Cuba and the Philippines: separated by distance, united by history

Filipinas y Cuba: por la distancia separadas, por la historia unidas

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Recibido: 29/09/2025
Aceptado: 12/06/2026

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Abstract

Cuban-Philippine relations date back to the 16th century, when Spain occupied both archipelagos and continued with an "intercolonial alliance" between enlightened Filipinos and Cubans in Madrid and New York in the 1880s-1890s. Formally, they began in 1946 with the recognition of the Roxas government by Ramón Grau and lasted 16 years until Macapagal broke them in 1962. Thirteen years later, under Marcos, they resumed and persist to this day, although in low-profile due to distance, lack of trade and political and economic crises. Several characters stood out in this relationship. Despite the historical ties, bilateral diplomacies have been little studied. This work analyses and traces the political milestones of the 20th and 21st centuries and proposes to strengthen the fraternity.

Keywords: Cuba, Philippines, International Relations, Manuel Quezón, Macapagal, León Maria Guerrero, Imelda Marcos, Communism, Fidel Castro

The annals of history are few and dark as to Philippine-Cuban relations, despite the fact that there have been certain connections and curiosities between the Pearl of the Orient and the Pearl of the Caribbean. These were separated in 1898 when their last link, Spain left to govern them. Despite that, there were several cultural links, words and visits/encounters between the two inhabitants that occurred for more than 300 years, which will continue throughout the twentieth century. There was a time when a galleon united them, when a province in Cuba was called Nueva Filipina and a town or municipality was called the Philippines, and when both communicated to free themselves from Spain. A Spanish government president was born in the Philippines and lived in Cuba, the first Philippine constitution was a copy of the Cuban one, and the design of the Philippine flag was influenced by that of Cuba. There was also a Cuban who declared himself an admiral of the Philippine Navy, a Filipino colonel trained Cubans against Fidel, and three famous personalities visited Cuba: Manuel Luis Quezón in the 1930s, León María Guerrero III as ambassador and Imelda Marcos as a goodwill representative to reestablish relations in 1975. The writings on the subject are either scarce or difficult to access, since they are not digitized or properly archived, their respective embassies being also closed for economic reasons, and delegated that role to another. Attempts to contact Philippine embassy staff who were in Cuba and obtain information about it were unsuccessful. The only person I could find was Jason J. Anasarias, the "lone gatekeeper of information pertaining to Philippine-Cuban relations at the department" and the "last man in Havana", who was entrusted with the definitive closure of the embassy in Havana on October 31, 2012 (Anasarias, 2019). Reading their blog, messages from Philippine presidents and biographies, this study seeks to demonstrate that communication, relationships and attention to events in Cuba were maintained.

My attention to the matter began when I was writing my master's thesis on Spanish-Filipino and Spanish-Cuban relations during the Franco regime, coming across several sources where they mentioned the presence of Cubans and Filipinos in schools and events in Madrid, and communication between

revolutionaries on the islands during the last two decades of the 19th century. Digging on the internet and several libraries in Spain and online I could find other interesting links, although many elusive and difficult to check. However, despite the mishaps, I was able to find more information than I really expected.

Philippine-Cuban relations can be traced back to the sixteenth century when Spain occupied both archipelagos and exchanged products and people, and then in the 1880s and 1890s an "intercolonial alliance" between enlightened Filipinos and Cubans appeared in Madrid and New York. On a governmental basis, these began in 1946 when the government of Ramon Grau recognized the new government of Roxas and diplomatic relations were established. Despite this and the historical connections, sending telegrams and visits to Cuba by Philippine delegations, these will take time to be carried out due to the distance, lack of trade, motivation and commitment, and then mainly by the new government of Fidel Castro.

1500s – 1946

The first contacts between the two Pearls occurred thanks to the Manila-Acapulco Galleon that was active from 1565 to 1815, and transported tobacco, coffee, spices, among other things, as well as Spaniards, Filipinos and Americans. The first Filipinos to arrive in Cuba were brought as laborers (as tobacco growers and sugar cane cutters), probably founding a town called *Filipinas* in the western province of the island, in what was then called *Nuevas Filipinas* (Diario de la Marina, 1932). The province and the town kept their name until the nineteenth century, when they were changed to what it is known today: Pinar del Río and Guane, respectively. But the true origin of why they were called that remains a mystery. According to historians Jorge Pérez, Sergio Jaca, and Pedro Hernández, in 1774 Felipe Fondesviela y Ondeano, Marqués de la Torre, established the jurisdiction of Nueva Filipina and named it in its honor (Ramírez Pérez, Márquez Jaca, & Hernández Pérez, 2016). Unfortunately, the movement of Native Americans to the Philippines and vice versa is difficult to trace, and the documents are silent, saying little and sometimes almost nothing about it. I would have liked them to have kept their original name, and thus not get lost in the sands of history and the Cuban memory. Given the influx of Filipinos, and probably other Asians, I do not doubt that they fought against pirates, the English in Havana, united with the Mambises against the Spanish government or in favor of the latter. At least in the municipality of El Cerro in Havana there is still a park and a street called *Manila*, supposedly because several "Chinos Manila" settled there, as they were called at that time.

Three characters with a Cuban-Filipino link and elusive in history stand out during the colonial times and then disappear: Marcelo de Azcárraga y Palmero, Vicente Catalán, and Gabriel Badelly Méndez. Each, in his own way, embodied the complex entanglement of Spanish imperial networks that connected Havana and Manila across the Pacific. Together, these men illustrate how intertwined yet ephemeral the Cuban–Filipino connection could be: highly visible in moments of upheaval, then fading from the mainstream historical narrative.

Marcelo de Azcárraga was born in Manila in 1832, the son of General José Azcárraga, a native of Vizcaya, and María Palmero, a Filipino mestizo from Albay. He was sent and remained in Cuba from 1856 to 1866 where he supposedly married one of the daughters of the wealthy Fesser family, whose father family, Edward Fessner, was the owner and founder of the Fessner Bank and Insurance House. On his return to Spain, he began to rise in the political ladder until he became provisional prime minister of Spain from August 8 until October 4, 1897 when Antonio Cánovas del Castillo died. He did the same on two more occasions, 1900-01 and 1904-05.

