

The 'Two Chinas' and Panama:

An historical review of Panamanian Relations
with the People's Republic of China
and Taiwan, 1903–2017

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a historical overview of Panama's ties with the "two Chinas", focusing initially on Asian migration to the Isthmus of Panama before the territory became part of New Granada (Colombia). This migration was the result of Chinese labourers being recruited to work for the Panama railway construction company from 1850-1855 and, a few decades later, for construction of the French Canal and the Panama Canal. This will be followed by an examination of the Republic of China (ROC or Taiwan) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) respective policies towards Panama.

In addition, this paper analyses the new social, political, and economic scenarios resulting from Panama's decision to establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China in June 2017. Panama's engagement with China, particularly its links with China's signature Belt and Road Initiative presents opportunities and challenges for the Central American country as it balances these with its national priorities.

1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Panama's relationship with China dates back to 1909 and the dying days of the Qing dynasty. In the early 20th century, the Chinese empire established a consulate general in Panama to serve Chinese immigrants living there. Following the 1911 Hsinhai (Xinhai) revolution, and the subsequent founding of the Republic of China (ROC), Panama was one of the first countries in the world to officially recognize the new Asian nation. The ROC soon after established a diplomatic office in Panama City, which was elevated to embassy level in 1954. On the other side of the world, the Government of Panama opened its embassy in China in 1933. Panama has the longest uninterrupted relations with the ROC of any country (Taiwan News, 2011).

Panama maintained diplomatic relations with the ROC even after it lost control of mainland China in 1949 and was relegated to the island of Taiwan. But June 12, 2017, when the Central American country established relations the Peoples Republic of China (PRC), marked the beginning of a new stage in Panamanian diplomacy.

1.1. BACKGROUND OF INDEPENDENCE: CHINESE 'COOLIES' AND CONSTRUCTION OF RAILWAYS AND CANALS.

Since the earliest days of Spanish colonialism, foreigners have sought a means of rapid and cheap inter-ocean travel to replace the lengthy and expensive option of passing around Cape Horn.

The subsequent construction of railways, the French Canal, and later the Panama Canal across the Isthmus, demanded thousands of workers. "Coolies", the pejorative 19th-century name used for workers from China and other Asian countries, were recruited to carry out the back-breaking work. In general, they were hired for a specified period of not less than eight years. They were given transportation, a salary, and accommodation, but were frequently subjected to abuse and mistreatment.

The first Chinese labourers were dispatched from Guangzhou and Hong Kong in 1847. Two British companies, Trait and Company and Syme Muir and Company, were involved in setting up this deal. By 1855 American companies, such as Boston's Sampson and Tappan, were also involved in the coolie trade, shipping labourers to countries like Brazil and Peru. (Connelly & Cornejo Bustamante, 1992).

The construction of the Panama railway in 1850-1855, and later of the ill-fated French Canal, brought substantial Chinese migration to the territory of New Granada (Colombia). According to Connelly and Cornejo Bustamante, the Qing government's official policy towards the emigration of its subjects it went through three stages: 1) from the beginning of the trade until 1859, it prohibited emigration; 2) from 1860 to 1874, it allowed emigration, distinguishing voluntary emigration and coolie trade and trying to regulate the latter; 3) from 1874 until the end of the dynasty in 1911, it banned the coolie trade and tried to protect migrants by sending diplomats and consular officials.

The trip to Panama was arduous. In 1852, for instance, 300 Chinese emigrants were shipped to Panama, with 72 dying on the crossing; in 1853, 425 Chinese embarked, 96 of whom died on the crossing; on March 30, 1854, 705 Chinese arrived on the Isthmus of Panama, with 11 having died on the journey. When the railway was completed in 1855, there were 1,262 Chinese residing the territory. When the Panama railway was completed in 1855, there were 1,262 Chinese residing in the territory; during that year, the Chinese government asked the United States to represent the interests of their subjects in the Americas, and thus New Granada (Colombia), and communicate to the Civil and Military Chief of the State of Panama, who was the authority in the territory Panama, that the United States would represent the interests of the subjects of the Chinese Empire (Mon, 2005).

In 1879, Paris hosted the International Congress for Interoceanic Canal Studies. Delegates from 136 countries whose workers had an important role to play in the construction of a canal on the Isthmus, including China, were present. Ferdinand de Lesseps, the French diplomat and businessman who built the Suez Canal, introduced the head of various subcommittees, quickly described the roles of each, and then read the full list of delegates, asking them to stand up to make himself known. Mr. Li-Shu-Chang, first secretary of the Chinese delegation in London, received the longest applause, since attendees hoped that China would provide the largest number of workers to excavate the canal (McCullough, 1976).

