

**China or Taiwan?**  
**The Tricky Dilemma of Diplomatic Recognition:  
The Salvadorean Experience**

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**Abstract**

This article analyzes the dilemma facing Salvadorean President Nayib Bukele of whether or not his administration should recognize China or Taiwan. Based on the theoretical approaches of Asymmetric International Relationships and Peripheral Realism, we discuss the principle of nation-state sovereignty and how such notions of sovereignty come into play when small states wish to take autonomous decisions, as well as suggesting that the margin of action is limited by asymmetric relationships. It is in this way that we analyze how El Salvador maintained its autonomy by holding fast to its decision to recognize China in the face of pressure from the United States. It was only possible for El Salvador to maintain this posture however by making significant concessions on immigration to the US. The objective of this article therefore is to contribute to explaining the concept of sovereignty from the perspective of small states, a currently under-researched topic.

**Keywords:** *Diplomatic Relations, Asymmetric Relations, China, Taiwan, El Salvador*

## 1. Introduction

In August 2018, Salvador Sánchez Cerén, President of El Salvador, announced the decision to establish diplomatic relations with China<sup>1</sup>. The president affirmed that: “I am convinced that this is a step in the right direction, which corresponds to the principles of international law, international relations and the inevitable tendencies of our time.” (*China Daily*, 2018a). Subsequent to this declaration, Foreign Ministers Wang Yi and Carlos Castaneda signed an agreement establishing diplomatic relations between both nations in Beijing. This statement established that “the People’s Republic of China and the Republic of El Salvador, under the interests and wishes of the two peoples, have decided to recognize each other and establish diplomatic relations” and that “the two governments agree to develop friendly relations based on the principles of mutual respect for sovereignty and territorial integrity, mutual non-aggression, non-interference in the internal affairs of the other, equality and peaceful coexistence.” (Spanish *Xinhuanet*, 2018). Sánchez Cerén later affirmed: “the establishing of diplomatic relations with China is the most important foreign policy decision of my administration.” (Abbot, 2018).

According to the vision of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), there is only one China in the world. In consequence, both the Chinese mainland and Taiwan belong to one China and Taiwan is part of China. In this way, the diplomatic recognition of China implies the denial of Taiwan as a sovereign state. The decision, therefore, to recognize China involves negating the status of Taiwan as a sovereign state. The reaction of the bureaucratic elite of Taiwan was immediate, with the Taiwanese

government using Twitter to announce: “It’s with a heavy heart and great sadness” the end of diplomatic relations with El Salvador, confirming that between both countries “all cooperation programs ended.” The Salvadorian government was further accused of abandoning Taipei as the latter “was not willing to continue” acceding to continued requests for financing by the former. In essence, Taiwan was unwilling to enter into monetary competition with China, and wary of encouraging dollar diplomacy that would inevitably result in a diplomatic debt trap (MOFA, Taiwan, 2018). It was further claimed that Taiwan had rejected El Salvador's repeated requests to provide financial assistance for the construction of a port, maintaining that the project was unfeasible. This was the first time that Taiwan announced the formal ending of a relationship with a diplomatic partner before the partner nation had officially announced its decision.

The break in diplomatic ties with Taiwan happened in the context of growing Chinese pressure to further isolate Taiwan. Since Tsai Ing-wen and the 2016 Progressive Democratic Party triumph in the Taiwanese presidential elections, the number of nation-states no longer recognizing Taiwan has been increasing<sup>2</sup>. However, non-recognition of Taiwan has not previously incurred such negative reactions on the part of the United States. After the election of Nayib Bukele as president of El Salvador, the possibility of the small Central American nation once more officially recognizing China came to the fore, rapidly presenting a dilemma: whether to continue recognizing Taiwan, a decision which could be interpreted as resulting from U.S. intervention, or whether to support the building of new diplomatic links with China and benefit pragmatically from the new alliance.

The establishing of diplomatic relations with China was not only questioned but also viewed with suspicion within El Salvador. As a presidential candidate, Nayib Bukele expressed his intention to

reestablish diplomatic links with Taiwan if his campaign was successful, although the government of Sánchez Cerén accused Bukele of receiving orders from the United States to cut ties with China<sup>3</sup>. In the first of five tweets regarding the recognition of China, Bukele wrote: “The Chinese Vice-Minister of Foreign Affairs promised not to interfere in our elections, just as we do not intervene in his internal politics. China is sending 6 million tons of precooked rice that can only be used as a gift in the middle of the official election campaign.” (*El Mundo*, 2018).

The competition for international recognition between China and Taiwan in the framework of the traditional interference that the United States has had in Central America is a key element in understanding the decisions of the Bukele government in the international arena. This case also exemplifies how, on the international stage, the decision-making of small states is conditioned by a system where two superpowers are constantly jockeying for position. Assuming the theoretical approach of the asymmetrical power dynamic in international relations, this article proposes that when there are two rival regional players, small states can apparently increase their autonomy. Appearances however can be deceptive, as these small states frequently accede to the requests of the more powerful nation, meaning that for the weakest countries, autonomy is just an illusion.