Vicente Catalán was a Cuban Creole apparently brought by Spain to be part of the Spanish navy, and became second officer on the ship *Filipinas* of the Tobacco Company. In mid-1898 Catalán, who sympathized with the revolutionaries, mutinied along with other Filipinos on the ship, killed the Spanish sailors, and proclaimed himself admiral of the Philippine Navy (Condeno, 2021, p.5). Days later, on July 5, being newly appointed captain of the Revolutionary Navy of the Philippines by Aguinaldo, Vicente along with his Filipino sailors helped capture Súbic Bay. From then on, nothing else is known about him and he disappears from the annals. The last, least studied and most unknown is Gabriel Badelly Méndez, of whom we only know that he was a Cuban who became a lieutenant in the Philippine army. He briefly surfaced in historical accounts as a figure navigating both colonial societies, hinting at the existence of lesser-known intermediaries who bridged Cuba and the Philippines but left behind only fragmentary traces.

The resurgence of contact between Filipino and Cuban revolutionaries did not take place in Havana or Manila, but in Madrid and New York during the 1880s and 1890s. In these cities, political activists from both nations maintained active correspondence and regularly shared information about events in their respective territories. Their mutual solidarity was reflected in various publications and newspapers, where they expressed their support for their independence movements. Beyond the rhetorical support, they pledged to provide each other with material aid, including weapons and personnel. The meetings were held clandestinely in spaces such as athenaeums and Masonic lodges, including the so-called *La Revolución*. A significant milestone was the founding of the *Solidarity* lodge in Madrid in April 1886 by a group composed of two Filipinos, three Cubans, a Puerto Rican and two Spaniards (Hagimoto, 2013, p. 131). Although meetings between José Martí and Filipinos during his stay in Madrid, Tampa or New York has not been confirmed, it is highly likely that it happened. In the case of Jose Rizal, had he not been arrested in Manila while trying to go to Cuba, it is possible that he would have met with Martí. However, Rizal did establish contact with Cubans in Madrid, such as Fernández Labrador who was present during a tribute to the Filipino Juan Luna.

Koichi Hagimoto stresses in his book *Between the Empires: Martí, Rizal and the Limits of Global Resistance* that the end of the nineteenth century was a pivotal moment for Cuba and the Philippines in which Martí and Rizal envisioned an anti-colonial solidarity that transcended their own nations, imagining alliances in Asia, Latin America, and beyond. He also emphasizes that both writers rejected a binary worldview of "colony versus metropolis," and instead advocated for a third space of resistance that would critique both Spanish colonialism and U.S. imperialism. He further argues that the works of Martí and Rizal demonstrate the value of intercolonial dialogue, where shared experiences of oppression could inspire cooperation against imperial powers. Hagimoto concludes that studying these figures together challenges Eurocentric narratives of history and promotes a more global understanding of anti-imperialist thought, and suggests that their visions are still relevant today.

The best known in the intercolonial alliance of whom there is correspondence are the Filipino Mariano Ponce and the Cubans José Alberto Izquierdo and Gonzalo de Quesada, who met for the first time at the Ateneo de Madrid club, introduced by a Puerto Rican (Hagimoto, 2013, p.141). Their letters show an active interest in each other's affairs, updating on the situation in their respective territories and their desires to help independence causes, both emotionally and financially. Given their meetings in lodges and athenaeums, and constant communication, both knew the situation of effervescence that was brewing on both sides of the pond, and on the Filipinos in Hong Kong and Cubans in New York. Puerto Rican Ramón Emeterio Betances also helped transmit Cuban guerrilla tactics and war policies to the revolutionary government of the Philippines, as well as updated reports to Cubans in the U.S. on the progress of the uprising in the Philippines (Hagimoto, 2013, p.144). Some Cubans also wrote for the Philippine newspaper in Madrid *La Solidaridad*, one of them being Juan José Cañarte. Cubans also supported Filipinos by publishing articles in their newspapers such as La *Patria*. All of this explains how Emilio Aguinaldo or other Filipinos were able to obtain a copy of Jimaguayu's 1895 Cuban constitution.

Another interesting fact is the first Philippine and Cuban constitutions. In November 1897 Emilio Aguinaldo signed the provisional constitution of the Republic of the Philippines in Biac-na-Bató. What many do not know is that, if analyzed side by side, it is almost a *verbatim copy* of Jimaguayu's Cuban constitution of 1895, with the only difference that the Philippine constitution contains ten extra articles (Salazar, 2006, p.46). This is a clear indication of the mutual communication and smuggling of news that arrived in the Philippines through travelers from the New World. Apart from having been written in Spanish, of the twenty-four articles that the Cuban has, twenty-one are present in the Filipino almost word for word, as well as a similar preamble and conclusion. Even the Philippine flag was inspired by the triangle, the star and perhaps the colors of the Cuban flag, something typical of that time (the first Cuban flag was influenced by the Chilean one). Sociologist Fernando Zialcita confirmed that fact about the flag to me in an interview I did with him back in 2023.

Contacts between the Philippines and Cuba seem to have been dormant for some time until new exchanges emerged during the interwar years in the first half of the 20th century, and interests in Cuban affairs continued to surface. Looking at the official messages and the months under review of the

doi.org/10.22518/jour.rfc/2025.9a01

Filipino presidents, one can find personal opinions, interest in the situation in Cuba (especially regarding sugar and tobacco) and meetings between them. In April 1937, Manuel Luis Quezón became the first head of government – and perhaps the first political representative of the Philippines – to set foot on Latin American soil. He visited Mexico, where he was received with military honors upon arrival at the airport and to the shouts of "Viva Quezón!" as he traveled to different towns accompanied by President Lázaro Cárdenas, with expenses covered by the Mexican government (Republic of the Philippines, 1937).

