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The Importance of Diplomacy: A Case Study of Taiwan



ABSTRACT

After the de facto separation of China in 1949, the international community was divided on the issue which government represents the Chinese nation as a whole. Until the 1970s the Republic of China (ROC) on Taiwan maintained its seat in the UN, and formal ties to a significant number of countries. However, by the end of this decade, in 1980, Taipei government was left with merely 22 diplomatic allies.¹ Our article focuses on the position of Taiwan after this shift, examining the regime's perception of the effects of recognition and derecognition. As the Taipei government has put significant efforts into the preservation (and expansion) of diplomatic relations with states that are not considered globally influential, we examined what possible effects and consequences these ties can have on the international legal status of the entity. It has to be noted that for this purpose, only the official relations, and diplomatic allies of the ROC were considered. After describing the diplomatic activities of Taiwan, and the shifts in the number of its diplomatic allies (between 1988–2020), we found three main areas which are positively affected by these ties. They provide basis for the regime's claim to sovereignty and statehood, and they enhance Taiwanese presence in international institutions (and indicate the unresolved nature of the entity's international legal status). Most importantly, they help to maintain the international nature of the cross-strait conflict and contribute to preserve the status quo.

¹ TUBILEWICZ 2007. 7.

KEYWORDS

Taiwan, recognition, diplomatic partners, checkbook diplomacy, one-China principle

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1 INTRODUCTION

The island of Taiwan is situated in East Asia, between the South China Sea and the East China Sea. It is separated from continental Asia by the Taiwan Strait, which lies between the island and the east coast of China.² The Taiwan Strait, however, is not the only factor separating Taiwan from Mainland China. The Chinese Civil War between the forces of the Kuomintang (KMT), led by Chiang Kai-shek, and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), led by Mao Zedong, resulted in the de facto division of China in 1949.³ The government of the People's Republic of China (PRC) exercises authority over the Mainland territory. Taiwan (along with the islands of Penghu, Kinmen, and Matsu) remained under the de facto control of the Republic of China (ROC).⁴

Today the Beijing government represents 'China' in most bilateral relations, and multilateral forums (such as the United Nations) as well. The Taipei government has merely 15 official diplomatic partner states (as of November 2020),⁵ and no seat in the United Nations (UN).⁶ Even though the number of states who recognize the ROC is low (and declining), sustaining these formal relations are of utmost importance for Taiwan.⁷ We wondered whether these relations have meaningful effects on the entity's global position, therefore, we asked the question; do the remaining diplomatic ties of Taiwan enhance its international legal status? If yes, in what ways?

² SALTER 2004. 8–10.

³ MAGGIORELLI 2019. 183–184.

⁴ KAN – MORRISON 2014. 12.

⁵ *Diplomatic Allies. Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of China (Taiwan).*

⁶ HUANG 2003. 81–82.

⁷ MAGGIORELLI 2019. 181–182.

2 THE ONE-CHINA PRINCIPLE

In order to find the reason behind the low international recognition of the Taiwanese regime, we have to consider the ‘one-China principle’. In spite of the de facto separation of the state, the legal unity of ‘China’ was upheld by both parties. They considered Taiwan to be part of the one Chinese state, this is the one-China principle.⁸ Their judgement only diverged in terms of who the legitimate government of the whole of ‘China’ was.⁹ This understanding implies that foreign states (who wished to conduct official diplomatic relations with China) had to choose their representative for the Chinese nation, exclusively either the Beijing or the Taipei government.¹⁰

Until the 1970s the ROC enjoyed the recognition of the US and most ‘Western powers’.¹¹ In addition, the ROC had been one of the founding nations of the United Nations (UN), it also held a seat in the Security Council (UNSC), as a permanent member.¹² In 1971 the representatives of the ROC were expelled from the UN, and their seats were assigned to the PRC.¹³ This decision was shortly followed by many states switching their recognition from the Taipei to the Beijing government, most notably, the by the United States.¹⁴

It is important to acknowledge the fact that Taiwan had made attempts to achieve dual recognition, like in 1989, which failed due to the counteractions of Beijing.¹⁵ Therefore, it can be argued that the ROC in the past decades have been known for trying to ‘stretch’ the one-China principle, and interpreting it in a quite flexible way.¹⁶ However, abandoning the doctrine is not possible without retaliation from Mainland China.¹⁷ Thus, overall, we would like to point out that officially the one-China principle still continues to dominate international affairs.¹⁸

3 COUNTERING DERECOGNITION – TAIWAN’S DIPLOMATIC STRUGGLE

Ever since the simultaneous existence of the PRC and the ROC regimes started, there have been a competition between the two governments to acquire recognition from the other states.¹⁹ Generally we can notice that connecting recognition to economic gains is not a novel phenomenon.²⁰

⁸ CHEN 2017. 30.