The objective of this article is to analyze Salvadorean decision-making regarding the subject of China-Taiwan recognition, and it is organized in the following way. First, we discuss the concept of sovereignty and analyze theoretical assumptions of asymmetric relationships. Second, we consider the international context of the growing dispute between China and Taiwan framed by the rivalry between the United States and China and we discuss the geopolitical influence of the United States in Central America. Third, we analyze the factors and events that explain the position President Bukele assumed

regarding the issue of diplomatic recognition of Taiwan. Fourth, we analyze the pressure exerted by the United States on the Bukele government to reestablish diplomatic relations with Taiwan. We subsequently examine the most recent decision made by the government of El Salvador regarding the recognition of China, and finally, in the conclusions, we indicate how, although two world powers are competing for international hegemony, the asymmetric structure of the international system prevents weaker states from exercising genuine autonomy. This article contributes to a much deeper understanding of the dilemma of international recognition from the perspective of small states and the influence of asymmetric structures.

## **2. International Relations in an Asymmetric World**

The world that emerged from the Peace of Westphalia accord established the foundations of the modern international system, making sovereign states the main actors in international relations. The sovereign state is a geopolitical reality and a legal concept, and, at the same time, sovereignty is the political doctrine on which the state is founded (Sutch and Elias, 2007). Sovereignty therefore has come to be seen as one of the most important concepts in the contemporary international system (Kaufman, 2013). It is today the basic norm on which international society is based (Jackson, 2005). Sovereignty embodies the idea of self-determination and implies that each state is independent of all others (Slomp, 2008). Sovereign states are therefore equal under international law, and this principle guarantees equal participation of each state in the international arena (Griffiths, O'Callaghan and Roach, 2008). The nation-state and the concept of sovereignty are social constructs and are redefined through different principles and practices, including the practice of mutual recognition that emphasizes the existence of concrete

borders and the principle of non-violation of those borders (Özlük and Cemrek, 2010). In order to obtain recognition from other states in the international system however, even the smallest and least powerful state must satisfy certain basic criteria, such as having a defined territory, a permanent population and government capable of maintaining effective control over its territory (Wilkinson, 2007).

Although recognition of a state should be a sovereign decision, on numerous occasions this choice is conditioned by internal and external factors that evidence the presence of multiple interests behind a pronouncement of this nature. In this way, how, when, and why some states respect the sovereignty of others suggests that the international system is no more than “organized hypocrisy.” (Krasner, 2009). This hypocrisy derives from the interests of the great powers (*ibid.*). In contrast however, the presence of states which are not internationally recognized is evidence of an anomaly in this system (Harvey and Stansfield, 2009). These unrecognized states exist in the shadow of those which enjoy all the privileges granted by international recognition, living in a kind of “limbo” (Caspersen, 2012). Once sovereign recognition is awarded to a state, it is difficult to remove it later, and this is a consequence of the type of arrangements that are agreed between states but which are not generally disclosed thoroughly (Krasner, 2009).

In the case of small states, their ability to make their own independent decisions on international affairs is proportional to their material capacities in a system that is anarchic (Brown and Ainley, 2005). The capability of these states to make independent decisions can lead, in effect, to challenges to their sovereignty (Neumann and Gstöhl, 2006). However, relations between states neither originate nor develop in a vacuum; on the contrary, these interactions are framed by material and ideational structures in which each state plays a specific role, one derived from a set of ideas and a system of norms (Jackson and

Sorensen, 2003).

This aforementioned set of norms and system of ideas is also shaped however by frequently asymmetric relationships between states. As Brantly Womack suggests (2016), this asymmetry is concerned with relative capability, not because the biggest side wins, but because the two sides of an asymmetric interaction are grounded in different perspectives: this is how asymmetry theory emphasizes relational structures based on disparities of power. The decision by El Salvador to recognize China can be seen therefore as one framed by an asymmetric structural relationship, one determined not only by China but also the United States. Despite the considerable influence wielded by the United States and its desire to ensure that El Salvador allied itself with the cause of Taiwan, the new Salvadorean president ultimately preferred to continue diplomatic links with China. We suggest that as a result of this decision, El Salvador had to pay an excessive price in terms of immigration issues.

Womack proposes that asymmetry is a general theory that can help to analyze all asymmetric relationships “However, the intended contribution is not an explanatory key that makes asymmetric relationships predictable, but rather an interpretive model.” (Womack, 2016: 3). Two basic assumptions of asymmetry theory are that differences in capacities produce systemic variances in interests and perceptions between the stronger and weaker states involved in the relationship. Mutual perceptions and interactions in an asymmetric relationship will essentially be molded by the distinct situations of opportunity and vulnerability experienced by each state. In addition, although asymmetric relations are frequently contentious, they also tend to be robust. In other words, stability might not be an accurate definition of asymmetry because differences in interests and perceptions between the states are a constant source of tension (Womack, 2006). It can be

said therefore that asymmetry produces a difference in perspective. The decision taken by the government of El Salvador demonstrates how the perspective of states in an asymmetric relationship differs, the significance of these differences and how they impact and define the crucial interests of different states.

