

African Democratisation and the One China Policy

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Democracy in Africa is among the most contentious issues in the continent's relationship with China. On one hand, many reform-minded scholars, international organisations, and western governments criticise the People's Republic of China (PRC) for its indifference to the unsatisfactory levels of democracy within many of the African states it deals with. On the other hand, Rich and Banerjee (2015), who carried out a study seeking to identify variables which led African states to have relations with the PRC over Taiwan/Republic of China (ROC) and vice versa, found out that in the continent, Taiwan tended to be more recognised by states that were non-democratic. The paper does not elaborate on why, however; noting only a positive correlation. What mechanisms may underline such a phenomenon? Subsequent literature has likewise not answered this and has thus far placed much emphasis on the economic factors; namely, that African countries have recognised China because of its economic strengths and gains to be made from increased trade with it. As it stands, only a single state recognises Taiwan on the continent. However, the continent has had domestic governance changes that began in the 1990s – the so-called 'Third Wave' of democratisation (Huntington, 1991: 12) – and culminated in the 2000s, which merit analysis alongside the One China issue in Africa.

In light of this, the present article notes a causal interaction among the three notable trends of the late 1990s that culminated in the 2000s whose interconnectedness has thus far been underexplored: the third wave of democratisation, which also saw the emergence of multiparty politics in many countries in Africa, the economic rise of China, and the decline of Taiwanese recognition in the continent. The article proposes that the process of democratisation, as well as regime change in a given state, is a direct determinant of the recognition of China in the twenty-first century; with those now in power expecting that the new relations with China will lead to increased trade and reap domestic electoral dividends (e.g., Liberia, Gambia, and Burkina Faso). Moreover, the states which were not new democracies but nonetheless switched from Taiwan to China – i.e., Senegal, Chad and Malawi – did so as a result of popular, election-linked developmental imperatives.

Over the last five decades, Taiwan has shed allies and recognisers (though the US remains an important military backer with no official recognition since 1979) and presently only has 17 formal diplomatic relations in the world, and only 1 in the African continent (the Kingdom of eSwatini). Since 2000, African countries have overwhelmingly recognized China as opposed to Taiwan including Liberia, Chad, Senegal, Malawi, Gambia, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Burkina Faso. Beijing has reportedly also made overtures to eSwatini. Interestingly, many of these states were initially reached out to either through the platform of the FOCAC, or reportedly by promises of foreign aid as well as, for the conflict-ridden countries (e.g. Liberia and Chad), assistance through the UN Security Council, where the People's Republic of China obtained a permanent seat in 1971 – succeeding the ROC which had held the seat given to China in 1945 upon the creation of the United Nations. How have scholars understood this history? This is briefly reviewed in the upcoming section.

At the end of the Cold War, Copper (1995: 222) correctly observed that Taiwan tends to have smaller relations, but in at least one book and one paper came to the incorrect conclusion that "future trends in this regard probably favour the ROC, particularly given the fact, among other reasons, the PRC's relations with the Third World are generally tenuous owing to Beijing's becoming a major recipient of aid and loans from international lending institutions while absorbing large quantities of private investment capital, to the detriment of other developing nations." This grew from a retrospective application of ideology on the question of the recognition of Taiwan borne from an association between these states' small size as well as that of Taiwan's own small size; "many smaller nations side with the ROC (also a small nation) saying that its sovereignty should be protected against a larger aggressive nation. More importantly, they support the idea of self-determination and apply that principle to

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Taiwan” (Copper, 1995: 225). This led to a prediction by Copper that Taiwan would continue having relations with the states on the continent.

This has not been the case however. Rich and Banerjee (2015: 141) perceptively observe that “whereas Cold War rationales initially benefitted Taiwan, economic interests now appear to incentivize African countries to establish relations with China. Through qualitative and quantitative data covering much of the post-World War II era, [their analysis] argues that economic factors have trumped political rationales for Taiwanese–African relations.” Incumbent upon this is an assumption – that one of the two Chinas has marginally more to offer than the other; the PRC’s annual GDP growth, and thus its exporting and importing potentials, have been consistently higher than that of the ROC. Thus, insofar as African states would perform an opportunity cost analysis as to which China to recognise, the PRC is the more economically viable option.

