

## THE EVOLUTION OF ITALIAN-TAIWANESE RELATIONS IN LIGHT OF THE GROWING US-PRC COMPETITION

by Stefano Pelaggi

### *Introduction*

Understanding and analyzing Taiwan's international relations has always been very complex. The peculiar legal framework within Taipei's relations with national and supranational entities and the very concept of Taiwanese sovereignty is subject to multiple interpretations. It is a unique condition in the history of international relations. The combination of historical and political circumstances that determined the Taiwanese anomalous situation.

Each of the involved parties, Washington and Beijing first and foremost, but also every nation and international organization, have their own interpretation of the framework that defines Taiwan<sup>1</sup>, its relations with other state actors and indeed the very concept of Taiwanese sovereignty. The possibility of interpreting the structure that regulates Taipei's international relations is implicitly accepted by all parties involved. This method has allowed relative stability since the 1970s to be maintained in the Taiwan Strait. A "semantic compromise" which allowed all involved parties to preserve their interpretation of Taiwanese sovereignty while keeping the dialogue open and guaranteeing

Dipartimento di Storia Antropologia Arte Spettacolo, Università di Roma "La Sapienza".

<sup>1</sup> In this article the term "Taiwan" indicates the state entity formally called "Republic of China" (ROC). Both "Taiwan" and "Republic of China" will be used. Without considering either the historical considerations linked to the two denominations, nor the value of the two terms in Taiwanese public discourse. The term "Island" will be used to indicate Taiwan, as opposed to mainland China. To facilitate understanding, I omit the presence of the other archipelagos that constitute Taiwanese territory.

stability in the Taiwan Strait<sup>2</sup>. Relations between Beijing and Taipei have experienced moments of cooperation and dramatic periods of tension over the past 40 years. Economic and industrial exchanges have grown steadily between the two sides of the Taiwan Strait. The growing competition between Washington and Beijing is profoundly changing the fragile balance in which relations have found relative stability since the Second World War. Today Taipei increasingly appears to be a point of friction between the two superpowers; the idea of a conflict over Taiwan seems possible in the medium term.

This article analyzes the relations between Italy and Taiwan from the 1980s to today, *i.e.*, the diplomatic exchanges but also the informal interactions that have obviated the lack of official diplomatic relations. Italy is what is referred to as ‘middle power’, a founding member of the European Union and member of the G7, a country with a strong industrial vocation and which has developed important commercial relations with the PRC, but at the same time has never had a relevant foreign policy in the Asia-Pacific region. Elements such as the closeness of the parties on the Italian left to Beijing’s positions, the strong desire by industrial circles to penetrate the Chinese market, the links of the Italian conservative right with the Republic of China (ROC) and Taiwan’s lobbying actions and interest towards the lively Taiwanese economy characterized the period from the 1980s to the mid-2000s. This reality remained crystallized, with some significant exceptions, until 2020 when a decisive ideological contrast began with respect to relations with Taiwan. The representation of Taipei as an example of democracy in Asia, as opposed to an authoritarian regime like the PRC, has begun to become prominent. The concept of Taiwan as a like-minded (democratic) partner in Asia is the key to the understanding promoted by the Atlantic alliance. The reaction of the Italian institu-

<sup>2</sup> This article does not analyze the complex regulatory framework and the different interpretations of the policies that have defined and still regulate relations between the People’s Republic of China, the United States, and the Republic of China. The bibliography and scientific literature on the topic are very vast, among others see: F. CHIANG, *The One-China Policy: State, Sovereignty, and Taiwan’s International Legal Status*, Elsevier, 2017; F. CONGIU, B. ONNIS, *Fino all’ultimo Stato. La battaglia diplomatica tra Cina e Taiwan*, Roma, Carocci, 2022; J. D. LISLE, *The Chinese Puzzle of Taiwan’s Status*, in “Orbis”, n. 1, 2000; A. LIFF, D. LIN, *The One China Framework at 50 (1972-2022): The Myth of Consensus and Its Evolving Policy Significance*, in “The China Quarterly”, 2022, pp. 1- 24.

tions to this obvious change must also be interpreted through the communications and declarations of the various political forces. Within the deliberately open framework of relations with Taiwan, the alteration of the hegemonic balance and the consequent changes in the power relations between the actors involved, inevitably must pass through the analysis of semantics.