As Womack (2010: 24) suggests, “Even in a normal asymmetric relationship, disparities of power are real, and they fundamentally affect the perspectives of the participants.” Therefore, the powerful state has less to win or lose in the relationship, and frequently has more important concerns, both foreign and domestic. The weak state is more exposed to opportunities and risks and has minimum control over the relationship. This essential difference in interest generates a difference in attention. The powerful state will tend to act concerning strategic relationships of friendship, normalcy, or hostility, while the weak state will be more active and less credulous of the total environment of the relationship (Womack, 2010). Consequently, the decision-making capacity of small states is conditioned by the asymmetric relationships in which they are embedded.

The fundamental formulation of asymmetry theory as regards bilateral relations has been previously explored, but global concerns of multipolarity require an extension of asymmetry theory from individual relations to the structures of relations. In this way, Womack (2016: 27) affirms that: “The picture of the world order that emerges from asymmetry theory is that of a matrix of countries of various capacities that are relatively stable overall, but one that is composed of individual relations of relative strength and relative vulnerability that can create tensions and misunderstandings.” These tensions were reflected in the case of El Salvador’s recognition of China.

However, despite these asymmetric relationships, small states like El Salvador can enjoy greater autonomy due to different perceptions of



reality when two powerful states are competing to have greater influence. In this sense, it is possible to suggest that, in a context of asymmetric relations, El Salvador took advantage of the situation derived from the rivalry between the United States and China to rescind recognition of Taiwan and, by doing so, obtain more benefits from China. This small victory for self-determination was however overshadowed by US pressure to control the immigration crisis. In the following section, we explore the international situation, marked by the growing rivalry between China and the United States and the role of El Salvador in recognition of China.

The theoretical perspective of asymmetric relationships proposed by Womack can be enriched by the theoretical approach of Carlos Escudé (2020) regarding peripheral realism. Peripheral realism proposes that as long as the international order is built by unequal states, it can never be democratic or egalitarian. An egalitarian system would only be possible if there were a cosmopolitan world regime with a single supranational state. Without such a framework, the world system will inevitably be imperfect and incipiently hierarchical. Faced with this reality, even the States do not even legally have the same rights since the Charter of the United Nations establishes the legal inequality of the States. Thus, the most powerful states – including China and the United States - have the power to shape the rules, while the vast majority are forced to behave according to the norms established by that oligopoly. Paradoxically, despite the enormous differences between Taiwan and El Salvador, these states share their inability to create new rules of the game regarding sovereignty or any other matter of international order. Therefore, both States must play with the rules already established regarding international recognition. The decision-making capacity is reduced to which other States can recognize and what advantages they would obtain from such recognition. Escudé (2020) reveals a third category of States

that, without having the power to establish those rules, rebel against them, paying very high costs to revert to their inhabitants. In other words, three types of states interact in the interstate order: the rule-makers, the rule-takers, and the rebels. Under this assumption, weak states that defy order – the established rules – tend to lose because the exactions they must impose on their societies to continue competing with the power increase to infinity. The Salvadorian case shows that by recognizing China instead of Taiwan, in the context of asymmetric relations framed in a relationship that is also peripheral, is that this country had to pay a high price for changing its international recognition to the detriment of Taiwan, an ally of the United States. However, this fact did not challenge a principle of international recognition as a guarantor of sovereignty. In contrast, China has a new role as a global rule-maker and cannot act following prevailing international law, which could be further motivation for El Salvador to want to be on the side of a new rule-maker.

### **3. The Competition between China and Taiwan for International Recognition**

Bukele's decision to maintain diplomatic ties with Beijing once he assumed the presidency of El Salvador took place in the larger context of the Chinese desire to further isolate Taiwan. Since 2013 when Xi Jinping was appointed as both Chinese president and General Secretary of the Communist Party, Chinese foreign policy has undergone a significant change. According to Lee (2016), it has morphed from a policy which was in line with existing international rules, to one that creates new rules and institutions more closely aligned with the Chinese perspective of world order. Xi has established an ambitious agenda aimed at making China a world power as a way to reach its "core interests" (Arase, 2016).

The idea of the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation and the Belt and Road Initiative represent two of the main axes that drive this new stage in the history of Chinese foreign policy (Men and Tsang, 2015). At the same time, Xi has promoted a new vision that includes a different relationship between China and the United States (Byun, 2016).

The pressure to reduce Taiwanese participation in international forums ranges from limiting its presence in international organizations, such as the World Health Organization, to boycotting its presence at international sporting events (Woods, 2019). A key element in this strategy is to gradually reduce the number of states willing to recognize Taiwan as a sovereign state. China has been accused of buying the loyalty of its new partners through loans and donations of infrastructure works, and employing astronomical amounts of money to persuade Taipei's remaining partners to switch diplomatic ties to Beijing (Scott, Morris and Ma, 2019).