From 1882 to 1889, work on the French Canal continued, and although the workforce was not as large as expected, Chinese migration continued. Some Chinese immigrants who had tried their luck in the California gold mines returned to Panama, but not to the excavation. They instead scattered throughout the territory to establish retail stores and other small businesses. At that time, there were no known immigration restrictions.

By 1882, the Chinese presence in Panama was significant enough to found the First Society, called “Way On”, to help the Chinese elderly who fell ill by placing them in hospitals or asylums. It was reorganized in 1904 and renamed the Chinese Benevolence Society in Panama (Mon, 2005).

1.2. LATE IMPERIAL CHINA, THE REPUBLIC OF CHINA, AND THE NEW PANAMANIAN STATE 1903-1941

Formal relations between Panama (then part of Colombia) and Imperial China began in the late nineteenth century as result of the coolies’ presence. In this era, the formation of international investigative commissions was unusual; despite that, France, Great Britain, and China established one to assess the status of coolies under the administration of Spain and its colonial government in Cuba. They found that that a quarter of a million Chinese had been sent to Cuba, Peru, and other parts of the Caribbean and Latin America between the 1840s and 1870s. More troubling were the individual testimonies, which detailed the hellish captivity in which they lived, which ultimately caused the commission to call for the coolie trade’s abolition (Yun, 2008).

Following independence from Colombia in 1903, the new Panamanian government adopted the discriminatory Decree 42 of June 24 in 1909, which suspended Chinese citizenship cards, thus restricting the ability of naturalized Chinese citizens to bring their wives and children to the territory. In 1911, the country’s first census identified 2,003 Chinese in the country; the authorities, however, estimated that there were probably around 7,000. Modesto Justiniani, Deputy in the National Assembly, proposed a bill seeking the expulsion of all Chinese from Panama (Guardia, 2015). President Belisario Porras did not approve the bill, but he issued Executive Decree No. 2 of January 11, 1912, which required Chinese who came to Panama as employees of the trading houses to deposit two hundred and fifty balboas (B. 250.00) in the National Bank (*Banco del Estado*) in order to guarantee that they would vacate the country upon their contract’s expiration. They were, under this decree, forced to notify provincial governors of their departure at least 48 hours in advance.

On March 24, 1913, however, Panama banned the immigration of Chinese, Turks, Syrians, and North Africans of the Turkish race, also setting guidelines for the creation and operation of associations formed by people of those origins (Tejada Mora, 2013). Law 50, required these organizations (or individuals) to register and re-register every six months after depositing \$500; non-compliance with the law could lead to fines or expulsion from the country. On September 9, 1913, in defiance of the Panamanian authorities, the Chinese colony, with the support of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce and the Chinese Consul in Panama, announced that it would not register. In response, President Porras cancelled his plans to recognize the Chinese Consulate and

ordered Chinese officials Samuel Sung Young (Hsiung Chung-chin) to leave the country. But after international debate, US diplomats defended the immigrants, and the Chinese community comprising 7,267 people decided to register.

By 1926, attitudes had hardened sufficiently that Panama expressly prohibited Chinese immigration. Until March 1928, a quota of ten people per year was allowed for those from prohibited nations. In 1932, Panama prohibited all entry to the country of Chinese and other races that did not have Spanish as their mother tongue (Kam Rios, 2015).

Further restrictions on Chinese immigration were imposed by Panama in 1941. Article 23 of Arnulfo Arias's Political Constitution of 1941 declared that "immigration of foreigners will be regulated by law ... they are prohibited immigration: the black race whose language is not the Castilian, the yellow race and the races originating from India, Asia Minor and North Africa". This same year, the National Assembly approved Law 24 of March 24, 1941, which declared that prohibited immigration races could not engage in commercial activities or liberal professions (some 20 Panamanian professions including medicine, nursing, dentistry, and social work) or possess commercial stocks surpassing 25 percent of the organization's capital.

Indeed, in Republic of Panama's first decade, Chinese immigrants were subjected to systematic legal and social discriminatory treatment. But over the following decades, new generations of Chinese overcame this discrimination and the community came to prosper.

2. THE PANAMA CANAL, TAIWAN AND CHINA, 1971-2017

After World War II, Panama followed the US and did not recognize the Peoples Republic of China. Panama instead retained ties with the government in exile in Taiwan. In 1972, however, while the US and other countries recognized the PRC, Panama maintained relations with Taiwan, a decision from which it hoped to reap benefits (Gandásegui, 2005).

Following sustained lobbying campaign, US President Jimmy Carter agreed in 1977 returned the Panama Canal Zone to its namesake. The Torrijos-Carter Treaties established that the United States would over a 23-year period return the territory to Panama and in 1999 the occupation would end, with the orderly and total transfer of the administration to Panamanian hands. In 1999, President Mireya Moscoso's government officially took over the Canal, promising "to administer the Interoceanic Canal that was about to revert to Panama with transparency, efficiency and responsibility" (Herrera Montenegro, 2009).