### 1. *Taiwanese diplomacy in Europe*

After the Second World War the image of Taiwan projected in Europe consisted of the effort carried out by the party that exercised dictatorial power on the island through martial law: Kuomintang or KMT, mainly through lobbyists and businessmen. Both Taipei and Beijing claimed to be the legitimate government of China and all Chinese people. The goal of Taiwan's projection was to convince European governments to establish formal diplomatic relations with Taipei. An act that would necessarily have been linked to the recognition of the ROC as the legitimate government of the entire Chinese territory. Any diplomatic relationship involved an inevitable choice: recognizing the Republic of China or the People's Republic of China as the legitimate government. While most Western countries showed a desire to establish relations with Beijing after the Korean War, and the beginning of the fight against communism in the Asian Pacific, it actuated a stalemate that lasted for decades. Taipei's diplomatic efforts did not produce results in the 1950s and 1960s but at the beginning of the seventies the situation changed radically. At the end of the 1960s, it became clear how Beijing's international image was changing. In October 1971, the People's Republic of China (PRC) replaced the Republic of China (ROC) in the United Nations General Assembly and UN Security Council. The path of rapprochement between Beijing and Washington was temporarily arrested by the vicissitudes of the Nixon presidency.

The approach adopted by Bertram Lang in his seminal paper "Taiwanese Lobbying in the European Union: Workable Diplomacy and its Limitations"<sup>3</sup> is the most effective tool to understand the relations be-

<sup>3</sup> B. LANG, *Taiwanese Lobbying in the European Union: 'Workable Diplomacy' and its Limitations*. "EU Diplomacy Paper" August 2015.

tween the European Union and Taiwan. Using a lobbying approach which focuses on the different channels of influences implemented by the Taiwanese government within the European foreign policy system in Brussels, has helped in understanding the informal diplomacy dynamics used by Taipei. Both the Chen Shui-bian's assertive and identity-based diplomacy<sup>4</sup> implemented after the 2000 elections presidential elections in Taiwan, and the "workable diplomacy" stressed during Ma Ying-Jeou presidency<sup>5</sup> from 2008 to 2015 produced significant results in Brussels. During the Chen presidency a Taiwan-centric identity suffered due to the attraction of the incredible economic success and development of the People's Republic of China was having in Europe (accompanied by an enormous increase of trade between China and the EU). Any assessment of the general framework of the diplomatic relations between Taiwan and the EU is inevitably conditioned by the priority problem of Taipei's diplomacy in Brussels: that is, the inability to design a favorable agenda for Taiwan<sup>6</sup>. On a working-level, the same sources from the Taiwanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) agreed on the effectiveness of the technical arguments, *i.e.* the possibility of discussing individual practices or legislative elements in Brussels and the extreme difficulty in organizing any discussion that could shift the political balance favorable to Taiwan's interests. Chinese warnings

<sup>4</sup> Chen Shui-bian served as Taiwan's president from 2000 to 2008. He was a member of the the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) and was the first non-KMT president. Since the very beginning of his presidency, Chen adopted a confrontational approach with Beijing, often evoking Taiwanese independence and claims related to Taipei's need for self-determination. Over the years of his presidency, Taiwan's diplomatic projection experienced a strong push towards the definition of Taipei as an insular reality, culturally and politically disconnected from the Chinese mainland.