The rivalry between China and Taiwan for international recognition dates back to the year 1949 when the triumph of the Communist Party meant the withdrawal of the Kuomintang government to the island (Hutchings, 2001). The nationalist government on the island was proclaimed as the legitimate government of all of China and with the support of the United States, it maintained its representation in the United Nations until 1971, the year in which the General Assembly voted for the expulsion of Taiwan and the restoration of China (Spence, 1999). In 1979 the United States recognized China diplomatically and agreed to withdraw all US military from Taiwan, accepting that the island was part of China (Salvini, 2017). However, through the Taiwan Relations Act, the US government attempted to ensure that American support for the island's defense would continue, and that diplomatic links would be retained with Taiwan at a high though superficially informal level (Manthorpe, 2009).

Since the triumph of the Communist Party, the complete unification of Chinese territory has been a priority for the communist government. Even in the 1950s the Chinese government's preparations to invade Taiwan were frustrated by President Truman's order sending the United States Seventh Fleet to neutralize the Taiwan Strait (Meisner, 1999). However, when Deng Xiaoping emerged as the main leader of the Chinese Communist Party in late 1978, he favored a peaceful reunification (Mark, 2012). In 1981 Deng Xiaoping assured the people of Taiwan that China no longer planned to recover the island by force, although China has not renounced the right to use military force against Taiwan if necessary (Roberts, 1999). At present, Taiwan is the last significant barrier to full national unification (Meisner, 1999). The Chinese government considers any concessions on territorial issues that affect the idea of "one China" as potential threats to its security (Lawrence, 1998). In 1992, the Chinese and Taiwanese governments signed an agreement recognizing the principle of one China. The resolution stated that both sides of the Strait insist on the principle of One China, but the two sides have different views regarding its meaning (Chen and Cohen, 2019). Therefore, it is not established how or when such reunification will take place.

On other hand, the countries of Central America had traditionally been allies of the Taiwanese government. The region is strategically important for Taiwan because Central American states have maintained international recognition in exchange for development aid (Lemus-Delgado, 2017), and through public diplomacy in this region of the world, Taiwan has found a way to guarantee security issues breaking the isolation (Alexander, 2014). Over the last few years, however the situation has changed, with Central America no longer being a homogeneous region supporting Taiwan. The first state to abandon Taiwan and recognize China was Costa Rica in 2007, and this was due

to a dynamic of rivalry between China and the United States (Rodríguez, 2013). This dynamic is the scenario in which El Salvador is currently involved.

In this context, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and Tsai Ing-wen's triumph signified a shift in Taiwanese foreign policy, with an increased focus on achieving greater international visibility. As a result, China assumed a more aggressive posture designed to further isolate Taiwan on the international stage. The unexpected triumph of Donald Trump however represented implicit support for the Tsai government, and, in consequence, relations between China and the United States have already moved beyond traditional bilateral concerns, these being superseded by larger issues of geopolitics, geo-economics and geostrategic competition (Wang and Zhu, 2015). President Trump even congratulated President Tsai by telephone for her electoral victory (*The Washington Post*, 2016). This fact was entirely against the policy of One China, and the Chinese government condemned the act as direct interference with the principle of non-intervention in internal affairs. Trump's presidency soon signaled a longer-term confrontation with the Chinese government, with both a commercial tariff war and the issue of Taiwan being part of a wider strategy intended to gain hegemony on the international stage. For this reason, the decision of El Salvador to withdraw international recognition for Taiwan and work on establishing ties with China was greeted with dismay in Washington. The Central American nation had traditionally been under US supervision in a context of asymmetric relations, and the decision was not deemed to be in line with the regional interests and influence of Washington. The US government however ultimately took advantage of this change in Salvadorean foreign policy by using the asymmetrical relationship to gain an advantage on an issue of domestic importance: the containment of migration.

#### **4. Bukele Playing in the Major League: Between International Recognition of China and the U.S. Pressure**

On February 3, 2019, Nayib Bukele was elected president of El Salvador at the age of thirty-seven. When he presented the plan for his new government, he did not reference foreign policy or mention the China-Taiwan dilemma. He made passing reference to his desire to improve international relations and that his government would attempt to attract foreign direct investment.

In his position as president-elect Bukele visited the United States, and it was during this trip that he accused China of not following international rules and intervening in the affairs of other nations. Bukele said that China is promoting "... projects that are not feasible, leaving countries with huge debts that cannot be paid ..." He also emphasized: "we want to be friends with China, but China has to be our friend with respect and not with money and investments." Regarding the question of relations with China and Taiwan, Bukele said he had not yet made the final decision whether or not to revoke the decision of the Sánchez Cerén administration to recognize China diplomatically. Bukele also commented that one of the topics in his meeting with John Bolton, who was at that time National Security Advisor to President Trump, had been how to counteract predatory Chinese practices (Reuters, 2019).

