



Gambia's Diplomatic Switch: Significance for China-Taiwan Relations

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The Gambia may be one of the smallest countries in the African continent, but its recent move may have implications for China-Taiwan relations. People's Republic of China and Gambia began formal bilateral diplomatic relations on 17 March 2016. While this may be a new beginning for China-Gambia relations, it raises a lot of questions over the future of China-Taiwan relations as well. The Gambia had withdrawn diplomatic recognition of Taiwan in November 2013, which was seen to have happened under Beijing's influence. Since then it had become a test case of the diplomatic truce between China and Taiwan.

There are diverse variables that are at play behind this development. The first being fears of end of China-Taiwan diplomatic truce.¹ During the presidency of Chen Shui-bian, Taiwan had lost its diplomatic recognition to China from six countries overall whereas there was no loss or gain during the Ma Ying-jeou era. The second is China's perceptions of the President elect Tsai Ing-wen, and the third is China's increased economic power and influence in Africa, especially signified by the recently held 5th meeting of the Forum for China Africa Cooperation (FOCAC). In particular, the victory of the Democratic People's Party (DPP) candidate in the recently concluded Presidential elections seems to have convinced Beijing for a renewed public effort to isolate Taiwan and send a message across the Strait to the people and political class of Taiwan that Beijing preferred the status quo under Ma Ying-jeou than under Tsai Ing-wen. Tsai Ing-wen has reacted to this development

by saying, “Taiwan needs to protect its international space as its diplomatic position is precarious” and hoped that “the establishment of ties with Gambia is not a targeted move.”²

Mainstream Taiwan media also sees the development in the same light. Writing for *China Post*, Frank Ching argues, “The shock announcement that China and the Gambia have re-established diplomatic relations raises the specter of a return to the cross-straits diplomatic rivalry via checkbook diplomacy that prevailed before Ma Ying-jeou became the island's leader in 2008.”³ In the same tone, editorial of *Taipei Times* argued that “China is putting pressure on president-elect Tsai Ing-wen two months before her inauguration on May 20. Beijing does not want to give up, although the pro-China policies promoted by President Ma Ying-jeou have been rejected by Taiwanese.”⁴ *Global Times*, on the other hand, says in a form of warning, “If desinicizing Taiwan will be the DPP's governing principle, it should brace for the mainland's countermeasures, which could be harsh.”⁵ It is noteworthy to recall that Beijing had responded by passing the Anti-Secession Law in 2005 when Chen Shui-bian won the presidential elections for the second term. During Ma Ying-jeou's regime, PRC and Taiwan had signed the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA) and other agreements that brought the two closer economically. However, the recent elections have proven that economic engagement is not transforming the political discourse in Taiwan and, in fact, may have further polarised opinions there.

During the reign of Ma Ying-jeou, Taiwan had followed a diplomatic approach called “viable diplomacy”.⁶ Under this approach, Taiwan's engagement with the world was based on the principles of humanitarian assistance, projecting Taiwan as a peacemaker and cooperation in areas of culture, education, science and technology and economic cooperation. In the last decade, Taiwan has also managed to become a member of the World Health Assembly (WHA) and the International Civil Aviation organization (ICAO). As of now, Taiwan is part of 27 international governmental organisations as associate or affiliate member. It is also observer in 21 other organisations. Taiwan's recent move to gain an observer status in the International Criminal Police Organization (Interpol) has been resisted by Beijing.⁷ Ma Ying-jeou went on to describe viable diplomacy by saying that “it meant putting a stop to the pointless competition with the mainland for allies in the global

community and actively playing an important role in that community by providing humanitarian aid and promoting peace.”⁸

He goes on to warn that any deviation from that line may lead to Taiwan losing the global goodwill that it had earned and would also strain its relations with the mainland. There is also a history behind this warning by President Ma. As countries started diplomatically recognising Beijing instead of Taipei, anxious Taipei started using all available means to save its diplomatic relations and its stature in the international order, something that was often described as “dollar diplomacy”. This reached its zenith in May 2008 when it was revealed that two middlemen had got away with \$30 million, which was to be used as a bribe to win Papua New Guinea’s support to Taiwan. This had led to the resignation of three top officials including the Foreign Minister and also caused much diplomatic embarrassment in the world.⁹ It is not to say that the PRC did not engage in any unethical means to diplomatically isolate Taiwan, even building cricket stadiums in the Caribbean in the first decade of the 21st century. However, it was Taiwan, which was fighting a losing battle and looked more desperate between the two as the time and resources were on the PRC’s side.

In this context, it needs to be asked whether the mainland sees Tsai Ing-wen’s election as a destabilising factor for the Mainland-Taiwan relations. Tsai Ing-wen and the DPP have consistently refused to accept the 1992 Consensus and the One China principle and that is a bigger concern for the mainland besides Tsai’s symbolic value as a democratically elected female president as against the oligarchic and patriarchal Communist Party of China (CPC). Tsai Ing-wen has outlined the DPP position on the 1992 Consensus by saying that it did not come into existence until 2000 and that the cross-strait situation was substantially different needing a new framework for cooperation.¹⁰ While Tsai and her party have not won the elections on the grounds of militant Taiwanese nationalism, they have also pitched for status quo and stability in the mainland-Taiwan relations.¹¹ For Beijing, the DPP’s pronouncement of status quo is a problematic posture that contravenes with its long term desire of Taiwan’s assimilation with the mainland.