<sup>5</sup> "Workable diplomacy" (活路外交) or "viable diplomacy" promoted by Ma Ying-jeou during his presidential mandate (2008-2016) was based on a pragmatic approach towards China, aimed at strengthening economic cooperation while building a possible path for closer institutional relations. Since Ma took office in May 2008, Taipei and Beijing restored trade negotiations, signed several trade agreements. Ma's mandate was harshly contested by the Sunflower Movement and presidential popularity ratings reached a negative peak in November 2015 following the historic meeting between Ma himself and Xi Jinping. See amongst others: T. TSAI, T. T. LIU, *Cross-Strait Relations and Regional Integration: A Review of the Ma Ying-jeou Era (2008-2016)*, in "Journal of Current Chinese Affairs", n.1, 2017, pp. 11-35.

<sup>6</sup> Interviews conducted with officials from the Europe division of the Taiwanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2019, 2020 and 2023.

against official ties with Taiwan<sup>7</sup> have become frequent and recurring since Tsai Ing-wen's second term as Taiwan's president in 2020, a period that coincided with a general reconfiguration of relations between Brussels and Beijing. Even if the Taiwan issue is not addressed directly by the European Union, concerns related to cross-Strait stability are getting more and more frequent<sup>8</sup>. While the EU is the largest foreign investor in Taiwan<sup>9</sup> representing over 25 percent of Taiwan's total foreign direct investment stocks, with a total value of over USD \$50 billion, the same flow of European goods is directly connected with the stability of the Taiwan Strait with more than 40% of European trade passing<sup>10</sup> through the Taiwan Strait.

## 2. *One China Policy and Italy-Taiwan relations*

Italy was ahead of others in establishing diplomatic relations with the PRC. After years of negotiations and various informal relations between the two countries, on November 6, 1970, a joint Italian-Chinese statement was issued, in which the Italian government recognized the government of the People's Republic of China as the only legal government of China. A condition that left Italy among the first nations to define the complex issue of the One China Policy, particularly a solution acceptable to both the People's Republic of China and the United States. Beijing's prerequisite was to cease all diplomatic relations with Taipei before establishing full relations with the People's Republic of China<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> REUTERS, *China warns Europe against official ties with Taiwan ahead of minister's visit*, 9 June 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china-warns-europe-taiwan-contacts-ahead-ministers-trip-2023-06-09/>

<sup>8</sup> EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, *EU-Taiwan Political Relations and Cooperation (P9\_TA/2021/0431)*, 21 October 2021, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0431\\_EN.html](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0431_EN.html).

<sup>9</sup> M. MALINCONI, *The European Union Crushes Taiwan's Hopes for a Bilateral Investment Agreement*, in "Global Taiwan Brief", n. 7, 2023.

<sup>10</sup> CENTRAL EUROPEAN INSTITUTE OF ASIAN STUDIES, *Taiwan Strait Crisis: Implications for Europe*, 2 October 2022, <https://ceias.eu/taiwan-strait-crisis-implications-for-europe/>.

<sup>11</sup> Among the vast bibliography dedicated to the negotiations for diplomatic recognition between Rome and Beijing: E. DI NOLFO (ed), *La normalizzazione delle relazioni diplomatiche tra la Repubblica Italiana e la Repubblica Popolare Cinese Atti e Documenti*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2010.

This was an understandable condition, given that Taipei formally claimed sovereignty over the entire Chinese territory, but the semantic question necessarily had to remain open to guarantee a Taiwanese projection, even if only informally. A formula appears in the document, in which Italy “took note” of China’s declaration that Taiwan was an inalienable part of the territory of the PRC, that had been used a few weeks earlier by the Canadian government: “The Chinese government reaffirms that Taiwan is an inalienable part of the territory of the People’s Republic of China. The Italian government takes note of this statement of the Chinese Government. The Italian Government recognizes that the Government of the People’s Republic of China is the sole legal government of China.”<sup>12</sup>

