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On the eve of the 50th anniversary of Swaziland's independence from British colonial rule and its establishment of diplomatic ties with the Republic of China, President Tsai made her first state visit to this African country to congratulate King Mswati III and celebrate the occasion with the Swazi people. Source: Office of the President, Taiwan (R.O.C.), flickr, <<https://www.flickr.com/photos/presidentialoffice/27657778938/in/album-72157667885322958/>>.

An Analysis of President Tsai's Visit to Swaziland: The Importance of Maintaining Diplomatic Allies

Dr. Chen-shen Yen

On the eve of the 50th anniversary of Swaziland's independence from British colonial rule and its establishment of diplomatic ties with the Republic of China, President Tsai made her first state visit to this African country to congratulate King Mswati III and celebrate the occasion with the Swazi people. More

importantly, she also witnessed that this friend has officially changed its name from Swaziland to eSwatini. (This article will use the new name hereafter)

eSwatini is a small country with a population of 1.3 million and a territory less than





half of Taiwan. But it is one of only two diplomatic allies of Taiwan in Africa (the other being Burkina Faso) and remains the only country on the continent that prefers Taiwan over Beijing. In this sense, eSwatini occupies a very special place in our diplomatic history and carries a symbolic meaning that is larger than its status in the international community. This is why President Tsai's visit to the country should not be overlooked.

Taipei has engaged in a diplomatic tug of war in Africa with Beijing since the late 1950s when both sides aggressively cultivated recognition from the newly independent states in their fight for membership of the U.N. Over the years, we have witnessed some countries continuing to maintain diplomatic ties with Mainland China while others have switched recognition, some more than once, with Swaziland the only country that has never abandoned Taiwan. There are several factors working against Taipei in the decision-making process of African states.

First of all, if the leaders of a new African state, upon independence, decided that Western capitalism is associated with imperialism and colonialism and chose socialism as the ideology for national development, they are more likely to find ideological affinity in the Beijing circle and maintain diplomatic ties thereafter despite the fact that both Mainland China and their own country have embraced the market economy for the past three decades. Examples of this include Julius Nyerere of Tanzania, Modibo Keita of Mali, Kenneth Kaunda of Zambia and Ahmed Sékou Touré of Guinea.

Second, Mainland China's stance on anti-imperialism and de-colonization as well as its self-identity as a Third World nation have earned it many friends in Africa. Thus, the former Portuguese colonies of Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau established ties with Beijing though Taipei and Lisbon had maintained diplomatic relations until 1975. It was thus natural for Namibia to choose Beijing over Taipei when it became independent in 1990. The African National Congress under Nelson Mandela, after acquiring power in the post-Apartheid era, decided to switch diplomatic recognition because Chinese communists had been supportive of the ANC struggle against the white minority government during the dark days.

Third, the rising political and diplomatic status of the People's Republic of China in international affairs also plays a role in the decision of many African countries to switch diplomatic recognition when regional or international ambitions preclude them from ignoring the presence of Beijing in international organizations. South Africa is a case in point. Senegal, as a leading nation of the New Economic Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) is another example of this factor. Even Yahya Jammeh of the Gambia cited one of the reasons to cut off relations with Taipei as Beijing's leverage in international affairs.

Fourth, China's rise, also in the last thirty years, also means it has a growing appetite for energy resources to fuel its economic development and many African countries have been endowed with such resources that Beijing can either help their development or be a major



export destination. Taipei will have very little chance to convince such countries like Angola, Gabon, Sudan, Equatorial Guinea, the Republic of Congo and even the newly independent South Sudan to make the switch. Conversely, Chad's decision in 2006 to abandon Taiwan could be attributed to such factors as well.

Finally, some African leaders have been targets of international sanctions and their countries considered either rogue states or pariah states. They need Beijing's support for, or acquiescence in, their poor record of governance to prove that they are not isolated and still have a place in the international arena. This may help to explain why Omar al-Bashir of Sudan and Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe remain in Beijing's camp and why after withdrawing from the British Commonwealth, Zimbabwe immediately cut relations with Taipei and was eager to establish ties with Beijing.

Most of the above scenario does not apply to eSwatini, which is a small kingdom where the fruits of our foreign assistance program can be easily discerned. In addition, as the last absolute monarch, King Mswati III would feel very uncomfortable with the PRC founded on the principle of socialism. All of this demonstrates that eSwatini might be one of the ideal types of Taipei's diplomatic allies: small, no socialist tradition, no armed struggle for independence, very few natural resources, no regional or international ambition, not a pariah state. However, we should not take such an ally for granted or downplay its importance for Taiwan. President Tsai's visit to eSwatini highlights its importance for our international presence.

First, the state visit of President Tsai Ing-wen and the official red carpet reception of her delegation, with the flag and national anthem of the Republic of China in the background, signified that we are a sovereign state. Compared to transit stop without official activities, these visits to diplomatic allies are the best way to demonstrate Taiwan's sovereignty.

Second, eSwatini, like many other countries, has been vital in our effort to return to the international community by advocating for our membership in international organizations and speaking on behalf of Taiwan to that effect. Such an effort has been an uphill battle and will become steeper without their support.

Third, our embassy in smaller countries is usually easily recognized among the limited diplomatic missions there. Taiwan's diplomats not only enjoy visible presence in the political circle, but also are able to mingle with diplomats from other countries, usually big ones like the U.S. and such interaction would not be as easy without a formal embassy.

Finally, as a beneficiary of U.S. aid that led to Taiwan's economic miracle, we often talk about giving back to the international community. Diplomatic allies needing foreign assistance provide such an opportunity for us to demonstrate our appreciation of the gesture by helping needy people. If such assistance plays a role in strengthening diplomatic ties, so be it.

Some question the necessity of President Tsai's visit to eSwatini and others have doubts about the necessity of Taiwan maintaining





diplomatic relations with its current allies, which are usually small countries with a low profile. The above discussion should shed light on how difficult it is for Taipei to compete with Beijing for diplomatic recognition presently and the importance of such allies to Taiwan's international presence. Thus it is imperative for our political leaders to show appreciation of their friendship with state visits such as the one taken by President Tsai to eSwatini.

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