On the other hand, Ma Ying-jeou, who is slated to step down as Taiwan's President, has not helped matters by visiting the Itu Aba island, known as Taiping in Taiwan.¹² Taiwan has equal and parallel claims in the South China Sea (SCS) disputes like mainland. However, the major difference is that Taiwan's actual control as well as activity in the SCS is minimal, as against Beijing's proactive construction of artificial islands in the disputed water. It is notable that this was Ma Ying-jeou's first presidential visit to the island in eight years. This also signifies the failure of his South China Sea Peace Initiative that had called for shelving of sovereignty disputes and for joint exploration of resources.¹³ Ma Ying-jeou's visit had drawn equally sharp reactions from Vietnam, China and the US as well.

Equally important is the factor of attraction of Beijing's investment and trade potential. When China and Taiwan were on the spree to win allies in the early part of the 21st century, Taiwan's was in a better financial position compared to the PRC. However, in the last decade, Beijing's proactive foreign policy coupled with its financial capacity means that it has surpassed Taiwan significantly, making it more attractive for a developing country like the Gambia. The 5th ministerial meeting of the FOCAC held in Johannesburg in December 2015 where China made various commitments worth \$60 trillion for a host of projects is testimony to this phenomenon. Therefore, Beijing's financial ability is highly attractive for the developing countries in Africa and elsewhere.

That Beijing has used this financial ability to send a political message to the President elect of Taiwan regarding Taiwan's international status at this point appears to be significant given its timing.

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The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.

Endnotes:

¹ The phrase "diplomatic-truce" appears in various statements of President Ma Tying-jeou and the 7th Congress of the Legislative Yuan held in September 2008 defined diplomatic truce as "The call for diplomatic truce aims to bring to an end the counterproductive competition between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait

so that they can pursue co-existence and co-prosperity in the international arena. During a diplomatic truce, conduct detrimental or harmful to the national interests of Taiwan should be discontinued. A diplomatic truce is a means to an end, letting us more easily reach our ultimate goal: peace and prosperity in the Taiwan Strait. In the end, we can create a win-win situation for both Taiwan and mainland China in the international community.” From the Foreign Policy Report, 7th Congress of the Legislative Yuan, 2nd Session, (September 25, 2008), at

http://www.mofa.gov.tw/en/News_Content3.aspx?n=4BAF9BD5400A05D9&sms=BA5E856472F10901&s=51D6EB59FAEF6B64 (accessed 5 April 2016).

² Reuters, “Taiwan must protect its space after China renews ties with Gambia”, *Asia Times*, 18 March 2016, at <http://atimes.com/2016/03/taiwan-must-protect-its-space-after-china-renews-ties-with-gambia-tsai/> (accessed 5 April 2016).

³ Frank Ching, “Gambia move a warning for Tsai”, *China Post*, 23 March 2016, at <http://www.chinapost.com.tw/commentary/china-post/frank-ching/2016/03/23/461496/p1/Gambia-move.htm> (accessed 5 April 2016).

⁴ Taipei Times, “The Liberty Times Editorial: China Should work to improve Ties”, 30 March 2016, at <http://www.taipetimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2016/03/30/2003642748/1> (accessed 5 April 2016).

⁵ Global Times, “Cross-Strait Diplomatic Truce still holds”, 18 March 2016, at <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/974522.shtml> (accessed 5 April 2016).

⁶ Ma Ying-jeou, “Full Text of President Ma’s New Year’s Day Address”, *Focus Taiwan*, 1 January 2016, at <http://focustaiwan.tw/news/aip/201601010013.aspx> (accessed 28 March 2016).

⁷ Xinhua, “China warns US not to endorse Taiwan observer status in Interpol”, *Xinhuanet*, 21 March 2016, at http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-03/21/c_135209672.htm (accessed 7 April 2016).

⁸ Op cit no 6.

⁹ Jonathan Adams, “3 Taiwan Officials Quit in Diplomatic Furor,” *New York Times*, 7 May 2008, at http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/07/world/asia/07taiwan.html?_r=0 (accessed 28 March 2016).

¹⁰ Chris Wang, “Tsai details DPP’s cross-strait policies”, *Taipei Times*, 24 August 2011, at <http://www.taipetimes.com/News/front/archives/2011/08/24/2003511508> (accessed 7 April 2016).

¹¹ Joseph A Bosco, “Tsai Ing-wen: Hardly Beijing’s Worst Nightmare,” *The Diplomat*, 25 January 2016, at <http://thediplomat.com/2016/01/tsai-ing-wen-hardly-beijings-worst-nightmare/> (accessed 27 March 2016).

¹² Reuters, “Taiwan President Visits Disputed Taiping Island in South China Sea,” *The Guardian*, 28 January 2016, at <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/28/taiwan-president-ma-ying-jeou-visit-south-china-sea-> (accessed 29 March 2016).

¹³ George W. Tsai, “Taiwan and its South China Sea Peace Initiative”, *The Diplomat*, 28 August 2015, at <http://thediplomat.com/2015/08/taiwan-and-its-south-china-sea-peace-initiative/> (accessed 7 April 2016).