The Taiwan issue had been widely debated by Italian politics and diplomacy in the months prior to the agreement. The fear of provoking a reaction in Washington and the difficult interpretation of the recognition dilemma between Taipei and Beijing were instrumental in leaving it up to the Canadians to set the details of the diplomatic recognition. In the following years, all Western countries established full diplomatic relations with Beijing and the formula of “taking note” became the one that everyone followed. When the United States, the main ally that had guaranteed the existence of the Republic of China, established formal relations with Beijing in 1979 the PRC already enjoyed full diplomatic relations with most European countries. The isolation of Taiwan in the international arena was clear, while the same time the Taiwanese economy entered a period of economic high-speed growth. Taiwan was one of the Asian ‘tigers’, a global powerhouse on the way to becoming an essential piece in the technology supply chain. While Taiwanese international projection was quickly decaying, a path that would lead the country to a loss of all its diplomatic allies in the following decades<sup>13</sup>, the attractiveness of the industrial sector and the

<sup>12</sup> *Joint Communiqué of Government of People’s Republic of China and Government of Republic of Italy on Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between China and Italy*. Cited in F. G. SNYDER, *The European Union and China, 1949-2008: Basic Documents and Commentary*, Portland, Hart, 2009, pp. 31-32.

<sup>13</sup> Taiwan at the time of writing this article, *i.e.* September 2023, has formal diplomatic relations with 12 of the 193 United Nations member states and with the Holy See, while in 1971 Taiwan had full diplomatic relations with 68 countries, which became 31 in 1973 and 21 in 1978 until today’s progressive and gradual erosion.

economic advancement of the country became evident. Establishing informal relations with Taipei, while overcoming the limitations of the One China policy, became an opportunity in the eyes of industrialized countries; no longer exclusively a political choice, in an anti-communist perspective or in support of being an US ally. Taiwanese investments and the possibility of participating in the process of building the country's infrastructure network were, however, frequently linked to Taipei's desire to break, or weaken, Taiwan's diplomatic isolation. Throughout the 1970s, similar to what had occurred in previous decades, relations between Rome and Taipei were mostly promoted by a lobbying group headed by conservative, and sometimes post-fascist, parties<sup>14</sup>. It was an action strongly animated by visceral anti-communism, rarely managing to gain consensus both among the public and in institutions. Taiwan in the Italian debate was a proto-fascist state supported by the United States, while the history of the island and its inhabitants remained excluded from that narrative.

In those years, Italy did not have a representative office in, unlike other European nations such as the United Kingdom (UK) and France which had informal representations in Taipei. A circumstance that created several problems, in particular during the construction of the dam of Tchi (德基水壩) on the Dajia River in the Heping District which was carried on from 1969 to 1976. The dam has been constructed by an Italian Japanese consortium headed by the Italian companies "Giuseppe Torno S.p.a." of Milan, "ELC Electroconsulting" and "Consonda S.p.a." The works lasted more than five years, involving more than 300 Italian workers. During that period the assistance to the Italians was completely non-existent due to the absence of any kind of diplomatic representation in Taiwan<sup>15</sup>. From that moment onwards the efforts of Taiwanese diplomacy, and their lobbyists who promoted Taipei's interests in Italy, were all directed towards the opening of an Italian Representative Office in Taipei. A document produced by the

<sup>14</sup> S. PELAGGI, *Trent'anni di relazioni diplomatiche tra l'Italia e Taiwan. 1949-1979*, in "Processi Storici e Politiche di Pace", n. 31-32, 2022, pp. 101-126.

<sup>15</sup> ARCHIVE DOCUMENTS FROM THE ITALIAN OFFICE OF ECONOMIC, COMMERCIAL AND CULTURAL PROMOTION IN TAIPEI (hereinafter UIPECC from the acronym used by the Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs), "Impianto idroelettrico del Tachien appunti del 20 novembre 1974". The documents coming from the Italian Office of Economic, Commercial and Cultural Promotion in Taipei have been cited indicating the totality of the information available.

Italian Consulate-General of Hong Kong in 1973<sup>16</sup> describes the situation, also citing the many difficulties reported by Italians who worked and operated in Taiwan. The document envisaged the possibility of open a private “Trade Office” in Taipei, probably reflecting on the initiative that had already been privately undertaken by an Italian, a certain Cossotto, and start promoting cultural events on the island.

