



The World Today

The China-Taiwan Tussle in the Caribbean

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In 1971, in spite of stiff resistance from the United States, a majority of member-states of the UN General Assembly voted to recognize the People's Republic of China (China), as the "only legitimate representatives of China in the United Nations", and therefore the ones entitled to occupy China's seat on the veto wielding powers on the Security Council.

The Government of what was then referred to as the Republic of China (Taiwan), strongly supported from the foundation of the UN by the United States, was then expelled from the global institution.

At the same time, the US was embroiled in its war in Vietnam. But, President Nixon was already beginning to change his views on the question on who could legitimately represent China in the UN. Nixon had indeed come to the conclusion that in order for the US to get out of Vietnam, China could be more useful to him than the Soviet Union.

So it was in the same 1971 that, Nixon's National Security Adviser paid a secret visit to China to speak with its two main leaders, Mao Tse Tung and Chou en Lai. By February 1972 Nixon and Kissinger proceeded with no prior notice to most of the 'Western world', on a visit of reconciliation to Beijing. After a week in China, Nixon proudly announced that the week he had spent there, and the agreements reached, had "changed the world".

From that time, Taiwan has sought to maintain the support of the countries which had previously recognized it, but that number has dwindled over the years. Today, in the English speaking part of the Caribbean Basin, St Vincent and the Grenadines, St Kitts and Nevis, St Lucia and Belize are of the 24 countries which at this time recognize Taiwan.

St Lucia, which in 1997 had followed countries like Barbados and Antigua and Barbuda in recognizing Beijing, surprised the Region, and indeed many countries in the wider world earlier this year, by revoking the country's stance, and returning to recognition of Taiwan which it had first done in 1985. What indeed surprised observers was not simply

St Lucia's recognition of Taiwan, but that the Government had gone against the general international trend.

There were indications after St Lucia's reversion to Taiwan that some other Caribbean countries might succumb to Taiwan's pleas to do likewise. In short order the Dominican Republic, Suriname and Nicaragua felt it necessary to announce that they would be staying with China.

It would appear that in the Dominican Republic, an important incentive for the move lies in the fact that DR has seen a rapid increase in its exports to China, now far exceeding its exports to Taiwan (US\$23m as against US\$9m in 2006). In part, this growth in exports reflects China's demand for minerals at this time, the DR now exporting, among other products, iron, aluminum and ferro-nickel to China.

Also in Central America, Costa Rica also surprised many by turning away from Taiwan and recognizing China. Representatives of the Government of Costa Rica in doing so felt it necessary to say, on the one hand that the decision was "just a matter of common sense" since the People's Republic represents "one-fifth of humanity", and on the other that the Government of Taiwan had proven to be "stingy".

Instead, both China and Taiwan have been making substantial offers of assistance to developing countries. Beijing's "gifts" have tended to focus on construction (in the Caribbean of factory shells, sports stadia and the like), while in the 1980's and 1990's in particular, Taiwan has sought to focus on small-scale agricultural reform projects, skill development for small businesses, provision of information and communications technology (ICT) for schools and colleges. Taiwan has also often asserted that, as a "small country" her development thrust was more appropriate to that of the small countries of the Caribbean, and that therefore, a diplomatic connection with her, and her assistance should be more acceptable to them.

For many countries adhering to Taiwan's cause, as long as the Cold War was raging in the Hemisphere, and they were hesitant to displease the United States, this argument was a diplomatically tenable one. Yet we should note that' with the election of what was sometimes deemed a conservative administration of the Barbados Labour Party under Tom Adams in 1976, that country moved from Taiwan (which the Errol Barrow administration had recognized) to China.

But as the process of globalization has penetrated the small countries of the Caribbean, and as China itself moved to a situation of domestic and external liberalisation as a central part of its economic policy making, allegiances of Caribbean countries to the United States, and to its alliances have tended to loosen.

At the same time, globalisation and the ending of the Cold War have led, in the Caribbean to the impression that their specific development concerns have been inadequately recognized by the United States, the main provider of assistance to the Eastern Caribbean in particular since the post-Grenada intervention period. In that context, China has certainly felt freer to forcefully make its case for recognition, not only in the Caribbean, but also in Africa where, in addition, critical raw materials needed by her are available.

That is now the background to the renewed vigorous competition of both China and Taiwan for recognition, involving competition in the grant of aid of different kinds to countries willing to recognize their cause. And this competition comes at a time when many countries in the Region, and particularly the smaller Eastern Caribbean ones, are feeling a degree of pressure from diminishing resources for development from their own resources, as well as from their traditional donors.

The Dominican Republic spokesperson's description of Taiwan's approach as being "stingy" indicates the mindset of some policy makers in this Region towards the competition. It is not unreasonable to accept that a similar feeling characterized the turn of the Grenada Government to China in 2005. In the case of St Lucia the then Foreign Minister, Rufus Bousquet is quoted as observing that Taiwan was committed to matching what China had on offer, and to complete the projects which it had started. St Lucia, he observed, should "support those who give you the most".

St Lucia itself, incidentally, was an early recipient of aid (for budgetary assistance) from China negotiated by the Labour Party administration of 1979-1982, a period in which the country recognized neither China nor Taiwan.

The thirst for budgetary aid, as major products in the Eastern Caribbean and elsewhere come under the pressure from the reduction of preferential conditions for exports, is further fuelling the competitive search for aid wherever it is available. And many observers will have noted that Prime Minister Owen Arthur of Barbados remarked during last week's meetings with George Bush, that he felt constrained to say, in Washington, that it is countries like Venezuela and Cuba which are now bearing the burden of responding to the pleas from countries in this Region.

We shall look at the implications of St Lucia's specific turn to China in a subsequent article.