The Chinese embassy in El Salvador issued a statement in response to Bukele's comments affirming that "China never seeks to intervene in the internal affairs of other nations, but always opens and develops diplomatic relations with all countries, as is the case with El Salvador." The embassy also confirmed that cooperation between China and El Salvador would not be a "debt trap, but a cake for the benefit of both peoples." (Embajada de la República Popular China en El Salvador, 2018).

Carlos Castaneda, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Sánchez Cerén, confirmed that the Chinese vice-chancellor, Qin Gang, would attend the inauguration of Bukele as president. However, through a statement, Bukele said that neither he nor anyone on his team had authorized the invitation of the Chinese official and, if such an invitation had been extended, it would not have been signed by the president-elect, but by one of the authorities of the government of Sánchez Cerén. Despite these issues, Bukele agreed to meet with Qin Gang, who later stated that “the facts have shown that the opening of diplomatic ties between the two countries is consistent with the mainstream and the aspiration of the peoples, and is a correct decision that is proof of history.” (Spanish *Xinhuanet*, 2019a). Bukele thanked President Xi for sending a special envoy to his inauguration and declared his appreciation for China, a country with thousands of years of culture, and one known for its disciplined and industrious people, stressing that “the new Salvadorean government will advance relations between the two countries and will correctly handle issues related to Taiwan.” (Spanish *Xinhuanet*, 2019a). Bukele took office as president of El Salvador on June 1, 2019. The new president understood that the most pressing issues on the presidential agenda would be confronting violence and addressing migration. One of the first foreign policy initiatives took place only five days after Bukele had taken office, when the new president sent a letter to the Secretary General of the United Nations, António Guterres. In this letter, Bukele recognized the UN for its peace missions in El Salvador and presented his country's candidacy for non-permanent membership of the Security Council, the election for which would take place two days later. With this decision, the government of El Salvador altered the agreement made with the Latin America and Caribbean Group, which had previously decided to present only the candidacy of Saint Vincent and the

Grenadines, the country that was finally elected for the period 2020-2021 (*Business Standard*, 2019).

On June 15, El Salvador broke ties with the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic with the clear intention of expanding its bilateral relationship with Morocco. The new president was critical of the fact that El Salvador had previously recognized and maintained diplomatic relations with a republic that did not exist, and was without both territory and population, being effectively a virtual republic. These decisions by Bukele reveal a foreign policy not founded on significant reflection, and it would not be outside the realms of possibility therefore if the agreement by the government of El Salvador to recognize China was reversed at some point in the future.

During Bukele's first month in office, he held a press conference in which he stated that: "Today we have diplomatic relations with China, they are full and we have to recognize the status of China in the world: we are talking about the world's second largest economy". He added that, despite the animosity that the decision to establish relations with China had caused with the United States, El Salvador would work hand in hand with the nations it decided were the most appropriate partners. Bukele stressed: "We are going to do not what suits China or the United States, we are going to do what is convenient for El Salvador" (EFE, 2019). The isolated reference made to "full relations" and the lack of detail offered about what this actually meant was an attempt to avoid a definitive stance on the matter and leave an ambiguous message of neutrality which could be left open to interpretation.

In September, during the General Debate of the 74th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, Bukele took advantage of his visit to New York to meet with State Councilor and Foreign Minister of China, Wang Yi. Wang stressed that the establishing of diplomatic relations between the two countries had opened a new chapter in bilateral



relations, adding that China was willing to support El Salvador's national development as much as possible. He noted that "that the measure is an independent decision taken by two sovereign countries and fully conforms to the fundamental and long-term interests of the two countries and peoples" (Spanish *Xinhuonet*, 2019a). On that occasion, the Salvadorean president said that "The establishing of diplomatic relations between the two countries will unleash the development potential of El Salvador and open ample space for bilateral cooperation." Bukele also noted that El Salvador hoped to strengthen and expand cooperation with China in order to obtain tangible results as soon as possible, with the intention that people from both countries could benefit from the new relationship.

### **5. Pressure from the United States for El Salvador under Bukele to Reestablish Diplomatic Relations with Taiwan**

Bukele's meeting with Wang and the announcement made at the end of the reunion reaffirmed the position of the Salvadorean government to consolidate the relationship with China and definitively leave behind diplomatic ties with Taiwan. However, the debate was resumed due to the position taken by the U.S. Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, Julie Chung. In her visit to San Salvador, Chung declared that the United States government was disappointed by the "opaque" way in which El Salvador established relations with China, and she subsequently made strong representations regarding the continuation of El Salvadorean diplomatic relations with the nation. She affirmed that China was not known for its stance in the fight against corruption and asked the Bukele government and Salvadoreans to question what kind of countries they want to stay closer to, those committed to democracy and the rule of law or countries like China

which do not respect the rules of international diplomacy. In addition, she hinted that although for El Salvador the link with China may be financially attractive, such agreements are often attached to complicated conditions involving loans or the appropriation of natural resources which may ultimately prove impossible for the receiving nation to pay. Chung emphasized that “This relationship is like a sweet that looks delicious but is going to rot your teeth.” Finally, she invited the Salvadorean government not to cut all ties and to maintain the closest possible relationship with Taiwan (*ElSalvador.com*, 2019).