In his official messages Quezón recounted his travels, reflected on stories he did not know they had in common and the pleasant reception he received, a visit which he informed the Cuban consul in advance that he was coming as a tourist and not as president. In June, invited by the Cuban government of Laredo Bru, he continued his travel to Havana from Miami by steamer for only two days, where he was warmly received at the port by Secretary of State Juan Remos and other officials (*The New York Times*, 1937). Laredo received him at the Presidential Palace and then paid him a visit at the National Hotel, where he was staying. The next day he was offered a reception organized by military and municipal officials through the Colonel Fulgencio Batista and later on, though Quezón insisted that his trip was purely recreational and not connected to the sugar trade, he attended a cocktail party at the estate of Senator Manuel Casanova, president of the National Sugar Institute (*The New York Times*, 1937). Also, according to rumors, Quezón liked to smoke Cuban cigars.



Fig. 1: Fulgencio Batista and Manuel Quezón talk in Havana before leaving for Washington D.C., June 22, 1937 (Getty Images, 2024).



Fig. 2: Manuel L. Quezón arrives in Miami on his way to visit Havana, Cuba, June 24, 1937 (*The New York Times*, 1937).

1946 –1962

On the date of its independence in July 1946, Roxas and Ramon Grau established diplomatic relations, accrediting the Philippine ambassador to the United States Joaquín M. Elizalde as Minister to Cuba (Republic of the Philippines, 1948–1953). Possibly the first visit of a Philippine delegation took place from November 21, 1947 to March 24, 1948, when they met in Havana representing their country at the ministerial conference of the *World Trade Organization* (WTO). The delegation was represented by Executive Secretary Emilio Abello, Senator Tomas Cabili, Purchasing Agent Mateo Occena, and Urbano Zafra, Abdón Llorente, and Leonides Virata of the Department of Foreign Affairs (Republic of the Philippines, 1948). On May 20, 1949, Quirino sent a telegram to President Carlos Prío Socarrás on the occasion of the anniversary of Cuban independence, and Prío sent another, days later, wishing: "ardent wishes for the traditional and unperishable friendship" between the Philippines and Cuba (Republic of the Philippines, 1949). This cordiality would continue during Batista, who sent congratulations on July 4, 1955 to Ramón Magsaysay, showing that some diplomatic communication was maintained. In March 1952, another Philippine delegation arrived at the *International Labor Conference* in Havana.

On September 3, 1952 in Washington D.C., former Philippine Foreign Minister Carlos Rómulo and Cuban Ambassador to the U.S. Aurelio Concheso signed a Treaty of Friendship with 8 articles "animated by the desire to strengthen and perpetuate friendly relations" (Senate of the Philippines, Legislative Reference Bureau, 1952), which was ratified

by Quirino in June 1953. Article 5 entitled nationals of each country to enjoy reciprocally the right to acquire, possess and dispose of movable and immovable property, to travel, reside and engage in trade, industry and other peaceful and lawful activities, as well as to the same protection and security of their persons and property. Articles 6 and 7 agreed to exchange government publications, and to conclude, as soon as possible, treaties on commerce and navigation, consular rights and privileges, copyright and patents, and extradition. The idea of these last treaties will come late and will be paused 10 years later with the coming to power of Fidel Castro.

During Carlos P. García's term (1957-1961), the Filipino historian and economist Benito Justo Fernández Legarda Jr. visited Havana as a tourist in 1956, who he thought was "very touristic" and decadent, where casinos and bars serving American tourists abounded (Anasarias, 2019). There were also interesting, and unexpected, visits by some Cubans to the Philippine archipelago to attend the *Far Eastern Animal Resources* conference on April 7-16, 1958, and the *10th World Boy Scout Jamboree* at Mt. Makiling in Los Baños in July 1959. Garcia also approves Andres M. Soriano as Cuba's substitute honorary consular agent in Manila.

Spain under Franco became once again the epicenter of several congresses, initiatives, events and educational and cultural conferences where many Filipinos and Cubans attended. They also studied in Spanish universities, possibly sharing classes. The Diplomatic School and the Central School accepted several Filipino and Cuban students, some important and even sponsored by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Institute of Hispanic Culture, with some resuming the study of Spanish relations with the Philippines and Cuba. The Filipino students included embassy personnel (ministers Juan Arreglado and José Alejandrino), and their children, government officials such as Belén S. Arguelles, and characters such as Antonio Molina and Manuel Enverga Sarmiento. In 1950 the Cuban Luis Enrique Aguilar León (journalist, professor and historian) graduated in International Relations, while Alberto Martínez Piedra obtained a doctorate in 1957.

Most of these congresses and gatherings where the two communities interacted took place in Spain, though meetings were also held in various American countries, in Cuba and even in the Philippines. Madrid thus reemerged as a central point of contact between these once-distant subjects of the Madre Patria, as some still called Spain. What follows is a selection of such congresses, bearing in mind that more than one of the same event was held later on:

- *I Inter-Ibero-American Congress of Education, October 1949.*
- *I Congress of Intellectual Cooperation and I Ibero-American Congress of Social Security, October 1950.*
- *I Congress of the Academies of the Spanish Language, April-May 1951 in Mexico.*
- *I Hispano-Luso-American Congress of International Law, October 1951.*
- *I Hispano-American Art Biennial (represented by the jurist Jorge Bocobo and the painter Antonio García Llamas), October 1951.*
- *II Hispano-American Art Biennial, May-September 1954 in Cuba.*
- *II Congress of the Academies of the Spanish Language, 1956.*
- *I Ibero-American-Philippine Congress of Archives, Libraries and Intellectual Property, attended by Manuel C. Briones, vice president of the Philippine Senate, 1952.*
- *Hispanic-Portuguese-American-Filipino Congresses of Municipalities (1955-2012).*
- *Far Eastern Animal Resources conference, April 7-16, 1958.*
- *10th World Jamboree of Boy Scouts at Mt. Makiling, Los Baños, Laguna, in July 1959.*
- *Philippine and Cuban Weeks (1950-1970s)*
- *Hispano-American Folkloric Festivals of Cáceres (1958-1970s).*