More concretely, in their case study of South Africa, Williams and Hurst (2017: 3) argue that “the ROC and PRC were far from passive bystanders” in the first four years of democracy as Pretoria was choosing which China to recognise: “the ROC provided first the ANC [African National Congress], and then the South African government, with a range of inducements designed to make the case that retaining ties with the island government was in South Africa’s best interest.”

The importance of the use of incentives and coercion is further demonstrated in the fact that “the focus of Mandela’s trip to the ROC in late July 1993 was fundraising,” and a few days before Mandela visited the island,

ANC and ROC officials arranged “That US \$10 million will be given to the President [Mandela] during his courtesy call at the President’s [Lee Teng-Hui] office at 18h00 just before dinner on Friday, July 31.” An ANC official went on to note: “The Question of further assistance, whether hard cash or in kind, should be raised during the President’s courtesy calls to both the President’s and the Prime Minister’s offices—and not at the public events, (i.e. at dinner tables). We understand that the Western way of fundraising, such as passing the hat and asking for contributions from individuals/business people in public is something that is not done here—they get very embarrassed (Williams and Hurst, 2017: 11).

Furthermore, although trade between the ROC and South Africa was at the time larger than that between the PRC and South Africa, the combined trade figures of Hong Kong and PRC far outweighed those of the ROC (Williams and Hurst, 2017: 21). But political factors are also a consideration in economic rationales, especially on ones predicated on diplomatic action.

One of Rich and Banerjee’s interests in their study was the relationship between a given African country’s domestic structure and the likelihood of recognising either the island or the mainland. Differences in Polity IV scores between each African country and Taiwan acted as the operational proxy. In this regard, Rich and Banerjee found that

Where Taiwan and the African country had the same Polity score (and thus an absolute difference of zero), the predicted probability that the African country recognized Taiwan was only 5.7 per cent during the Cold War, dropping to 3.31 per cent after 1991. At the other extreme (a 19-point difference in Polity scores), the predicted probability of recognizing Taiwan reaches 15.74 per cent during the Cold War, but only 10.34 per cent later (pp. 154).

Furthermore,

the absolute difference in Polity scores does reach statistical significance at .01, with a coefficient that appears counterintuitive: As the differences between Taiwan and African countries increase, recognition of the ROC is more likely. Additional tests show that this pattern is consistent during the Cold War and in both Taiwan’s authoritarian and democratic eras, in stark contrast to claims that Taiwan’s democratization allowed it to hold onto allies (pp. 155).

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Their conclusion is that “these counter-intuitive findings suggest that Taiwan’s ability to maintain allies *had little to do* with similarities in political systems” (p. 154; emphasis added) They offer no further hypothesis in this regard. However, the finding that mainly autocracies had relations with Taiwan is only descriptive, and while a curious finding, it says little outside itself. Furthermore, the authors and other academic works subsequent to this finding, have made no attempt to hypothesise as to why that might be.

The literature review has yielded economics as the predominant reason for African states’ switching from Taiwan to PRC in the late 1990s and 2000s. At the same time, however, democracy was found to be on the rise in the continent. These two factors have been looked at separately, but perhaps some combination of these factors could be at play: the regime change in a newly democratised state could usher in competitive democratic politics (and thus rational self-interest among the political elite [Tomz, 2007: 821]) which may have led to African states being more likely to respond to the opportunity cost of not recognising the much larger PRC; especially an economic one, underlined by developmental/poverty-reduction concerns in African states). Thus, we could deduce that the process of democratisation, as well as regime change in a given state, is a direct determinant of recognition of China in the twenty-first century; with those now in power expecting that the new relations with China will lead to increased trade and reap domestic electoral dividends.

This study was interested in the causal linkage between democratisation and the recognition of China by African countries in the 2000s. Thus, the research question of this article is as follows: why have all newly democratised states in Africa subsequently switched their recognition from China to Taiwan? A sub-question within this question is: is there an association between electoral accountability, the prospect of economic gain in recognising China and its subsequent recognition?

The case studies include those African countries which became democracies in the 2000s; Liberia, Gambia and Burkina Faso. The article presents and tests a causal hypothesis as to why this may be the case. In line with that, the article also postulates that the states which were not new democracies but nonetheless switched from Taiwan to China – i.e., Senegal, Chad, Malawi and Sao Tome and Principe – still did so as a result of popular, election-linked developmental imperatives.