The reaction inside El Salvador was immediate. Deputy Manuel Flores of the opposition leftist party, Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional, said that “The statements of this lady are irresponsible and interfering, but like her, all US officials who arrive in Central America make the same speech, without respect to the sovereign decisions of each state.” (Sputnik, 2019). The Chinese embassy in El Salvador also condemned Chung’s declarations, calling them “irresponsible, unfounded and hypocritical,” (*ibid.*) and insisting that Taiwan “is an inalienable part of Chinese territory” (*ibid.*) and urging the US government to manage issues related to Taiwan prudently to safeguard peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.

The US ambassador suggested that China might be looking to establish a military base in Salvadoran territory in order to turn public opinion in El Salvador against China, warning that the Asia-Pacific Xuanhao company intended to establish a special area in the territory. It was suggested that this measure was part of China’s attempt to set up an alternative trade route to the Panama Canal, and to establish itself in a privileged site which would permit the expansion of intelligence capabilities closer to Washington. The allegation was based on the 100-year rental by China of a 2787 square-kilometer area of El Salvador – 13 percent of the country’s surface – where tax exemptions were required.

The reaction of US officials to the decision to cut diplomatic ties between El Salvador and Taiwan was based largely on Bukele's uncertain stance. During his election campaign, Bukele "recognized the United States as a key ally." As president-elect, Bukele traveled to Washington in May; Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited El Salvador in July and Bukele met with US President Donald Trump in September at the General Debate of the UN Assembly. The initial impression therefore was that Bukele was willing to turn his back on the alliance with China in order to maintain an excellent relationship with the United States.

As previously mentioned, the construction of relations between El Salvador and China initially began during the presidential election campaign, despite the then-candidate Bukele being significantly irked by the Chinese donation of pre-cooked rice that, according to Bukele, was destined for delivery to ruling party supporters and thus electorally benefit his rival. Bukele subsequently declared: "That is why China negotiated with an outgoing government, because it is cheaper to financially support an electoral campaign than to help develop a country over five years." (*El Mundo*, 2018). His exasperation was echoed by the government of the Donald Trump, although this was probably unrelated to the issue of solidarity with Taiwan. In fact, In May 2017 Bukele traveled to Taipei as Mayor of San Salvador to participate in the Smart City Summit and Expo. On that occasion, he was received by President Tsai Ing-wen, who celebrated his participation and highlighted the policies that were implemented in the Salvadoran capital. It is important to note that this reception was out of deference to Bukele as he was not a Head of State but the mayor of the capital of El Salvador (*El Periodista*, 2017).

The Trump administration reacted angrily to the announcement that El Salvador was abandoning its relations with Taiwan, a phenomenon

not heretofore experienced along of the Trump administration. The White House press secretary released an official statement, something that had not been done when other Central American nations recognized Taiwan, declaring the belief of the US government that the decision would not only affect El Salvador but also the economic stability and security of the entire Americas region. The statement affirmed that “The El Salvadorean government’s receptiveness to China’s apparent interference in the domestic politics of a Western Hemisphere country is of grave concern to the United States, and will result in a re-evaluation of our relationship with El Salvador.” (The White House, 2018).

In response to the US declaration, Beijing stated that there was no reason for anyone to interfere with El Salvador’s decision to establish diplomatic ties with China. Lu Kang, Foreign Ministry spokesman, asked the United States to have a “correct vision” of ties between China and El Salvador. Lu made the comment in response to the assertion by the US State Department spokesperson that Washington was “deeply disappointed” by El Salvador’s decision to break ties with Taiwan and that the Trump administration would be reviewing its relationship with the Central American country (*China Daily*, 2018b). Washington’s disappointment at the decision taken by the Salvadoran government was shared by some members of the Legislature, who raised the issue of the US cutting aid to countries that abandoned diplomatic recognition of Taiwan (Sullivan and Lum, 2018). Senator Marco Rubio (2018) posted on his Twitter account that “It would be a terrible mistake for the government of El Salvador to switch diplomatic recognition from Taiwan to China. Maybe they think Chinese money will help the governing party win elections in 2019. But it will cause real harm to the relationship with the U.S., including their role in Alliance for Prosperity.” In a second tweet, Senator Rubio threatened El Salvador: “The U.S. response to Panama and the Dominican Republic switching

recognition from Taiwan to China is not the way we will react if El Salvador does the same. If they do this, I will have no choice but to immediately begin work to end their funding and remove them from Alliance for Prosperity plan.” After Bukele established formal ties with Beijing, Rubio commented that both he and fellow Republican Senator Cory Gardner would be raising the issue of ending US aid to El Salvador with President Trump. Both senators subsequently introduced an amendment to restrict US funding to El Salvador (Gardner, 2018).