The Philippine government and Congress also kept a close watch on developments across the Atlantic, with particular attention to the sugar and tobacco markets. Congressional records from 1946 through the 1960s consistently mention Cuba in connection with two issues in particular: disputes over U.S. sugar and tobacco quotas, and, beginning in 1959, the rise of Fidel Castro—often framed in terms of communism and used as a point of comparison in domestic political debates. As early as 1946, discussions touched on international law, including accusations directed at Cubans naturalized as Filipinos who had, in the words of one legislator, "changed their shirts" by subsequently becoming American citizens (Republic of the Philippines, 1946, p. 621). President Manuel Roxas even rejected the claim that the Philippines might share Cuba's fate of being "governed from Wall Street," pointing out that Cuba, contrary

doi.org/10.22518/jour.rfc/2025.9a01

to popular belief, did not receive financial assistance from the United States. From 1959 onward, references to Cuba became more frequent, especially as Castro's revolution reshaped hemispheric politics. By 1962, critics such as Senator Lim accused President Diosdado Macapagal of behaving in ways that "unknowingly or unwittingly, might become some kind of a Castro in the near future" (Republic of the Philippines, 1962, p. 1633).

Around 1959, the messages of the president Carlos P. García began to show a concern: the new Cuban government and the emergence of communism. The fall of Fulgencio Batista and Fidel's rise to power did not cause the rupture of relations, which were maintained until his departure from the government. At a press conference, Garcia called Batista's flight to the Dominican Republic the "inevitable end of all dictators" and recognized, before the U.S. did, the new government headed by Manuel Urrutia, sending a telegram conveying the wishes of the Filipino people for happiness and progress for the Cuban nation (Republic of the Philippines, 1959). This decision was made in a conference he held with the Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Felixberto Serrano. On March 28, 1960, he received the credentials of the first Cuban ambassador, Sergio Pérez y Pérez, with military honors, in a simple but impressive ceremony held in Malacañang in the presence of his cabinet, who pledged to make efforts to maintain cordial relations (Republic of the Philippines, 1960). In it, García outlined the growth and development of both nations and expressed the desire that they remain united, both loyal to the cause of freedom and democracy, while the ambassador revealed in his statements his determination to work for the same goal, taking into account that both countries had almost the same historical background in political aspects, economic and cultural. Everything seemed to be going smoothly.

Soon, however, he was dismayed by the extrajudicial executions carried out under Fidel's direction. García expressed his desire that the defendants be tried by civilian and not military courts, although he clarified that this was his personal opinion and that he did not wish "to be charged with meddling in the internal affairs of the new Cuban government" (Republic of the Philippines, 1959). On the economic level, he interpreted the situation that was brewing as a favorable opportunity for the Philippines, expressing his optimism about the possible increase in the sugar quota as a result of the deterioration of Cuban-American relations. During meetings with officials and members of the Tobacco Board, he reiterated his willingness to expand tobacco planting, improve tobacco quality, and produce tobacco in large quantities to meet projected U.S. market demand, "a golden opportunity which occurs only once every half century" (Republic of the Philippines, 1961).

Although he will note the incursion of communism into Cuba in a speech to the *Anti-Communist League of Asian Peoples* on May 3, 1961, García will not break relations with Fidel. A month before that speech – and a year after he had presented his diplomatic credentials – Sergio Pérez left Manila, going to Malacañang to say goodbye before leaving and expressed optimism to García that he would return. Unfortunately, it will not be like that. Fidel had withdrawn him due to the invasion of the Bay of Pigs. To make Cuba's situation worse, an official from the Caribbean embassy, Jorge Freire González, defected and reported on subversive activities carried out by the diplomatic mission. President Garcia discussed the possible implications of the case with Navy Captain Heracleo Alano, head of the G-2 of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, while resting in his suite (Republic of the Philippines, 1961). Previously, García had asked Foreign Secretary Felixberto Serrano to determine the veracity of the accusations, concluding that it was not appropriate to break diplomatic relations.

It is at those moments that our last figure in common appears momentarily: the Filipino colonel Napoleon Valeriano. Born in Manila, Valeriano fought against the Japanese and then fight against the uprising of the Huks in Luzon. When in 1961 the CIA was training Cubans in Guatemala and Louisiana to infiltrate through the Bay of Pigs and the Escambray, the U.S. needed an expert with experience in such activities and look at Valeriano for help. Valeriano also spoke Spanish and English, which made him a good intermediary between the CIA and the Cubans. Called "el Chino Viejo" by those of Brigade 2506, he was brought in to train those who were going to infiltrate Cuba (Bay of Pigs Brigade 2506, 2024). That's where his connection with Cubans ends to disappear from the common history.

Provoked by the Cuban missile crisis, his anti-communist crusade and support for the United States, it was Diosdado Macapagal (1962-66) who broke relations by expelling the Cuban embassy for subverted activities, and blaming García for his early enthusiasm in having accepted and maintained relations. From Macapagal one obtains, by reading the official messages, more opinions about Cuba and Fidel than

any other president. In his personal messages he is quite interested in Cuba and its fear of the country's situation, asking his cabinet early on for information on the global situation and "particularly the furor over Cuba" (Republic of the Philippines, 1962). Macapagal also ordered a re-examination of relations and left indications of wanting to break them, although in communication with his staff and the press he made it clear that such an action would not be easy. However, he was encouraged by the fact that no Filipinos were going to Cuba and noted that for more than a year the Cuban government had not sent a chargé d'affaires to its legation in Manila. Macapagal would later caution that "we have diplomatic relations with Cuba, and it is not so easy to break diplomatic ties with any country. We cannot sever diplomatic relations with Fidel Castro's government. It would mean war" (Republic of the Philippines, 1962).

