



The World Today

China or Taiwan? Diplomatic Rivalry in the Caribbean

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It is widely agreed that the Peoples' Republic of China (China) enjoys not only the world's largest population but also the world's fastest growing economy. It also boasts of having the largest army in the world, a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council, a manned space program, and nuclear capability. As such, some islands in the Caribbean have maintained long standing relations with China. The increasing ties with China have been usually seen as a way to decrease long term dependence on the United States of America (USA). Generally, these relations are mostly based on trade and investment which have increased significantly over the period of the last four decades.

Thus it came with little surprise that China suspended diplomatic relations with St. Lucia at the beginning of May 2007. This announcement quickly followed the United Workers Party's decision to re-establish diplomatic ties with the Republic of China (Taiwan) after returning to power in December 2006.

In the past, the Chinese government has sought to encourage other states to adopt the 'One China' policy which considers Taiwan to be a part of China's territory. In so doing, China attempts to dissuade official diplomatic recognition of Taiwan. In its first White Paper in 1992, China advocated that "reunification of the Country embodies the fundamental interest of the Chinese nation and that Taiwan question has long been a destabilizing factor in the Asia-Pacific region. Reunification of China will not only bolster the stability and development of the country itself, but also contribute to the further enhancement of friendly relations and cooperation between China and other countries". Therefore, for China, the Taiwan question is an internal issue. It could be described as a family row involving estranged relatives, with the parent disallowing any outside interference.

Under the Dr Kenny Anthony-led St. Lucian Labour Party (SLP), China enjoyed a ten year old relationship with St Lucia. Ahead of elections, rumour was rampant as to whether this relationship would have changed. In April, all speculation ended after the new Foreign Minister of St. Lucia, Rufus Bousquet, announced the intention of the John Compton government to renew diplomatic relations with Taiwan stating there was an "overwhelming consensus" to do so. It must be noted that St. Lucia's recognition is a much needed win for Taiwan in its diplomatic rivalry with China. Previously, Taiwan had full relations with sixty-seven (67) countries including the United States and much to Western Europe. Until last month that number had dwindled down to 24.

What was quite interesting was Mr. Bousquet's statement in which he suggested that this action by the UWP Government should not be interpreted as a "severance" with China. To many, it would appear that this was a naïve oversight by a Minister of Foreign Affairs who believed that it was possible to maintain full diplomatic relations with China and Taiwan simultaneously, with the perceived hope of playing off one against the other in the pursuit of further tangible assistance. This move could prove to be an ill-considered political gamble especially in light of widespread speculation of Taiwan's financial assistance to the UWP in its recent electoral campaign.

With the current ill-health of Prime Minister Compton, there is a possibility that fresh elections may be held. Indeed, this would have repercussions for both China and St. Lucia if the SLP regains political office. Even so, it has been alleged that there are divisions within the ruling UWP government with regards to Taiwan. It is rumoured that supporters of the elderly Prime Minister still want to secure a firm relationship with China.

As expected, the initial announcement by the UWP led government was met with strong disapproval by Chinese officials. Describing it as "a wanton interference in its internal affairs", China reasserted its sovereignty over Taiwan, clearly implying that repercussions were bound to follow. On May 4th, the PRC suspended all diplomatic relations and cooperation efforts with St. Lucia. It may be some time before the real impact of this decision on St. Lucia may be assessed. As such, one could only take the "wait and see" approach to evaluate the choice made by the Compton led UWP.

Just earlier this year, China was embroiled in a similar situation with another Caribbean island. At the formal reopening of Grenada's National Stadium, a diplomatic blunder was made when the Taiwanese anthem was played instead of China's. China was instrumental in the reconstruction of the Stadium and the Grenadian government is still dealing with the diplomatic fall-out from this error.

It is argued that the Caribbean has much more to gain from a permanent relationship with China rather than Taiwan. As it is impossible to maintain relations with both of them simultaneously, a decision must be made: China or Taiwan? To this end, as the overarching development needs of the Caribbean come into play, it is believed that China will continue to enjoy preference in the Sino-diplomatic rivalry in the Caribbean.