Although the United States government sought to undermine El Salvador’s international recognition of China as a way of supporting Taiwan, this issue was not a priority in the relationship between the United States and El Salvador. As asymmetric relations theory supposes, the asymmetry produces different perceptions about what the critical interests are for each state. The support offered by the US to Taiwan therefore could take a backseat to the issue of waves of human migration. Allowing El Salvador to continue with diplomatic ties with China therefore became a bargaining chip in helping to force further concessions on the issue of migration.

Immigration has repeatedly proved to be an issue of significant concern for President Trump, one which is also very profitable from an electoral standpoint. Trump’s relationship with Northern Triangle countries has been extremely rocky due to the perceived failure of these countries to collaborate with the United States on the issue. Trump maintains that these countries do nothing to stop migratory flows, and the relationship was strained still further when in January 2018 he referred to El Salvador as a “shithole”, from whence many criminals migrated to the US: “Why are we having all these people from shithole countries come here?” (*Revista Factum*, 2019).

When the problem of migrant caravans became more pressing, Trump then resorted to blackmail, threatening Mexico with raising

tariffs on its products. To the Northern Triangle countries, Trump simply announced the suspension of the aid that these countries receive from the US government. The aggressive posture of Trump caused the Mexican government to sign an agreement with the United States to improve security on its southern borders and impede the free passage of migrants, with Guatemala and El Salvador subsequently following suit. All three countries have pledged to receive those who have applied for US asylum and not forward them to another nation until their immigration application is resolved: in effect, a “safe third country” agreement<sup>4</sup>.

This was the context in which in September 2019, the US embassy in El Salvador announced that the acting Secretary of National Security of the United States, Kevin McAleenan, and the Chancellor of El Salvador, Alexandra Hill Tinoco, representing the governments of Donald Trump and Nayib Bukele respectively, would sign a bilateral cooperation agreement on asylum. The communiqué established that the two governments would undertake to address the issue of migration jointly and humanely, endeavouring to improve both the prosperity and security of the region. This agreement is part of an integrated strategy designed to combat organized crime, strengthen border security, reduce forced migration and people-smuggling and tackle illegal trafficking. The US government is satisfied with the treaty and has referred to it on several occasions, such as in the speech delivered by Trump at the General Debate of the United Nations Assembly where he said: “To our country, I can tell you sincerely: We are working closely with our friends in the region — including Mexico, Canada, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Panama — to uphold the integrity of borders and ensure safety and prosperity for our people.” (U.S. Embassy in El Salvador, 2019).

Another issue that required resolution was that of the Temporary Protected Status (TPS) humanitarian program<sup>5</sup>. The program was

initiated as a response to the two earthquakes that shook El Salvador in 2001, and allowed Salvadoreans to live and work legally in the United States. In January 2018 however officials from the US Department of Homeland Security reported that the government intended to terminate the agreement. Salvadoreans are the largest group of migrants to benefit from TPS, and although the figures are variable, approximately two hundred thousand people are believed to have taken advantage of the scheme. El Salvador was one of the first countries to become involved in the program due to the ongoing civil war. The right of Salvadoreans to take part in the program expired in 1994, but it was subsequently reinstated due to the earthquakes, and although this particular emergency has long been over, the scheme was extended due to the violence prevailing in El Salvador. The eventual deportation of these Salvadoreans would greatly affect the extremely vulnerable economy of their nation, 20 per cent of which is comprised of remittances sent home by those working in the US. El Salvador, with a population of six million inhabitants, has more than one million citizens in the United States, making it particularly dependent on its larger and more powerful northern neighbor.

The decision of Trump to terminate the TPS program was appealed in court, resulting in the temporary suspension of the intended termination. In October 2019 the U.S. Ambassador Ronald Johnson announced that the Department of Homeland Security would extend the validity of work permits currently held by Salvadoreans under TPS until 4th January, 2021, making it clear that the scheme would remain in operation at least one year after the current litigation in the US courts ends. “This is in recognition of the good work of the Nayib Bukele government,” Johnson said in the video (*El Economista*, 2019).

## **6. Endpoint: El Salvador and the Recognition of China**

Speculation about the continuity or breakdown of diplomatic ties with China ended when it was announced that Bukele would tour the Asian continent. The visit to China included an interview with President Xi Jinping and was billed a “State Visit.” In his welcome to Bukele, Xi said that the establishment of diplomatic relations opened the door to bilateral cooperation, laid the groundwork for historical development, and was consistent with the fundamental interests of both peoples. At the Great People’s Palace in Beijing Xi praised Bukele’s decision to maintain and develop relations between China and El Salvador, stating: “You have shown strategic vision as a statesman and assumed historical responsibility.” It was also emphasized that China welcomed Salvadorean participation in the construction of the Belt and Road Initiative and that China was ready to import more products such as sugar and coffee from El Salvador (Spanish *Xinhuanet*, 2019b). Bukele declared China to be a great nation, one which played an important role in the international sphere, and he mentioned his admiration for China’s history, culture, and achievements. Bukele also pointed out that the development of relations with China could generate more opportunities and benefits for its people in El Salvador, and stated explicitly that El Salvador adhered to the one China policy and supported the Chinese aim of peaceful reunification. In an oblique message to the United States, Bukele further referred to his commitment to the development of a long-term friendship with China, in parallel with other important bilateral relations. The speech clearly reiterated that the Chinese government is the only legitimate government representing the whole of China and reinforced the belief that Taiwan is an inalienable part of Chinese territory. For its part, the Chinese government committed to the execution of projects such as the construction of a national stadium, a



new national library, and water treatment plants in Lake Ilopango and the Puerto de La Libertad area.