In March 1962 he mentioned with concern the advance of the "Red Hand" over predominantly Catholic Cuba, and on September 26 he predicted that "the clouds of danger are darkening in the skies over Cuba" (Republic of the Philippines, 1962). Like Kennedy and Khrushchev, Macapagal kept abreast of what was happening in the Caribbean pond. The following month, with the missile crisis at its climax, Macapagal dedicated an entire speech to Cuba during the Day of the United Nations, beginning with dismay and concern that "Today, perhaps more than in the past, the United Nations faces a grave test on the Cuban crisis" (Republic of the Philippines, 1962). He claims that the Filipinos had wished the Cubans success in their struggle against Batista, the latter having embarked "on a just revolution for the purpose of achieving true sovereignty over their country and its natural resources", and that they had now become prisoners of a communist regime. Macapagal uses Cuba as an example of something that they should consider carefully and that their destiny is the perfect illustration of the consequences of accepting communism, adding in his emotional message that:

> A revolution that had started on the glorious promise of achieving true human dignity and a better life for the Cuban people has been betrayed. One more popular struggle has been debauched by its leaders who have delivered the people into the hands of the communist enemy. By this act of betrayal, a whole nation has become the tool for the advancement of communism in a part of the world where it is feared, hated, and abjured. This is a tragedy which countries like the Philippines would do well to consider thoughtfully and carefully. The fate of Cuba affords a perfect illustration of the brutal and anti-human methods which the communist will adopt without compunction in order to destroy the freedom of man and advance their insane dream of world conquest and domination (Republic of the Philippines, 1962).

He ordered the Foreign Ministry to reexamine relations between the Philippines and Cuba, and decided to support the United States for ideals and mutual interest, but also for the issue of sugar and tobacco, which would lose preference in the U.S. market and it would be opportune to expand the Philippine market. Although at first worried, he later noted that there was no cause for national alarm, that there were no Filipinos in Cuba or vice versa, and that the Cuban government had not sent a chargé d'affaires to its legation in Manila a year ago. Even so, he took precautions to store commodities to ensure an adequate supply. He had also instructed the Philippine delegation to the UN to support the resolution calling for the withdrawal of missile and weapons bases in Cuba. Relations will thus remain silent for 13 years until a new leader arrives.

1975 – 1986

With the coming of Ferdinand Marcos to power and his search to improve the image of the Philippines and international and economic support, he decided to establish relations with socialist and Third World countries. One of these was the other Pearl. For this enterprise, Marcos sent León María Guerrero III to take charge of the speeches and preparations and his wife Imelda Romuáldez Marcos to Latin America. In August 1975, as part of her international tour, Imelda visited and toured the island with Fidel, with the intention of reestablishing the relations that were terminated by Macapagal in 1962. According to Jason Anasarias, a former member of the Philippine embassy in Cuba, Imelda demanded that Castro pick her up at the airport and take her to Havana, a rumor that he said was confirmed by one of his grandchildren who visited the island in 2012 (Anasarias, 2018). Fidel was Imelda's own driver on some trips they made to places of interest, seen in photos where he drives a jeep with her next to her and Imee behind. On August 26, 1975, they signed a joint declaration re-establishing relations; Cuba reopened its embassy in 1976 and the Philippines in 1984. Even so,

doi.org/10.22518/jour.rfc/2025.9a01

economic and political relations will remain low-key. His messages do not mention Cuba much except on a few occasions discussing sugar and the situation of the American base in Guantanamo.



Figs. 3-12: Imelda Marcos' official visit to Cuba by Prime Minister Fidel Castro and President Osvaldo Dorticós, June 22, 1975 (*Philippine Diplomatic Visits*, 2016).

In September of that year, Cuba was added to the mission in Mexico and León was notified that Fidel had approved his appointment to Havana. In the book *The Diplomat Scholar*, Erwin Fernández recounts his short stay, as well as his mishaps. In March 1976, as ambassador of Mexico, León María Guerrero III visited Cuba to present his credentials to Oswaldo Dorticós, president of Cuba and minister of foreign affairs at the time. Dorticós would later commit suicide that same year under mysterious circumstances. León Guerrero was a writer, lawyer, and nationalist intellectual from the prominent Guerrero family. According to Erwin, León could not meet Fidel, since he was in Africa, which disappointed him, as Guerrero admired him (Fernández, 2018, p.284). His wife Margaret, however, had the opportunity to meet him, referring to her as "the blonde Filipino" at a special ambassador event before the presentation. León had the opportunity to visit Cuban museums and poets such as Nicolás Guillén, who induced him to publish a collection of Filipino literature in Spanish. León also had the idea of creating a magazine called *El Galeón de Manila*, but when he sent to Manila to ask for the poems of Manuel Bernabé, Jesús Balmori, and Cecilio Apóstol and showed them to Guillén, they agreed that the public would not be interested, so the collection and the magazine were aborted (Fernández, 2018, p.285). León was also present at the International Sugar Conferences negotiating with Cubans, informing Marcos that they were tough negotiators.



Fig. 13: Ambassador León María Guerrero III exchanging words with the President of Cuba, Oswaldo Dorticós (Fernández, 2018, p.285).

The last 10 years of Marcos after re-establishing relations saw only sporadic events of cooperation, visits, and agreements. A meeting place between Filipinos and Cubans will be at the summits of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), beginning in 1975 in Peru when Marcos presented a request to enter as an observer. In 1976 Philippine attended an official meeting for the first time as an observer in Sri Lanka, and in 1979 they finally met in Havana, where I have no doubt that the delegation interacted with Fidel. They continued as an observer until 1995 when it became an official member under president Fidel Ramos. A few months after relations were re-established, Emiliano Lezeano (general director of *Cubazucar*) visited Marcos from Cuba to exchange information and talk about technical cooperation on sugar issues, the construction of new mills, the use of new varieties, cultivation practices and sugar technology in general (Republic of the Philippines, 1966–1986, p. 245). But it was not until 1977 that economic relations began with the visit of a Cuban trade mission headed by Amadeo Blanco, director of the Ministry of Foreign Trade.