⁹ CRAWFORD 2007. 5.

¹⁰ BJÖRN 2008a. para. 5.

¹¹ ALBERT 2016. 2.

¹² HUANG 2003. 78–81.

¹³ HUANG 2003. 82.

¹⁴ HSIEH 2007. 774.

¹⁵ HUGHES 2003. 54–55.

¹⁶ HUGHES 2003. 49; 130.

¹⁷ JACOBS 2012. 121.; Anti-Secession Law (Full Text) (03/15/05). *Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the United States of America.*

¹⁸ HICKSON 2003. 5.

¹⁹ MAGGIORELLI 2019. 180.

²⁰ RICH 2009. 171.

Therefore, it is not surprising, that the ROC government has long been using economic tools to further its diplomatic interests. The regime started providing assistance to Africa, and to Latin America and the Caribbean in the early 1960s with the concrete aim of gaining recognition.²¹

3.1 ‘Checkbook diplomacy’

The role of these foreign aid instruments tremendously increased when, by 1979, Taiwan was left without a seat in the UN, without recognition by the US, and with the alliance of only 22 countries. This is especially true for the period that started after the death of Chiang Ching-kuo, as in 1988 Lee Teng-hui, the new president started to implement his new foreign policy approach.²² He called his strategy ‘flexible’ or ‘pragmatic’ diplomacy and identified the main objective as Taiwan’s emergence from international isolation.²³ As a means of achieving this goal, Taiwan did not abstain from using ‘checkbook diplomacy’.²⁴

Nevertheless, what exactly do we mean by ‘checkbook diplomacy’? In simple terms, it is ‘purchasing’ recognition. In the case of Taiwan, the regime provides various forms of economic benefits (such as loans, donations, and investments) to a state,²⁵ and in return it expects either the creation or the maintenance of formal relations. For instance, Niger decided to recognize the Taipei government in 1992, shortly after receiving a loan of US\$50 million from the regime.²⁶ Ending diplomatic ties have inverse effects, for example El Salvador decided to switch recognition to the PRC in 2018,²⁷ and as a result the ROC decided to relocate “six of its aid programs”²⁸ from El Salvador.

Utilizing economic instruments in order to gain recognition is not an alien concept to the PRC either, the Beijing government managed to seize many diplomatic allies from Taiwan by using such tactics.²⁹ For instance, in the above-mentioned case of El Salvador, the PRC promised to provide funding for a project in the Central American country (which project was previously deemed excessively pricey and unethical by the ROC government).³⁰ Additionally, it must be noted that ‘checkbook diplomacy’ is not an official name for the foreign policy strategy of the competing governments, they mutually condemn such practices by the other side of the Taiwan Strait.³¹

²¹ TUBILEWICZ 2007. 6–7.

²² NEMESKÉRI 1998. 11.

²³ TUBILEWICZ 2007. 7–9.

²⁴ MICHELON 1997. 45.

²⁵ MICHELON 1997. 47.

²⁶ RICH 2009. 172.

²⁷ SHATTUCK 2020. 350.

²⁸ MAGGIORELLI, 2019. 195.

²⁹ SHATTUCK 2020. 335.

³⁰ SHATTUCK 2020. 346-347.

³¹ RICH 2009. 182.

In this ‘interest-based’ diplomatic contest, Africa, and Latin America and the Caribbean became the most important battlegrounds,³² as well as island countries on the South Pacific³³ (although, during the 1990s, Taiwan made significant efforts to develop relations with post-communist Central and Eastern European states).³⁴ It is very much apparent that by using economic aid instruments, mostly “smaller countries which are more in need of development assistance”³⁵ can be targeted. Therefore, the centers of the ‘checkbook diplomacy’ of the PRC and the ROC are states that generally do not play significant roles internationally.³⁶

3.2 Evaluating the diplomatic contest

In this section, we will look at whether Taiwan’s allocation of resources and provision of assistance to preserve and enhance international recognition³⁷ achieved its goal. We decided to divide the period between 1988 (the beginning of flexible diplomacy)³⁸ and 2020 into three different periods to examine. The first period consists of the administrations of Lee Teng-hui and Chen Shui-bian (1988–2000 and 2000–2008, respectively), the second only includes the presidency of Ma Ying-jeou (2008–2016)³⁹, and the third follows the presidency of Tsai Ing-wen from 2016 until 2020.⁴⁰ After individually considering these three periods, we will present a comprehensive picture of the achievements.

