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Africa – The People’s Republic’s exclusive playground?

By **Yejoo Kim**

Research Analyst, Centre for Chinese Studies, Stellenbosch University

The President of Republic of China (ROC, hereafter Taiwan), Ma Ying-jeou, recently wrapped up his state visit to the country’s so-called African allies, Burkina Faso, the Gambia and Swaziland. On the African continent, Taiwan has maintained diplomatic relations with four countries: the three countries mentioned above and São Tomé and Príncipe. This state visit was aimed at reaffirming the relations, however São Tomé and Príncipe cancelled President Ma’s visit at the last minute, and considering that this kind of high level visit is organised in advance, the incident stirred up concerns over the further erosion of the Taiwan’s diplomatic standing on the continent. Will the continent be Mainland China’s exclusive playground?

It has been rumoured that the representatives of São Tomé and Príncipe attended the Forum for Economic and Trade Cooperation between the People’s Republic of China (hereafter PR China or Mainland China) and Portuguese-speaking countries, also known as the Macau Forum. Taiwan and São Tomé and Príncipe both denied this, however this incident suggests that there is uncertainty regarding the relations between Taiwan and its allies.

Since 1949, the competition for international diplomatic recognition between the PR China and Taiwan has been ongoing, and the position of Taiwan has become increasingly marginalised on the international stage. In 1971 the United Nations recognised the PR China as the sole legitimate representative of China, and in 1979 the United States withdrew its recognition of Taiwan. Thereafter, and probably not least so with a view to the impressive economic growth of the PR China, many countries have cut off ties with Taiwan. Under these circumstances, Africa became a diplomatic battleground for both sides. In the 1990s, Along with the demise of the Cold War, the competition between Mainland China and Taiwan was a good opportunity for African leaders, who suddenly lost support from both East and West, to enhance their bargaining power. In the end, most coun-tries chose the PR China’s side and only a few (strategically unimportant) countries have maintained their relations with Taiwan.

Taiwan has provided unprecedented material support to maintain ties with its allies, for example São Tomé and Príncipe, once received US\$30 million from Taiwan when, at the time, its annual GDP was only US\$45 million. Nevertheless, São Tomé and Príncipe showed the possibility that these remaining allies can realign themselves with Mainland China at any time. Taiwan has been one of the important economic partners to São Tomé and Príncipe since 1997, however, in 2009, China Petrochemical and Chemical Corporation (Sinopec) started oil exploration in the Nigeria-São Tomé and Príncipe Joint Development Zone (JDZ), and the significance of China has been increasing and this might have affected São Tomé and Príncipe’s cancellation of the Taiwanese President’s state visit.

Taiwan has experienced very restrictive diplomatic relations with the world; it now has diplomatic relationships with only 23 countries. Considering that Taiwan’s foreign reserves are ranked as the fourth in the world, Taiwan has tried, based on its

economic strength, to preserve its position by assisting other developing countries. In this process, aid used to be an important tool for Taiwan to achieve the country's foreign policy objectives. In the case of The Gambia, while the country's diplomatic relations with the West have been strained since the 1994 coup, the country has maintained close ties with Taiwan. In return the country has received considerable financial support from Taiwan. Taiwan's relation with Swaziland can be understood in the same context. Swaziland is a small kingdom, nevertheless it has one vote in the UN system, and that is the key concern for Taiwan on the international stage.

The 'biggest' African partner of Taiwan is Burkina Faso. The country is categorised as one of the low-income countries, and has been largely dependent on development assistance from the international donor community. Taiwan has provided around 8% of the country's ODA. Also, Taiwan has been Burkina Faso's top trade partner. However, the strong presence of the PR China these days should be noted; imports of Chinese manufactured goods make up 16% of Burkina Faso's total imports. Furthermore, considering that cotton is one of Burkina Faso's major export products along with gold and that Mainland China is the world's largest cotton importer, it will be interesting to observe the development of the relations between Burkina Faso and the PR China in the near future.

Does this mean victory for the PR China over Taiwan in the African continent? Since African countries choose their partners strategically, the partnerships of today cannot be guaranteed for tomorrow. African countries do not hold strong convictions with regard to the political and diplomatic competition between Mainland China and Taiwan. Instead of political rhetoric, African countries are interested in practical matters. Since Taiwan can be a capable economic partner, the country will not be entirely overlooked by African countries aspiring to increase external assistance.

Also, the relations between the PR China and Taiwan should not be seen as a zero-sum game anymore. Other large partners such as Brazil, Russia and India are rushing to the continent and the PR China today's outcompeting Taiwan will not count much in the global competition of tomorrow. Therefore, China's relations with African countries are not set in stone. The emphasis on friendship might easily be trumped by the saying that 'states don't have friends, they only have interests'. Relationships have to be nurtured and taken care of; no partnership should be taken for granted. 