The treaties signed by the United States and Panama in relation to the Panama Canal include the Torrijos-Carter Treaty and the Treaty Concerning Permanent Neutrality and Operation of the Panama Canal. It is notable that the PRC was the only UN Security Council member to not sign the Neutrality Treaty.

This joint administration process was designed to demonstrate Panama's administrative abilities and usher in a new period in the country's relations with the other countries using the Canal, despite the effects the crisis had on the world economy and international trade. This process also provided an opportunity for Panama to manage the Canal's expansion so that it could continue to be competitive as hegemonic interests, such as that of the PRC, changed.

With the constitutional reforms of 2004, however, the special regime of the Panama Canal Authority created title XIV, granting to the Panama Canal Authority (APC) the exclusive powers of administration, operation, conservation, maintenance, and modernization of the Panama Canal (Panama National Assembly, 2012). This

reform aimed to limit political influence over technical decisions. The Panamanian constitution recognizes that the Canal is the nation's inalienable heritage, must be open to the peaceful and uninterrupted transit of ships from all nations, and today holds substantial global strategic value in maritime trade.

During this period, Taiwan interests in Panama were twofold. First, due to its export-oriented economy, the government intended to use the Canal as part of its global trading network. Secondly, Taiwan relied on Panama an important diplomatic linchpin in its diminishing international official standing.

Taiwanese economic involvement in Panama, while not enormous, was significant for both countries. According to the Taiwan Investment Commission, total investments in Panama stand at \$1.6 million among them, those of the shipping company Evergreen Marine and the Mega International Commercial Bank stand out, with respective amounts of \$850 million and \$20 million (La Crítica, 2017).

In 2016, Panamanian shipments to mainland China (\$35.5 million) already exceeded the value of exports to the island to Taiwan (\$26.8 million). In other words, Panama's diplomatic normalization with Beijing was likely not needed to export goods to the PRC (Guevara Man, 2019).

Taiwan, on the other hand, provided economic support to Panama to reinforce international cooperation, boost investment in and loans to small fishermen, support technical assistance for the modernization of information technologies applied to agriculture, and scholarships and donations for social works.

While the PRC's Chinese involvement in Panama dates back to the 1991 Hutchinson-Whampoa investments, China's expanded trade interests in Latin America over the past two decades are a recent phenomenon, displacing traditional trading partners like the United States and Europe. In 1997 Hutchinson Ports-PPC (tied to the Hutchinson Port Holding Group, and owners of the transnational Panama Ports Company <PPC>, S.A), won the concession from the Panamanian government to manage both ports for a period of 20 years. Since securing another contract in 2016 to upgrade and expand facilities PPC, which operates a port on the Pacific and Panamanian Atlantic sides, is spending some \$140 million to modernize the Balboa and Cristóbal facilities. According to the company, the Balboa port modernization program includes the construction of 350 meters of deep draft wharf and 8.4 hectares of patio to store containers equipped with three Post Panama port cranes and seven port gantry cranes with a capacity to handle 400,000 units annually (Gandásegui, 2000).

China's offered infrastructural investments have come in response to Latin American needs. China's 2008 White Paper for Latin America, outlined its economic and political intentions for the region. But Chinese firms are seen by some analysts to be relatively independent and often operate in divergence from Beijing's goals (Norris 2016). What's more, in the post-Cold War era, there is a need to overcome neighbouring countries' reluctance to involve themselves to strategic competition. Accordingly, China quells these fears by reinforcing the five principles of peaceful coexistence: mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, non-aggression, non-intervention of one country in the internal affairs of another, equality and mutual benefit, and peaceful coexistence.

In China's second white paper on Latin America, published in 2016, Beijing established its priorities in the region: energy and natural resources, infrastructure construction, agriculture, manufacturing, scientific and technological innovation, and information technologies (which is reflected in the Cooperation Plan between China and CELAC for the period 2015-2019, which sets out seven priority areas and others of implementation: policy and security, infrastructure and transportation, trade, investment and finance, agriculture, industry, science and technology, cooperation in environmental matters, cultural exchange, cooperation in other areas and its implementation) (CELAC, 2018).

3. TAIWANESE AND CHINESE DIPLOMACY IN PANAMA

Diplomacy between the “two Chinas”—the ROC and PRC—forced the two to compete for influence in Central America and consequently offer substantial donations for state infrastructure and exchange programs (academic, authorities, representatives of organizations, etc.). Beyond that there was direct efforts to influence politics through the financing of electoral campaigns of preferred political leaders (Wallace, 2018). In the case of Panama specifically, by treating Panama as a logistical and financial centre, both Taiwan and China helped develop the country while strengthening their respective presence in the region and facilitating the commercial relations of its companies.