Between 1988 and 2008, the ROC was very focused on establishing new diplomatic relations, and ‘checkbook diplomacy’ was regarded as an essential instrument of this policy.⁴¹ Generally, it can be argued that purely in terms of the number of allies, the beginning of the 1990s was a positive development for the ROC.⁴² In 1988, the Taipei government was recognized by merely 22 states, by 1995 this number rose to 30. The number of official diplomatic partners had not been this high since 1974. However, it appears that 30 was the peak, because after 1996 this number of allies was never reached again.⁴³

During the 2000s, the ROC could establish formal ties with only 3 states, the last of which happened in 2007, when Saint Lucia switched recognition from the Beijing to the Taipei government.⁴⁴ As a result of these modest gains, and the greater advances of the PRC, by the start of Ma Ying-jeou’s presidency, the regime only had 23 partners.⁴⁵ President Ma decided to

³² RICH – BANERJEE 2015. 145.

³³ TUBILEWICZ 2007. 15.

³⁴ TUBILEWICZ 2007. 46-50.

³⁵ MAGGIORELLI 2019. 199.

³⁶ SHATTUCK 2020. 339.

³⁷ RICH 2009. 184.

³⁸ TUBILEWICZ 2007. 7-9.

³⁹ Presidents & vice presidents since 1947. *Office of the President Republic of China (Taiwan)*.

⁴⁰ President & vice president. *Office of the President Republic of China (Taiwan)*.

⁴¹ MICHELON 1997. 50.

⁴² MAGGIORELLI 2019. 181.

⁴³ TUBILEWICZ 2007. 7-11.

⁴⁴ TUBILEWICZ 2007. 11.

⁴⁵ WANG – LEE – YU 2011. 253.

establish a so-called ‘diplomatic truce’ with Mainland China, which put an end to ‘checkbook diplomacy’.⁴⁶ The rival governments agreed to refrain from poaching “the other’s diplomatic allies”⁴⁷. Due to this agreement, there was no significant change in the number of Taiwanese diplomatic partners. Nevertheless, the diplomatic truce did not seem to concern Gambia, as the African state decided to derecognize the ROC in 2013.⁴⁸

The start of the first presidential term of Tsai Ing-wen made cross-strait relations ‘cooler’⁴⁹, which also meant the termination of the diplomatic truce by Beijing. On the other hand, President Tsai affirmed that her administration would not relaunch ‘checkbook diplomacy’.⁵⁰ However, it is apparent that the preservation of allies continues to be regarded essential.⁵¹

Since 2016 Taiwan has already lost 7 diplomatic allies,⁵² therefore the regime (as of November 2020) maintains official ties with solely 15 states. Geographically, the majority of these states are located in Latin America and the Caribbean (9 countries), or in East Asia and the Pacific (4 states). Additionally, the Taipei government has one ally in Europe (the Holy See), as well as in Africa (Eswatini).⁵³

3.3 The shortcomings of ‘checkbook diplomacy’

Overall, “the delivery of development aid constitutes an effective instrument of public diplomacy”⁵⁴, however, excessive reliance on this method does not usually bring the expected or hoped results.⁵⁵ This experience can be noticed in the case of Taiwan as well. The first period of ‘checkbook diplomacy’, could be regarded as quite successful, as it increased the number of the allies of the ROC. However, it proved to be rather difficult and (in most instances) unsuccessful to keep these new ties, as already by the start of the 2000s, the number of official partners started to decline yet again.⁵⁶

The instability of ‘checkbook diplomacy’ is due to some of the factors that make this foreign policy practice possible, namely that it is very easy to switch recognition, and that states try to maximize their economic benefits.⁵⁷ “Whenever better conditions”⁵⁸ are being offered by one of the two governments, ‘opportunistic’ states can choose the more ‘generous’ option.⁵⁹ For

⁴⁶ WANG – LEE – YU 2011. 254.

⁴⁷ SHATTUCK 2020. 355.

⁴⁸ SHATTUCK 2020. 337.

⁴⁹ CHEN 2017. 4.

⁵⁰ SHATTUCK 2020. 335.

⁵¹ MAGGIORELLI 2019. 196–201.

⁵² SHATTUCK 2020. 335–336.

⁵³ *Diplomatic Allies. Ministry of Foreign Affairs Republic of China (Taiwan).*

⁵⁴ MAGGIORELLI 2019. 181.