### 3. *Rome and Taipei in the 1980s and 1990s: lobbies and economic interests*

During a speech to the Kuomintang Central Committee in 1986 Chiang Ching-kuo, the son of Chiang Kai-shek who succeeded him as president of the ROC, spoke openly about the removal of martial law, institutional reforms, and the abolition of the ban on new parties. A few months later, in September 1986, democracy activists gathered at the Grand Hotel in Taipei and founded the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) while a few months later, in July 1987, martial law was abolished. After that, the gradual process of opening began which led to the first democratic elections in 1996, but it was neither the end of martial law nor the democratization of the country that attracted the attention of Italian politics but the enormous economic growth of the country, in particular of technology sector.

The 1980s marked a new approach of Italian-Taiwanese relations. Relations between countries, which had experienced a period of formidable economic and industrial development in the previous decades. A parliamentary mission in 1979 led by Bruno Stegagnini and entirely composed of members of the party Democrazia Cristiana<sup>17</sup> (DC), stood for a turning point for Italian-Taiwanese relations. The Associazione per l’amicizia e le relazioni culturali di Cina a Taiwan (China in Taiwan Friendship and Cultural Relations Association) was founded in 1980; initially chaired by the same Stegagnini and then managed by Camillo

<sup>16</sup> UIPECC, “Questione di Taiwan - interessi italiani”, telecast from the Hong Kong consulate general to the ministry of 19 April 1973, prot. No. 0474.

<sup>17</sup> The other members were Gianni Cerrioni, Alberto Rossi and Antonio Falconio, all members of DC. The delegation was accompanied by Camillo Zuccoli who from that moment onwards managed Taiwanese interests in Italy, through various associations, until 2019.



Zuccoli until the end of its activities in 1992. Until the mid 1980s the main Taiwanese lobbying activities in Italy were carried out by Sun Yat-sen Center in Rome, a structure fully funded by the Taiwanese government aimed at the cultural and institutional promotion of Taiwan<sup>18</sup>. The director was former General Carlo Unia, who had worked closely with Chang Kai-shek in the 1930s in Nanjing. Unia served in China as chief instructor in the aeronautical mission<sup>19</sup> that had been promoted by Benito Mussolini's son-in-law, Galeazzo Ciano, at the time Italian consul in Shanghai.

In October 1988 the first edition of Italexpo Taiwan was organized in Taipei inside the World Trade Center - an exhibition of machinery, technology, and Italian goods in which major Italian industrial groups showcased their activities and products<sup>20</sup>. The Taiwanese economy was growing and from the mid-1980s the island's companies began relocating production processes to Chinese territory, taking advantage of the market openings in China. A dynamic which, thanks to geographical proximity and common values, constituted a pivotal moment for the technological transfer of Chinese industry<sup>21</sup> generating a huge advancement of the Taiwanese economy. In the late 1980's Taiwan had 70 billion dollars in foreign exchange reserves - the third largest currency reserves in the world after Japan and the Federal Republic of Germany. In 1989, the Istituto del Commercio Estero (ICE) financed the opening of an office in Taipei initially directed by a private individual, Vincenzo Masi who also held the position of president of the European Trade Representative Organization (ETRO)<sup>22</sup>. The office changed its name to the Italian Economic Promotion Office (ITPO) and Italy, following the example of most European countries, was finally able to count on an institutional structure for the management of Italian-Taiwanese relations. The notable delay in opening the office – Western countries had begun opening private offices and informal em-

<sup>18</sup> M. F. PINI, *Italia e Cina, 60 anni tra passato e futuro*, L'Asino d'oro, 2011, p. 217.

<sup>19</sup> V. MOCCIA, *La Cina di Ciano. La diplomazia fascista in estremo oriente*, Libreria Universitaria, 2014.

<sup>20</sup> UIPECC, Formosa "Catalog and promotional material Italexpo 1988".

<sup>21</sup> S. RIGGER, *The Tiger Leading the Dragon: How Taiwan Propelled China's Economic Rise*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2021.