Fig. 14: Ferdinand Marcos giving a speech at an event for Hispanidad (AECID Digital Library, 2024).

In September of 1981, a 12-member Philippine delegation led by Deputy Prime Minister José Rorio visited Cuba to attend the 68th Inter-Parliamentary Union Conference of the MPNA. During the event, Fidel Castro took the opportunity to meet with them and extended an invitation to President Ferdinand Marcos to visit Cuba, though this visit never materialized. On June 12, 1982, the Cuban embassy delegation, headed by Ambassador José Hernández Arteaga was received at Malacañang in celebration of Philippine Independence Day, and later that year, on September 9, Idelma Marcos and Cuban Foreign Minister Isidoro Malmerca signed the first Technological and Scientific Agreement. Ferdinand Marcos would later describe it as "an auspicious start of the transfer of technology between Third World countries" (Republic of the Philippines, 1966–1986, p. 364). On October 7, 1984, Ana González Suárez, the last Cuban ambassador during the Marcos administration, formally presented her credentials.

1986 – Present

After Marcos lost power in 1986 relations still continued, although the information appears randomly and scarcely, making it difficult to follow the leads.

doi.org/10.22518/jour.rfc/2025.9a01

That same year, Ophelia San Agustín Gonzales became the first female ambassador of the Philippines to Cuba. Twenty years later, the most significant encounter of their shared history would occur. On September 15, 2006, for the first and only time, a Philippine president officially visited the island, marking the highest-level political contact between the Pearls. Gloria Arroyo Macapagal, daughter of the president who ended relations in 1962 (ironically), visited the island to attend the 14th Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) Summit where she was able to meet with Raúl Castro, and perhaps Fidel. The visit, however, was limited to attending the meeting, rather than pursuing bilateral political or economic discussions. Although the occasion carried symbolic and emotional weight, the interaction went little further than greetings and routine political-cultural exchanges. Arroyo's brief stay, limited media coverage, and the absence of a reciprocal visit from the Castros underscored the lack of momentum in strengthening bilateral ties.



Fig. 15: Gloria Arroyo Macapagal and Raúl Castro greet each other during the 14th meeting of the MPNA (*Star Bulletin*, 2006).

At the end of October 2012, the Philippine embassy closed in Havana while Cuba closed theirs in June of the following year, although the Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs announced that the effects on its services would be minimal. Cuba's former ambassador to the Philippines, Jorge Rey Jiménez, told a forum organized by *the Philippines-Cuba Friendship Club* that the global economic crisis and embargo were the main reasons, and that those interested in business should contact the Cuban embassy in Kuala Lumpur (Uy, 2013). One of the members of the group Francisco Nemenzo – a political scientist, former president of the University of the Philippines, and who named his eldest son in honor of Fidel Castro – was present at the forum. Corazon Valdez Fabros, a prominent peace advocate, lawyer and academic who is also part of the group, said Cuba recognizes the close affinity that exists between the two countries thanks to a shared history and that it did not want to close its embassy, but the Philippines closed theirs. Currently, Cuba is accredited to the Philippines from its embassy in Malaysia, while the Philippines accredits Cuba from its embassy in Mexico.

Thanks to the blogs authored by Jason Jovencio Anasarias— a Foreign Service officer in Cuba and known as "the last man in Havana" in charge of closing the Philippine Embassy on October 31, 2012—it is possible to gain a personal and unusual perspective on Philippine diplomatic life in Cuba. In his blog *Notes from a Long, Hot Summer*, which total about eighteen entries, he chronicles personal experiences and reflections from diplomatic postings, focusing on cultural, historical, and political observations, covering diverse topics related to the author's assignments in various countries, particularly Cuba. Given that Cuba is not a frequent destination for Filipino citizens, and that bilateral exchange is limited, his observations take on a special value as first-hand testimony. According to what he once said, the Department of Foreign Affairs of the Philippines never bothered to maintain a systematic archive or record of relations with Cuba, which could lead to uncomfortable situations when official information was suddenly required. That lack of documentation was one of the reasons that led him to write his blog. As an illustrative example, he mentions that in July 2011, on the 65th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations, none of the members of the embassy were aware of such a date. The event was only noticed when they received an invitation to attend the inauguration of a commemorative stamp in Havana, an act that, according to his assessment, was perceived as a celebration of protocol rather than a heartfelt moment.

Throughout his writings there are no substantial references to bilateral cooperation initiatives, economic agreements, high-level meetings or visits by political personalities during his assignment. Most of the entries focus on personal impressions of his travels around the island, historical reflections, interviews with some Filipino figures such as the historian Benito Justo Fernández Legarda Jr., and mentions of iconic figures such as Fidel Castro, Raúl Castro and Ernesto "Che" Guevara, which are nevertheless important for his historical use since he is one of the few who left his impressions in writing. His blogs combine the subjective gaze of an official who

lived the day-to-day life of the diplomatic mission with notes on shared historical memory, although without delving into specific political or economic dynamics themselves. In September 2012, Anasarias and his team left Cuba for good, thus closing their times as one of the few Filipino diplomats with a long experience in the Caribbean country.