Julio Fabián, leader of the right-wing Alianza Republicana Nacionalista party, argued that Bukele's visit to China risked US support for the Salvadorean administration, stating: "One should not bite the hand of the person who has fed him, as the popular saying goes; if the American embassy has accompanied Bukele in difficult times (for the country) I think they (the US government) should have an opinion on whether he travels to China or not." (*El Diario de Hoy*, 2019). Tobias Bradford, U.S. Public Affairs Counselor in San Salvador, declared that his government was evaluating whether U.S.-backed programs would be affected by any agreement that the Salvadorean administration made with China. He further emphasised that the U.S. government had advised El Salvador and warned the executive not to fall into the traps that have caused other countries to make agreements with the government of China which have subsequently proved problematic.

## **7. Conclusions**

Although Bukele initially viewed the establishing of diplomatic relations with China with suspicion and accused President Sánchez Cerén of seeking political benefit from this foreign policy decision, he changed his opinion once in office. Bukele believed that recognizing China would be beneficial, and that cementing ties with China would usher in a new era of cooperation. It was envisioned that China would provide El Salvador with support and partnership in areas such as science, culture and social development in addition to offering infrastructure loans, all of which would consolidate domestic support for Bukele. In addition, El Salvador would prove itself capable of resisting pressure from the United States despite the structures of the international system. From

this perspective, therefore recognition of China by El Salvador could be viewed as a significant achievement, with even some sectors of the opposition congratulating the new president on his decision to rescind recognition for Taiwan as a sovereign state. Oscar Ortiz, general secretary of the FMLN, stated that Bukele's trip to China was a positive development, one which was based on the work that his party had begun in the previous administration, and which strengthened previous agreements. He also pointed out that "The approach that we assume to China was not only correct, but it was also timely, visionary and for the long term", and the Salvadorian state must continue to cultivate and strengthen (*El Diario de Hoy*, 2019).

Initial impressions of Bukele's decision regarding the dilemma of whether or not to recognize China were that the young politician acted pragmatically and intelligently. In addition, he had apparently safeguarded the sovereignty of El Salvador by taking advantage of the rivalry between China and the United States to recognize China despite U.S. threats and the virulent reaction of some U.S. politicians. The election of Bukele was furthermore a clear indicator of his capacity to recognize the increasing importance of China on the international stage, including in Central America. The new Salvadorean president was able to take advantage of the contest for hegemony between the United States and China to overcome the asymmetric structural limitations that have traditionally conditioned El Salvador's foreign policy.

As Womack suggests (2016: 9), asymmetry is a general theory that can help us to analyze unequal relationships by using an interpretive model of the interactions between states. Asymmetry is not however a theory that explains all actions of foreign policy from a deterministic perspective. What it does is to propose that the most important factor behind Bukele's decision beyond his personality or ideology was the real possibility of action in an international system where not all states have

the same degree of autonomy. This article demonstrates that the Salvadorian government was able to choose between recognizing China or Taiwan. On the other hand, this country did not intend to change the rules on international recognition. As peripheral realism suggests, it could not do so due to the system's inequality. Even so, in return, El Salvador conceded something more vital for the United States and more important for the future of El Salvador, the immigration issue. While El Salvador was able to recognize China, it was ultimately unable to cope with the immigration restrictions imposed by the United States. For the US government, the priority was migration, not support for Taiwan.

## Notes

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1. In this article, we refer to the People's Republic of China as China and the Republic of China as Taiwan.
2. The diplomatic allies to defect from Taipei to Beijing during Tsai's first term as president have been Sao Tomé, Burkina Faso, Dominican

Republic, Panama, El Salvador, Solomon Islands and Kiribati

3. These Bukele tweets referred to the announcement made by President Sánchez Cerén, reporting \$150 million USD in non-refundable deliveries from China to El Salvador over three years (*El Mundo*, 2018).
4. The agreement with Mexico was signed on 8th June; with Guatemala, on 26th July; with El Salvador, on 20th September and with Honduras on 25th September (*Latin America Reports*, 2019).
5. The United States Secretary of Homeland Security may designate a foreign state for TPS due to conditions that temporarily prevent nationals of that nation safely returning, or in certain circumstances, where the country cannot handle the return of its nationals properly. The Secretary may designate a country for TPS due to ongoing armed conflict; an environmental disaster or an epidemic or other extraordinary and temporary conditions. Currently, El Salvador, Haiti, Honduras, Nepal, Nicaragua, Sudan, South Sudan, Syria and Yemen enjoy this status (US Citizen and Immigration Services, 2019).

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