Haitian disaster relief: implications of Chinese and Taiwanese assistance

The human and economic toll of the January earthquake in Haiti highlights the institutional weakness of many poor countries when faced with natural disasters. With difficulty providing basic services before the earthquake and the destruction of many aid centres (including the UN mission headquarters), the need for immediate foreign assistance is undeniable. While the immediate international response has been remarkable, mirroring that of the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake, another factor may go largely unnoticed: China’s offer of assistance.

CHINESE OFFERS OF ASSISTANCE post natural disaster have become more commonplace in the past decade and the government’s response to the Sichuan earthquake in 2008 provided valuable experience for humanitarian efforts elsewhere. The Haitian case however differs from previous humanitarian efforts not because of the geographical location, but that the Caribbean nation is one of the 23 countries with diplomatic relations with Taiwan instead of China. A holdover from the Chinese cold war, countries must choose to recognise either the People’s Republic of China (PRC) or the Republic of China (or ROC; Taiwan’s official name) as the legitimate government of all of China. Cold War tensions benefited the ROC as it retained a diplomatic advantage up through the 1960s due to strong American support. Since the PRC’s entry into the UN in 1971 and the Sino-American rapprochement culminating in formal relations in 1979, the once competitive battle turned overwhelmingly in Beijing’s favour. Even after Taiwan dropped claims to the mainland in 1991, China’s refusal to allow dual recognition like that of divided Korea has perpetuated this diplomatic battle.

Small state power

Where diplomatic battles in the past usually centred around powerful nations withholding recognition to smaller states (e.g. the US’ non-recognition of Cuba), in the case of the diplomatic battle between China and Taiwan, small, relatively powerless states hold the bargaining chips. Most of Taiwan’s current allies are island microstates in the Caribbean and the Pacific, with a declining number of holdouts in Africa and Latin America. Furthermore, Taiwan’s relations with most of its allies lack firm foundations, as evident by the 12 countries which have switched recognition more than once between China and Taiwan in the past 20 years.1

Despite emerging as a global power with near universal diplomatic recognition, Chinese officials have continually viewed international responsibilities within the framework of minimising Taiwan’s formal relations. To accept Taiwan’s attempts for greater diplomatic space undermines the PRC’s goal of unification. Even the loss of tiny St. Lucia in 2007 was viewed within the framework of Beijing’s ‘One China’ policy. To put this in further perspective, China twice threatened to use its UN Security Council veto to block peacekeepers in Guatemala and Macedonia at times when both had formal relations with Taiwan, a veto China has actually only used six times since gaining a seat on the Security Council.2 Although Chinese assistance has on occasions been granted to non-recognising nations (including peacekeepers to Haiti in 2004), this has usually been as part of attempts to encourage a switch of diplomatic recognition. In what both sides of the Taiwan Strait condemn as ‘dollar diplomacy’,

Dollar diplomacy

Financial assistance, from debt forgiveness to funding for public projects, has played no small part in the establishment and maintaining of diplomatic allies for both China and Taiwan. Development assistance has been particularly important to Caribbean nations that otherwise may not be economically viable on their own. For years Taiwan has remained the dominant donor to Haiti as well as many of its Caribbean neighbours, including in the past the Dominican Republic.3 Aid packages have ranged from improving infrastructure and paying salaries of police to eye projects such as stadiums. In the Haitian case, Taiwanese aid has in several years equaled a fifth of the Haitian government’s annual budget. It should not be surprising, then, that one former cabinet minister suggested that Taiwan does not ‘give us any reason to look after’ the PRC.4

China in recent years, however, has been increasingly willing to match Taiwan’s assistance packages. While Chinese assistance packages to Africa have received extensive attention,5 increased efforts throughout Central America and the Caribbean have garnered scant attention. Although Sino-African relations may be considered mutually beneficial economically—China gaining access to natural resources and diplomatic recognition in exchange for economic assistance—relations with Caribbean nations are less clear cut. Haiti and others in the region have little to offer China or Taiwan other than formal diplomatic relations and their support or opposition in seating Taiwan in the UN. However, as both Taiwan and China place such a high premium on formal relations, small countries can make greater demands for assistance. Under these conditions, Taiwan’s immediate response to the Haitian earthquake—humanitarian assistance matching China—gains greater relevance.

Haiti has been one of Taiwan’s strongest allies since establishing relations in 1956, in no small part due to Taiwan being a major donor to the island in recent years. Although relations between China and Taiwan have markedly improved under the Ma Ying-jeou administration, including a tacit agreement to end ‘dollar diplomacy’, this does not eliminate the underlying incentives for either side of the strait. However, the combination of China’s economic boom, cross-strait competition and the island in crisis presents an opportunity to tie much needed aid to cutting relations with Taiwan. While one should applaud China rising as a responsible global power, the potential political incentives behind these actions should not be ignored.

References

1. These include Benin, Burkina Faso, Central African Republic, Chad, the Gambia, Lesotho, Liberia, Mauritius, Nicaragua, Niger, Senegal and St. Lucia.

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