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São Tomé and Príncipe: The Butterfly Effect from Macau to Taipei

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When applied to international relations, the so-called butterfly effect entails one seemingly insignificant event cascading to wider and unpredictable consequences. New developments occur, that are overlooked until they take a toll on foreign relations. The *Macau Daily Times* newspaper triggered precisely such kind of unexpected firestorm when it recently reported – in error – that a delegation from São Tomé and Príncipe had attended the Forum for Economic and Trade Cooperation between China and Portuguese-speaking countries, also known as the Macau Forum.¹

Since 2003, this body has become an important platform for Chinese contacts with the Lusophone world, often spurring investment announcement of millions and helping to lay the foundation for greater trade ties between all parts. At a first glance, the timely presence of São Toméan officials shouldn't warrant controversy. But the significance of this issue is quickly apprehended if one considers that São Tomé and Príncipe is the only Lusophone country that maintains official ties with Taiwan over China and that it is one of the few African allies that the Taiwanese government still has abroad. Any potential indication of a possible change of allegiance

– even if later rebutted² – could therefore cause alarms to be immediately raised in Taipei. And so it did.³

Taiwan's wariness, however, did not surge from nowhere. As it so happens, Taiwanese President Ma Ying-jeou began in April a 12-day visit to its remaining African allies, Burkina Faso, Gambia and Swaziland. Although São Tomé and Príncipe was initially included, the stopover was dropped at the last minute, in light of "conflicting agendas".⁴ São Toméan President Manuel Pinto da Costa was apparently set to visit Cuba at the same time as Ma Ying-jeou had intended to visit the archipelago. But such reasoning was somewhat flawed since, as some observers noted, "state visits are always organized well in advance and meticulously scripted, so it is hard to believe that Pinto da Costa's Cuba trip somehow just cropped up".⁵ While diplomatic protocol dictates the need to forcibly play down this sort of misunderstanding, the truth is, there may be some clues behind this episode that may trouble the bilateral relationship. The central factor

1 Sum Choi, "USD 1 billion fund for Lusophone countries' development" (*Macau Daily Times*, 28 March 2012).

2 Emmanuelle Tzeng and Jamie Wang, "African ally did not attend Beijing-initiated forum: MOFA" (*Central News Agency*, 5 April 2012).

3 Shih Hsiu-chuan, "Sao Tome's Macau visit causes alarm" (*Taipei Times*, 1 April 2012).

4 "MNE justifica cancelamento de visita do President taiwanês com "conflito de agenda"" (*Lusa*, 3 April 2012).

5 "Editorial: Ma only has eyes for China" (*Taipei Times*, 7 April 2012).



here resides, of course, in Manuel Pinto da Costa, who returned to the Presidency of São Tomé in August 2011 after having held the same position from 1975 to 1991. During that period, São Tomé and Príncipe recognized the People's Republic China as the sole legitimate government in representation of the whole of China but that would change after President Miguel Trovoada decided to formally side with Taiwan in 1997 – a move that Pinto da Costa notoriously challenged at the time.

Thus it came as no surprise that former Taiwanese ambassador to São Tomé and Príncipe John C. Chen, when interviewed in 2010, forecast that the possible election of Manuel Pinto da Costa could bring problems for both countries relations and could even imply in the long run an attempt to return to the *status quo* prior to 1997, i.e. the reestablishment of official diplomatic ties with China instead of with Taiwan.⁶

Nevertheless, Pinto da Costa's public preference for China faces more impediments than probably meets the eye. Given internal dynamics, and much like in 1997 when the Taiwanese option did not gather the full consensus of local elites, it is difficult to envision political cohesion around what would amount to a diplomatic one-eighty. The calculus is even more complex if we consider that such an overall review of ties would never be possible without the consent of Patrice Trovoada's government, which has never given any signal of ever considering that particular option.⁷

6 Helena Lopes, "Beyond "dollar diplomacy": The role of development aid in Taiwan's relations with São Tomé and Príncipe" (MA dissertation, SOAS, September 2010), p. 24.

7 Quite the opposite, actually, since Prime Minister Trovoada has already met with President Ma back in 2010. See "President Ma meets Sao Tome and Principe prime minister Patrice Emery Trovoada" (News Releases/Office of the Republic of China [Taiwan], 14 January 2010).

It is also worth asking if China is willing to 'pay the price' of supplanting Taiwan as one of São Tomé and Príncipe's main external partners. On this score, there is absolutely no indication that China is inclined to top Taiwan's impressive aid flows of the past 15 years to the West African nation.⁸ In other words, to whom does it matter the most having São Tomé and Príncipe on its side, China or Taiwan?

With these doubts in mind, it could be thus deducted that the São Toméan-Taiwanese *entente* is not as endangered as many in Taipei think. That said, the bilateral developments will continue to be interesting to observe, especially given that Pinto da Costa has already been invited to attend the inauguration of President Ma's second term – fresh from an electoral win in January – on 20 May 2012.⁹ His presence or failure to attend will certainly add further indications regarding the future of São Toméan-Taiwanese relations but until then one is left to speculate how occasional the butterfly effect truly equate to Pinto da Costa's intentions of changing the current bilateral alignment with Taiwan and, more importantly, his actual chances of success in achieving such an important deviation in São Tomé and Príncipe's contemporary foreign policy.

8 Vasco Martins, "Aid for legitimacy: São Tomé and Príncipe hand in hand with Taiwan" (IPRIS Viewpoints, No. 36, February 2011).

9 Abdulay Gomes, "Pinto da Costa é convidado para cerimónia de investidura de novo Presidente de Taiwan" (O Parvo, 1 March 2012).

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