But Panama’s management of the diplomatic switch from Taipei to Beijing came as a shock to Taiwan and the US. In 2018, Joseph Wu, the general secretary of the Taiwan Presidential Office, said that ROC-Panama relations had broken down as the result of an “unfair act, which China has made possible through intimidation diplomacy, offerings and the purchase of diplomatic allies” (Vidal, 2017). Taiwan’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs said that President Varela, by breaking official diplomatic relations, “had ignored the friendship between his countries and the efforts that Taiwan had made to help the general development of Panama” (Sparks, 2017). Taiwan immediately terminated all bilateral cooperation projects and withdrew its diplomatic staff and technical advisers from the country, adding that it will not participate in some ROC-PRC competition for influence. Taiwan was outraged, namely because in previous months the Panamanian deputy foreign minister had indicated that he did not foresee changes in the alliance.

Then-Panamanian President Juan Carlos Varela justified his rupturing of Panama-ROC relations by arguing that the China represents 20 percent of the world population and constitutes the second largest economy in the world, and that relations with Beijing would not prevent Taiwan from being involved in the economy.

4. FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC REACTIONS TO CHANGING DIPLOMATIC TIES

On October 18, 2018, Panama’s long-time ally, the United States, reacted immediately and aggressively to then-Panamanian President Juan Carlos Varela decision to establish diplomatic relations the PRC. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Panama soon after and in an interview with Panamanian social media warned Panama to “have wide eyes regarding China” (*El Panamá América*, 2018). The United States Embassy in Panama, meanwhile, said that Pompeo’s visit was intended to reaffirm that the United States is Panama’s main partner, and that Panama should, therefore, exercise caution in their relations with the PRC (Bonilla, 2018).

The Panamanian reaction to the PRC’s new presence in their country was diverse—a result of the process’s lacking transparency. Economists, businessmen, academics, and lawyers asked to negotiate calmly, while producers requested greater protection. The livestock sector expressed its fear that the signed Free Trade Agreement with the European Union would fall apart, and that they would not make up these losses by exporting meat or milk to China.

China is the main user of the Colon Free Zone and the second of the Panama Canal, through which six percent of world trade passes. According to the Ministry of Commerce and Industries of Panama, “Panama mainly exports coffee, bovine hides and fishmeal to the Chinese market, while China imports high-tech products such as cell phones and televisions into our country, as well as textiles, tires, toys, slippers and shoes, among others” (Garrido, 2018).

On the other hand, Panama’s Chamber of Commerce, Industries and Agriculture considered the relationship positively, saying that the country’s association with the PRC will enhance Panama’s competitive advantages. The body points out that “entrepreneurs expect the possibility of opening a trade agreement with a country of

more than 1.3 billion people, increasing exports and imports, in addition, new investments will be attracted to Panama, especially in the technological and logistical field, to name a few” (Forbes, 2017). The Panama Hotel Association concurs.

Panama is a logistics hub, and accordingly will attract Chinese companies, banks and the award of mega works. Diplomatic relations with the PRC are now a fact; the implications of this are diverse and effect all areas of education, health, science, technology, environment, energy, maritime, migration, tourism, agribusiness, social problems, logistics, trade, economics, and politics.

And yet, the 2019 election of Laurentino Cortizo Cohen led to the pausing of these agreements. Cohen’s government suspended the Free Trade Agreement negotiations with China and the rejected a plan to connect by railway the capital city with the Province of Chiriquí and possibly Costa Rica. Cohen’s momentary pause allows Panamanians to better analyse their commitments and implications, thus allowing the new government to better consider the effect of its Chinese relationship on Panama’s national interests.

5. CONCLUSION

Chinese diplomacy in the 21st century comprises commercial expansion and the consolidation of power, with Beijing seeking to ensure close ties with emerging Latin American economies through cultural diplomacy, investment and cooperation. Panama is strategically important to China in no small part because of the Central American country’s raw materials and propensity to consume Chinese products and investments. Taiwan’s position was increasingly untenable as Beijing sought to exert its economic and diplomatic power in the region.

The Chinese government understands Panama’s strategic value to its global ambitions. Panama government’s decision to adhere to the Chinese initiative of the Silk Road and enhances its role as the key nodule, thanks to the Panama Canal, linking the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. The Panama Canal is seen as an interoceanic bridge of China’s New Silk Road, and, according to Chinese Minister of Overseas Affairs of China Qiu Yuanping, the PRC’s agreements with Panama constituted the most important diplomatic achievement for China during the year 2017 (Yau, 2015). ■

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