Over the past decade, several sporadic events occurred that have brought these low-key relationships to light, demonstrating the continuing interest. From 2016 to 2024, Cuba–Philippines relations were marked by intermittent but symbolically important diplomatic, educational, and health-oriented exchanges. In September 2016, a Philippine delegation traveled to Cuba to study its health system, headed by Secretary of Health Paulyn Rosell-Ubial, and made up of Undersecretary Enrique Tayag, Third Secretary Mikhal C. De Dios and Protocol Officer Rubén F. De Jesús from the Philippine embassy in Mexico, other officials from the department, and Gundo Weiler, head of the WHO office in the Philippines (Public Information Services, 2016). Ubial met with his Cuban counterpart Roberto Morales Ojeda, who gave them a tour of the island, and affirmed the mutual desire for any opportunity for cooperation. The delegation visited the Institute of Cardiology and Cardiovascular Surgery, the "Hermanos Almeijeiras" Hospital, and the Central Unit for Medical Cooperation and the Institute of Friendship with the Peoples. At the end of the trip, they met with 3 Filipino students enrolled in the Latin American School of Medicine – Mila Polinar, Claire Salering and Flora Hagonia, who talked about their experiences. In March 2017, the Philippine ambassador to Mexico, Eduardo José A. de Vega, visited Havana to deliver his credentials.



Fig. 16: From left to right: Administrative Officer of the Embassy of the Philippines, Bernardo Bagalay; Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez; Ambassador of the Philippines, Eduardo A. de Vega; Vice President of Cuba, Gladys María Fortilla; and Political Assistant, Raymund Ondiano (Department of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of the Philippines, 2017).

In November 2016, the 70 years of diplomatic relations between Cuba and the Philippines were celebrated with a ceremony in Manila presided over by Enrique A. Manalo, Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Caribbean Ambassador Ibete Fernández (Candela, 2016). The activity was attended by members of the diplomatic corps, officials of the Foreign Ministry, parliamentarians, Cuban residents, members of friendship associations and graduate students in Cuba. In the speeches, Manalo and Fernández highlighted the similarities that united them and the mutual desire to advance in the diversification of ties, the typical historical and cultural speech. On November 14, 2020, Philippine Foreign Secretary Teodoro Locsin Jr. welcomed Cuba's accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in Southeast Asia and expressed confidence in its future contribution to greater peace and stability in the region. Bruno Rodríguez, his Cuban counterpart, expressed pride in being the first Caribbean country to join, and was encouraged by the interest in expanding cooperation with ASEAN. In June 2023, Ambassador to Mexico Lilybeth R. Deapera presented her credentials to leader Miguel Dias Canel.





Fig. 17-18: Left: Secretary of Health Rosell-Ubial and her counterpart Roberto Morales Ojeda; Dr. Ubial Secretary and the Philippine delegation visit the Cuban Central Unit for Medical Cooperation (Public Information Services, 2016).

doi.org/10.22518/jour.rfc/2025.9a01



Fig. 19: Ambassador of the Philippines, Lilybeth Deapera, with Miguel Díaz-Canel and Bruno Rodríguez (Department of Foreign Affairs, 2023).

In October 2022, Cuban Ambassador Florentino García Gonzales visited Manila to attend the Pandesal Forum and thanked the Filipinos for their support at the UN for Cuba regarding the U.S. embargo. In the same forum, he stated that he sought to expand ties through support in different areas and industries such as biomedicine and biotechnology and promote new economic standards and increase accessibility to services. On June 12, 2023, he participated in the commemoration of the 125th anniversary of Philippine independence, personally congratulated President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and said that this triumph "remains in the hearts and historical memory of Cubans," an affirmation of high diplomatic value, although with limited support in the general historical perception. The next day, Gonzales held a meeting with Stephanie Alexis Cruz, from the American section of the Philippine Foreign Ministry, where they discussed issues of mutual interest and initiatives to improve bilateral relations. At the same time, he held meetings with organizations in solidarity with Cuba, with the Cuban community residing in Manila and with dependencies of the Philippine government.

At the end of 2023, Gonzales and the Foreign Minister of the Philippines Enrique Manalo signed a Memorandum of Understanding on Political Consultations, where they reaffirmed the narrative of shared history and expressing the willingness to strengthen cooperation in multiple areas. In 2024, he returned to Manila to participate in the independence celebrations, met with Marcos Jr., officials from the Foreign Ministry and the Department of Education, and at the end of the year held a meeting with Health Secretary Teodoro Herbosa to discuss matters of medical cooperation. Finally, he held a last meeting with the foreign minister to formalize his official farewell, thus closing his term of office characterized by constant diplomatic activism, although low profile as usual. His tenure was marked by consistency and outreach, attending forums, engaging with officials, and building cultural and political bridges. However, the interactions remained more ceremonial than substantive, with little evidence of major economic or strategic agreements. Despite lacking intensity compared to other bilateral relations, both countries have kept their ties alive through periodic reaffirmations, solidarity messages, and modest agreements, ensuring the relationship does not disappear from the diplomatic map.



Fig. 20: Cuban Ambassador Florentino Batista González to the Philippines at the Pandesal Forum with Filipinos (Yuching, 2022).



Fig. 21: Cuban Ambassador Florentino Batista González with President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. and the First Lady (CubaMINREX, 2023).



Fig. 22: Philippine Secretary of Foreign Affairs Enrique Manalo with Florentino González signing the Memorandum (CubaMINREX, 2023).



Fig. 23: Philippine Secretary of Health Teodoro Herbosa with Ambassador Florentino González (CubaMINREX, 2024).

Philippine–Cuban relations since 1986 have been characterized by a pattern of symbolic reaffirmations, modest cooperation, and selective diplomatic exchanges. Taken together, these events demonstrate that the bilateral relationship remains low-key but resilient. Health diplomacy has emerged as a central theme, with Cuba's global reputation in medicine and the training of Filipino medical students in Havana serving as natural points of connection. Similarly, Cuba's ASEAN outreach, supported by the Philippines, reflects a mutual interest in embedding the relationship within broader regional frameworks. While these initiatives have not translated into large-scale economic or strategic partnerships, they reveal a steady continuity in ties maintained through anniversaries, high-level visits, and solidarity gestures. In conclusion, recent developments indicate that Philippine–Cuban relations are sustained less by major agreements than by symbolic diplomacy, cultural memory, and selective cooperation in education and health. Moving forward, the challenge will be to convert these symbolic affirmations into practical collaborations, particularly in healthcare, biotechnology, and educational exchange, where both states have expressed mutual interest and capacity.