Based on findings from seven case studies, this article proposes that regime change and/or multiparty competition in newly democratised states may have ushered in competitive politics and free media which may have led to African states being more likely to respond to the domestically-rooted and socially-distributed opportunity costs of not recognising the demographically larger PRC over the smaller and economically stagnating ROC. This is especially plausible in light of the developmental/poverty-reduction concerns that permeate African states. Indeed, all new democracies on the continent in the twenty-first century – Liberia, Gambia, and Burkina Faso – have gone on to switch to China within one to three years of democratisation.

Liberia

On September 5, 1997, Liberia, under erstwhile President Charles Taylor sought to recognise both the “two Chinas”. Beijing, unwilling to accommodate such an arrangement, on September 9th, once more suspended the diplomatic relations with Liberia (*China Daily*, 2007: 1). But relations with Beijing were reactivated in 2003 by the Provisional Government of Liberia, which paved the way for an electorally competitive Liberia, when it signed a joint communique on the resumption of diplomatic relations between the two countries (PRC, 2003: 1), “with Beijing sending a generous aid package to Liberia soon after Monrovia switched its relations” (Taylor, 2015: 45-46). As the country was just emerging from the brutal second Liberian civil war which had begun in 1999, Beijing’s permanent seat in the UNSC “and the possibilities this could provide the country in its post-war reconstruction, as well as China’s desire to access Liberian resources” were deemed to be deciding additional factors (Taylor, 2015: 46).

Gambia

On the other hand, the government of The Gambia sought to end its relations with Taiwan and unsuccessfully

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sought to recognise the PRC; who was unwilling to recognise it due to a 'diplomatic truce' between Beijing and Taipei (2008-2015), which was also accompanied by rapprochement and ever greater economic cooperation between the two One China claimants. However, after the election of the pro-independence government of Tsai Ing-wen in 2015, China once again resumed the 'dollar diplomacy' and formed diplomatic relations with Gambia. This begs the question of whether autocracies are more likely to respond to the opportunity cost when they have experienced a decline in aid from Taiwan, rather than from expansion of domestic pressures from within the populace. The Gambian case is interesting in this regard because although under an autocratic government when the country initially unsuccessfully reached out to China in 2015, the country was also anticipating what proved to be the freest election in its history, set to take place in 2016. The decision to relent relations with the ROC within a year of the election also perhaps indicates a desire to economically gain from the PRC and therefore resuscitate the economy, which had reached a technical recession in 2014, at -0.94%. This was the second such recession in three years, as 2011 had also seen a nominal GDP decline of -4.295%, along with a GDP per capita decline of -7.141% in the same year (World Bank, 2019). It was in this context that the country made the overtures it did to the PRC.

Burkina Faso

Imports from Burkina Faso declined measurably between 2014 and 2015 period, "partly because of Burkina Faso's political unrest and owing to reduced demand in China leading to a drastic reduction in Chinese cotton imports" (Cabeston, 2017). But the larger obstructing factor in the PRC-Burkinabe trade relationship has been the lack of recognition between the two states. This was changed in 2018, when the two countries formed formal diplomatic ties. This was despite prior indications that the country would maintain its relations with Taiwan. For example, Burkinabe Foreign Minister Alpha Barry had initially disclosed to a newspaper that the country 'get ridiculous proposals telling us "if you sign with Beijing we'll offer you \$50 billion or even more"' (*Asia by Africa*, 2018; April 22; Blanchard, 2018; May 26). This may have also been partially due to the fact that in the course of the 2015 electoral season, diplomatic sources demonstrated that one opponent of the eventual winner, Zéphirin Bagré, had had his campaign accept an offer of "\$4.6 million from China in support of his pro-Beijing stance" (*Asia by Africa*, 2018). In the wake of the recognition, the country's exports to China grew from US\$37.93-million in 2014 to US\$99-million by 2017.

