



How Pressure Caused South Africa to Switch Recognition from Taiwan to China

OE Watch Commentary: There is only one country in Africa that still recognizes Taiwan, the tiny Kingdom of eSwatini, perhaps better known by its former name, Swaziland. It was not always like this. Previously many African nations recognized Taiwan, but as the excerpt from the accompanying article published in the South African online journal *The Conversation* relates, pressure from China is responsible for the switch. This article focuses on the South African experience with China, and how its initial desire to maintain good relations with both Taiwan and China faded under Chinese demands.

China and South Africa did not initially have such a close relationship. Back in May 1994, when Nelson Mandela first took office, he inherited from the apartheid government South Africa's recognition of Taiwan, which at that time was the country's sixth largest trading partner. With the world's largest population, a rapidly growing economy, and significant international influence that included a seat on the UN Security Council, China was a rising power that many nations wanted to benefit from by associating with it. At the time of Mandela's inauguration, 159 countries had diplomatic relations with China, compared to only 29 for Taiwan.

Still, despite the overwhelming number of countries in China's camp, Mandela wanted to have good relations with both countries. Unfortunately for Mandela, under China's "One China principle" that insists Taiwan and mainland China are one nation, he was finding it increasingly difficult to deal with both of them as equals. However, it took him 30 months before he finally announced the change from Taipei to Beijing.

The article presents an interesting analysis as to why Mandela was so slow to go with China when so many other countries had already done so. To begin with, Taiwan, as an already established major trading partner, stated it was anxious to provide economic assistance to post-apartheid South Africa, so long as South Africa continued to recognize it. Additionally, Taiwan had provided ten million dollars to the 1993 ANC election campaign, and Mandela was not anxious to dump such a loyal and generous friend. Mandela was also rather uncertain about China's future. The Soviet Union had collapsed just a few years earlier, and he was concerned that China might share a similar fate.

Those were the pressures against recognizing only China, but there were also numerous pressures to recognize it, though that would mean no longer recognizing Taiwan. One reason for the change was that a high level ANC delegation to China reported that this was the way South Africa should go. However, it was not just internal pressure from the ANC that was weighing on Mandela, there was also external pressure, and it was intense. China had informed South Africa that if it did not make the switch, it might lose its "most favored nation" trading status. Thus, after lengthy negotiations, Pretoria switched to Beijing in 1998. In the end, despite the widespread popularity and respect Mandela enjoyed, it was not enough to overcome the internal and external pressures to recognize China and only China. **End OE Watch Commentary (Feldman)**

“South Africa's China choice shows how political and economic clout can aid a state in achieving its objectives.”



Nelson Mandela-2008.

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Source: Christopher Williams, “A tale of two Chinas: the story of South Africa's switch from Taipei to Beijing,” *The Conversation*, 24 July 2018. <https://theconversation.com/a-tale-of-two-chinas-the-story-of-south-africas-switch-from-taipei-to-beijing-100348>

South Africa's China choice shows how political and economic clout can aid a state in achieving its objectives. In the mid-1990s South Africa had large reserves of moral authority derived from its relatively peaceful transition, and Mandela's widespread popularity and respect. But this was not enough to overcome China's global influence, importance, and insistence on the One China principle.

When President Nelson Mandela took office in May 1994, he was immediately confronted with a vexing foreign policy problem: how to balance the country's diplomatic relations with Taiwan – inherited from the apartheid government – with Beijing's “One China principle”.

Our analysis shows that internal pressure from the African National Congress (ANC) as well as external pressure from China influenced Mandela's choice.