⁵⁵ MAGGIORELLI 2019. 198.

⁵⁶ TUBILEWICZ 2007. 7–11.

⁵⁷ RICH 2009. 183.

⁵⁸ TUDOROIU 2017. 205.

⁵⁹ TUDOROIU 2017. 205.

instance, the state of Nauru switched recognition twice within the period of 2003-2005,⁶⁰ and Papua New Guinea managed to change alliances twice within the year of 1999.⁶¹

Moreover, it is obvious, that “on a dollar for dollar base”⁶² Taiwan does not have the means to compete with Mainland China, the second largest economy of the world.⁶³ Additionally to direct financial contributions to a country, states switching to recognize the PRC also benefit from enhanced trade relations therewith.⁶⁴ Also, it must be kept in mind that apart from creating economic incentives, the Beijing government can also exert pressure on states to make this switch.⁶⁵ Therefore, as Thomas J. Shattuck put it, “overall, Taiwan, on its own, is not well positioned to counter China’s tactics”⁶⁶.

4. ENHANCING THE INTERNATIONAL LEGAL STATUS OF TAIWAN?

In the previous sections we illustrated the attempts of Taiwan to maintain (and to form) diplomatic relations in order to combat international isolation, as well as the importance and success of said efforts. It can be concluded that the results of the foreign policy of Taipei are mixed at best.⁶⁷ However, the process to achieve these humble outcomes is very costly⁶⁸ and sometimes has negative implications on the regime’s international reputation.⁶⁹ Why is this foreign policy still worth pursuing? What possible effects can the remaining formal diplomatic relations have on Taiwan’s international legal status?

4.1 Supporting the international presence of Taiwan

Diplomatic allies in a way enable the Taipei government to continue to appear in international organizations, as they raise and support the issue of Taiwanese application to these forums.⁷⁰ For instance, in 1993 seven Latin American partners of the ROC advocated for adding the question of the representation of Taiwan to the agenda of the year’s UN General Assembly (UNGA) session. This attempt was unsuccessful, the issue was only discussed by a committee.⁷¹ However, from 1993 until 2008 each year,⁷² there was a UN Petition endorsed by (some)

⁶⁰ RICH 2009. 173.

⁶¹ TUBILEWICZ 2007. 11.

⁶² MAGGIORELLI 2019. 203.

⁶³ GDP (current US\$). *The World Bank*.

⁶⁴ MAGGIORELLI 2019. 189.

⁶⁵ SHATTUCK 2020. 335.

⁶⁶ SHATTUCK 2020. 348.

⁶⁷ MAGGIORELLI 2019. 203.

⁶⁸ RICH 2009. 184.

⁶⁹ TUDOROIU 2017. 205.

⁷⁰ RICH 2009. 181.

⁷¹ KLINTWORTH 1994. 283–284.

⁷² WANG – LEE – YU 2011. 260.

ROC diplomatic partners.⁷³ None of these were successful, nevertheless, they reminded the international community “that the issue of Taiwan is not resolved.”⁷⁴

On the other hand, it is important to note, that these functions are not exclusive to official allies, since non-official partners of the ROC regime are also capable and willing to do these supporting activities in international forums (except for the UNGA). Major states (e.g. the US, Canada) endorse Taiwanese participation, with the same, futile results.⁷⁵

4.2 Status quo maintenance

Evidently, the division of China has been ‘internationalized’ since 1950, when the US decided to protect the ROC on Taiwan from the forces of Mao Zedong.⁷⁶ This international nature was also reflected in the fact that both governments of ‘China’ has had their own diplomatic allies throughout their coexistence.

Undoubtedly, there is a marked imbalance between the number of states who recognize the PRC, and the states who recognize the ROC (180 and 15, respectively).⁷⁷ Still, official ties with this handful of states assist the Taiwan regime in its efforts to maintain the international aspect of the cross-strait conflict.⁷⁸ The significance of ‘internationalization’ is that it serves as protection or “buffer against the use of force.”⁷⁹

Timothy S. Rich summarizes this rationale excellently as “Recognition is crucial to Taiwan’s national security, not only to prevent further isolation but to deny the PRC the ability to swallow Taiwan without international objection, while making forced reunification more difficult.”⁸⁰ Nonetheless, it should be considered that Taiwan as a *de facto* regime, with or without recognition by other states, would still be protected by the UN Charter “against the threat or use of force by the PRC government.”⁸¹

Additionally, preserving some degree of recognition is deemed as essential (by the Taipei government) to be able to continue upholding its “claim to sovereignty”⁸² and legitimacy.⁸³ On the whole, it can be argued that the remaining diplomatic ties, on one hand, help the ROC to avoid increasing international isolation, and on the other, extend the current status quo,⁸⁴ in which Taiwan functions as a *de facto* independent entity.⁸⁵

⁷³ RICH 2009. 181.