Fig. 24: Former Philippine embassy in Havana along Miramar Fifth Avenue (Anasarias, 2018).



Fig. 25: Logos of existing associations on the Philippines and Cuba (Philippine-Cuba Cultural and Friendship Associations, 2025).



Fig. 26: Commemorative stamp for the 65th anniversary of Philippine-Cuban relations (Anasarias, 2011).

Conclusion

The historical journey between Cuba and the Philippines reveals a relationship rich in political, cultural and diplomatic exchanges, cemented from the times of the Spanish Empire to the present day. From the bonds forged in the Manila Galleon and the intercolonial solidarities of the nineteenth century to the popular revolutions, both nations shared ideals of independence, common figures, and institutional parallelisms. However, despite this shared past, official relations have been disparate, intermittent and, in many cases, relegated to the background within their respective foreign policies. The global political conjunctures of the twentieth century, especially the Cold War, marked moments of rapprochement

doi.org/10.22518/jour.rfc/2025.9a01

and rupture, revealing the structural and ideological limits of a deeper bilateral relationship. Even so, individual, institutional, diplomatic and trade efforts—promoted by Philippine delegations, fraternity societies, and figures such as Manuel Quezón, León María Guerrero, and Imelda Marcos—reflect a persistent will.

The study of the Cuba-Philippines relations shows that, beyond geographical distance and differences in political context, the two nations have maintained ties that respond to three fundamental axes: common historical heritage, intermittent diplomatic interaction and the persistence of cultural and political affinities. First, the shared heritage of the Spanish colonial period left tangible traces in the language, institutions, national symbols, and even in revolutionary strategies, as evidenced by the similarity between the constitutions of Biac-na-Bató and Jimaguayú, or the inspiration in the design of the flags. These parallels were not merely accidental, but the result of contacts between intellectuals, revolutionaries and diplomats in Madrid and New York. Secondly, the diplomatic relationship has been marked by pronounced ups and downs, conditioned by international conjunctures such as the Cold War, the strategic alignment with the United States or the rise of Third World movements. Moments of rupture and resumption show how each country's foreign policy has subordinated bilateral ties to broader geopolitical agendas, limiting its sustained development. Thirdly, a low-profile pattern persists in current relations, where cooperation, although existing, is mainly manifested in symbolic, cultural and occasionally technical spheres. Initiatives such as joint participation in the NAMP, sporadic official visits or the signing of recent memorandums show that there is a potential for collaboration not yet been translated into strategic projects.

In short, Cuba and the Philippines possess sufficient historical and cultural capital to sustain a more ambitious bilateral dialogue. Building on this legacy would involve not only reactivating embassies and expanding diplomatic channels, but also identifying priority areas—such as public health, renewable energy, technical training, and cultural cooperation—that transcend the rhetoric of historical brotherhood and become concrete and sustainable programs. The revitalization and rescue of this relationship, in a multipolar and increasingly interconnected world, could strengthen not only the external projection of both nations, but also their position in South-South cooperation networks, representing an opportunity to foster a more active, culturally rooted and geopolitically significant dialogue.

The 21st century offers the Pearls the opportunity to transform a relationship of intermittency into a long-term strategic partnership. To achieve this, it will be necessary to move from the rhetoric of historical brotherhood to the realization of sustainable projects, with tangible benefits for both populations. Only in this way can it be ensured that the shared legacy is not limited to the history books, but is projected towards a future of active and mutually beneficial cooperation. Acknowledging this common history not only rescues forgotten episodes of international memory, but also offers a basis for rethinking future collaborations. The shared legacy between Cuba and the Philippines deserves to be not only remembered, but revitalized.

Appendices

Table 1. Filipino personalities who traveled to Cuba (1930s-2023)

Name	Position	Year
Manuel L. Quezón	President of the Commonwealth	1930s
Emilio Abello Tomas Cabili Mateo Occena Urbano Zafra Abdón Llorente Leónides Virata	Executive Secretary Senator Purchasing agent Department of Foreign Affairs	1947 - 1948
Philippine delegation		1952
Benito Justo Fernández Legarda Jr.	Historian and Economist	1956
León María Guerrero	Ambassador	1970s
Imelda Romuáldez Marcos Imee Marcos	First lady Imelda Marcos' daughter	1975
Delegation		1976-79
Trade Mission		1977
José Rorio	Deputy prime minister Delegación (12)	1981
Ophelia San Agustín Gonzales	Ambassadress	1986
Gloria Arroyo Macapagal	President	2006
Jason Jovencio Anasarias	Foreign Service officer of the Philippine Embassy	2008 - 2012
¿?	Grandson of Imelda Marcos	2012
Paulyn Rosell-Ubial Enrique Tayag Mikhal C. De Dios Rubén F. De Jesús Gundo Weiler	Secretary of Health Undersecretary Third Secretary Protocol Officer at the Philippine Embassy in Mexico Head of the WHO office in the Philippines	2016
Eduardo José A. de Vega	Ambassador	2017
?	Director General of Education	2017
Lilybeth R. Deapera	Ambassadress	2023
Mary Therese C. Jose	Political and Economic Assistant	
Susan Yap	Governor	

Source: Messages of the Presidents; CubaMinrex.

Table 2. Cuban personalities who traveled to the Philippines (1950s-2025)

Name	Position	Year
Delegation	Cultural	1958 y 1959
Sergio Pérez y Pérez	Ambassador	1960
Trade mission headed by Amadeo Blanco	Director of the Ministry of Foreign Trade	1977
Women's national volleyball team		2000
Jorge Rey Jiménez	Ambassador	2010? - 2013
Ibete Fernández	Ambassadress	2016-2019
Florentino González	Ambassador	2022 - 2024
Yadira Ledesma Hernández	Ambassadress	2025

Source: CubaMinrex; Messsages of the Presidents.

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