Role of elections: Chad, Malawi, São Tomé and Príncipe and Senegal

Of the four states that were not new democracies but still switched (i.e., Senegal, Chad, Malawi and São Tomé and Príncipe), three (Chad, Malawi and São Tomé and Príncipe) did so within a year of an upcoming election following a declining performance in the preceding presidential election by the incumbent leaders. For example, in 1996, Idris Deby of Chad had obtained 69.09% but had seen a marginal decline to 63.17% in 2001. After effecting a switch to the PRC in 2006, an electoral year, his electoral outcome was improved to 64.67%. To a more substantial margin, the ruling United Democratic Front in Malawi had declined from 52.34% in 1999 to 35.97% in the 2004 elections. The gains in trade appear to have coincided with gains in the ballot for the ruling United Democratic Front (UDF) which won its highest electoral victory to date in the presidential election in 2009 (66.17%), the year following the switch to the PRC. It is discernible that the party had just obtained a margin of the plurality in the election preceding the switch of 2008. The erstwhile president of Malawi, Bingu wa Mutharika, had paid a visit to the PRC shortly after establishing diplomatic relations, and upon his return, he told the country "it would help turn Malawi from poverty to riches" (Mweninguwe, 2017: 1), thereby demonstrating a willingness to make a trade-off between the recognition of the ROC and that of the PRC which, at least the preceding statement would suggest, had resulted in an opportunity cost. During the campaign, media noted that while John Tembo, the incumbent president's principal opposition, "enjoyed the united backing of the country's two most established and powerful parties—the MCP and the UDF—he faced an incumbent president who had presided over strong economic growth of 8%, and the outcome was considered uncertain" (Tenthani, 2009; May 17).

São Tomé and Príncipe's decision to discontinue its relations with the ROC seems to have been motivated by the former's request for more aid from the latter, and its inability or unwillingness to cooperate. As a statement made public by the ROC's Foreign Affairs Ministry stated: "The government of São Tomé and Príncipe ... with excessive

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financial difficulties, and demands beyond those [Taiwan] could meet, has ignored 20 years of friendly diplomatic relations, playing both sides of the Taiwan Strait while holding out for the highest bidder” (Southerland, 2017: 1). The country’s switch to the PRC in 2016 came in the wake of a contentious year for the country as during the July 2016 presidential election, Evaristo Carvalho, a former Prime Minister had won the plurality (at 49.8%), but nonetheless failed to gain an outright majority. Thus, a run-off election was called to take place in August of the same year. However, the incumbent president Manuel Costa, decided to withdraw in protest; claiming the original poll in July had been rigged. By default, then, Carvalho became president.

Senegal on the other hand switched to the PRC outside the context of an election and, moreover, in the midst of a growing economy. This would appear to make the country an outlier. However, its switch, in 2005, took place a year prior to the Forum on China-Africa-Cooperation (FOCAC) summit of 2006 where it had been invited despite its Taiwan alignment. The country subsequently had its China-bound exports grow; from US\$7.8-million in 2005, the year of the switch, to US\$22.5-million by 2007 and US\$128.5-million by 2018; additionally, the country also gained interest-free loans from China and has subsequently been appointed co-chair of FOCAC (2018-2021).

Caveats: Imperfect democracies

Assuming perfect democratisation (by which is meant governments that are held accountable, that are transparent and that are not corrupt), might be characterised as assuming a non-existent occurrence. There is nothing in the existence of a corruption-ridden democracy, however, which precludes a relationship between democratisation and the recognition of China – insofar as it is predicated on states switching to the PRC to make economic gains. That is, we can still presume that the installation of new, albeit corrupt governments, is still capable of being concomitant with greater amounts of elites among which there are ‘rents’ that need to be shared and spread out. In other words, democratisation is an associated variable that works in combination with this and (perhaps) other variables which may be at play; further, as the combination of economic stagnation of Taiwan compared to China which creates an opportunity cost served in this article. Democratisation is a process and a mechanism for the assertion of economic/developmental pressures that result in switches rather than an end in itself. It is in this regard necessarily tied to situational circumstances, and thereby accommodates and channels a multitude of other variables to various policy outcomes in which choosing which China to recognise has been only one occupation in the multi-faceted practice of African statecraft.

In conclusion, given the findings in the 7 case studies, the process of democratisation or regime change (or a weakened autocracy, as in the case of pre-2017 Gambia) in a given African state in either case is a critical determinant of recognition of China in the twenty-first century; with those now in power *expecting* that the new relations with mainland China will lead to increased trade and in turn translate these into domestic electoral dividends. Importantly, this article’s thesis is not that China increases democracy on the continent. Rather, it is the other way around: democratisation and electoral competitiveness in African states in the twenty-first century has led to a growth in the recognition of China. The data has proved this, and not necessarily the reverse.

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