⁷⁴ RICH 2009. 182.

⁷⁵ SHATTUCK 2020. 343.

⁷⁶ HUGHES 2003. 16.

⁷⁷ SHATTUCK 2020. 335.

⁷⁸ MICHELON 1994. 49.; TUBILEWICZ 2007. 23.

⁷⁹ HICKSON 2003. 6.

⁸⁰ RICH 2009. 180.

⁸¹ BJÖRN 2008b. para. 22.

⁸² TUBILEWICZ 2007. 14.

⁸³ HARWIT 2000. 465.

⁸⁴ MAGGIORELLI 2019. 202–203.

⁸⁵ RICH – BANERJEE 2015. 146.

5. CONCLUSION

Our set of research questions; ‘Do the remaining diplomatic ties of Taiwan enhance its international legal status? If yes, in what ways?’ focused on the regime’s place in the international arena. We began dealing with this issue by examining the group of states that continued to maintain diplomatic ties with the Taiwanese regime. It is apparent that by the middle of the 1990s, the Taipei government lost all of its formal relations with internationally influential states.⁸⁶ However, this was also the time period when the regime very actively tried to find new diplomatic allies,⁸⁷ and in course of achieving this purpose, it did not refrain from using ‘checkbook diplomacy’.⁸⁸ It was also discussed that ‘checkbook diplomacy’ methods are appealing to states that are “poor, heavily indebted”⁸⁹ and do not play prominent roles in international politics.⁹⁰

Afterward, we followed the results of Taiwanese efforts to form and maintain official relations. Regarding this aim, only modest results were detected,⁹¹ but for high costs.⁹² Even though this finding did not provide immediate answers to the questions, it still demonstrated that the existence of formal ties are regarded to be paramount by the leadership of the regime,⁹³ which indicates that diplomatic relations are perceived to have effects on the global position of Taiwan.⁹⁴

Consequently, we presented three factors that are either positively affected or assisted by the presence of diplomatic allies. These factors are rather linked to each other. Firstly, diplomatic relations have a quite ‘symbolic’ impact,⁹⁵ as they provide some basis for the ROC government to keep claiming sovereignty and statehood.⁹⁶ Furthermore, official allies facilitate the indirect presence of Taiwan in international organizations (most notably the UN), as they advocate for the admission of the regime to the forum.⁹⁷ This advocacy is rarely successful, however, it serves as a reminder for states that the question of Taiwan has not been resolved yet.⁹⁸

This leads us to the final argument, which is that the fact that both governments are recognized by a number of states, ‘internationalizes’ the conflict and cross-strait relations as well to a certain extent⁹⁹ (even though both entities formally belong to ‘China’¹⁰⁰). This international nature serves as a safeguard against the use of force¹⁰¹ or a unilateral act of reunification.¹⁰²

⁸⁶ COPPER 1992. 211.

⁸⁷ TUBILEWICZ 2007. 7-9.

⁸⁸ MICHELON 1997. 47.

⁸⁹ TUDOROIU 2017. 202.

⁹⁰ SHATTUCK 2020. 339.

⁹¹ MAGGIORELLI 2019. 203.

⁹² RICH 2009. 184.

⁹³ MAGGIORELLI 2019. 180-182.

⁹⁴ MICHELON 1997. 49.

⁹⁵ MICHELON 1997. 49.

⁹⁶ TUBILEWICZ 2007. 14.

⁹⁷ RICH 2009. 181.

⁹⁸ RICH 2009. 182.

⁹⁹ MICHELON 1997. 49.; TUBILEWICZ 2007. 23.

¹⁰⁰ CRAWFORD 2007. 18–20.

¹⁰¹ HICKSON 2003. 6.

¹⁰² RICH 2009. 180.

Therefore, our answer to the asked questions is that the maintenance of formal relations with seemingly nonsignificant nations does enhance the international legal status of Taiwan. Taking into account the above-listed three factors leads to the conclusion, that the remaining diplomatic ties on the one hand are meaningful to avoid an even higher degree of diplomatic isolation, and on the other, they assist to the preservation of the status quo.¹⁰³

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¹⁰³ MAGGIORELLI 2019. 202–203.

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