<sup>22</sup> UIPECC, "Apertura ITPO, appunti del febbraio 1991".

bassy as early as the mid-1970's<sup>23</sup> - was clearly connected to fears of damaging relations with the People's Republic of China. Italian-Taiwanese trade grew from to 47 million dollars in 1973<sup>24</sup> to 2.6 billion dollars at the beginning of the 1990s<sup>25</sup>, and the ever-increasing flow of Taiwanese tourists to Italy made it necessary to open an office for relations with Taipei.

Institutional relations between the two countries grew, mostly thanks to visits by parliamentary delegations from Italy. In January 1990 a delegation of fourteen parliamentarians, led by the Vice President of the Senate, Giorgio De Giuseppe, visited Taiwan. In April 1991, the Minister of Public Works Giovanni Prandini arrived in Taiwan for the first, and so far, only visit of an Italian minister to the island. Prandini's delegation was made up of 41 managers representing 25 public and private companies<sup>26</sup>. It was the second visit of a European minister to Taiwan. Prandini was in fact preceded by just a few months by Roger Fauroux, French Minister for Industry, while Irish, Swedish, and British government ministers arrived in the following weeks. The official reason for the visit was the awarding of an honorary doctorate from Taipei Fu Jen Catholic University to Minister Prandini. The degree was delivered directly by the Rector of the Catholic University of Taipei, Archbishop Stanislaus Lokuang. Several representatives of public companies were part of the delegation, such as Italimpianti from Genoa, cooperatives, such as CMC of Ravenna and CTIP of Rome and private companies such as Torno, Lodigiani, Maltauro, Recchi, Acqua, Gavio, Itinera and Pizzarotti<sup>27</sup>. In October 1991 a three-day conference was held in Taipei, as a sort of follow-up to the minister's visit, the "Chinese-Italian Workshop on Motorway Technology" with the participation of the top leaders of the Azienda Nazionale Autonome delle Strade (ANAS) and the participation of the Taiwanese Ministry of Transport<sup>28</sup>. Representatives of Taiwanese companies

<sup>23</sup> Rome arrived among the last in the country, at the time of the opening of the office among the members of the then European Economic Community only Portugal and Italy were not present in Taiwan.

<sup>24</sup> UIPECC, Formosa, "economia Taiwan 1973" dispatch from the Hong Kong consulate to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs dated 22 January 1974.

<sup>25</sup> UIPECC, Formosa, "Intercambio commerciale Italia", February 1992.

<sup>26</sup> UIPECC, Formosa, "Delegazione Ministro Prandini". July 1991.

<sup>27</sup> UIPECC, Formosa, "Delegazione Ministro Prandini", cit.

<sup>28</sup> UIPECC, Formosa, "Chinese-Italian Workshop on Motorway Technology", December 1991.

in the infrastructure technology sector also participated. The conference constituted the starting point of a series of public works carried out by Italian companies in Taiwan in the following years. The Taiwanese market opened up for Italian companies with contracts for large construction works. Among these were Torno CMC which built 6 km of motorways with tunnels and viaducts for a value of 260 billion lire, Ansaldo with 2 incinerators for urban waste at a value of 250 billion lire, Fincantieri which built an oceanographic vessel for 75 billion lire, Italmprese which created electromechanical systems for highways tunnels at an amount of 60 billion lire, Ilva of Terni which supplied various Taiwanese companies with special steel at the amount of 40 billion lire and Cobra S.p.A. which provided the Taiwanese government with 100 special containers worth 11 billion lira. These industrial orders were carried out in the period between 1993 and 1994 and they can be directly linked to Prandini's visit to Taiwan. All the Italian companies that won contracts were in fact part of the 1991 delegation. Among the objectives of the Prandini mission was also to encourage the participation of Italian companies in the "Six year National Economic Development Plan" launched by the Taiwanese government,<sup>29</sup> had allocated 320 billion US dollars for structural investments in the country. The mission also strengthened Taiwan's interest in Europe and Italy. In those years Taiwanese investments in the European continent increased from just 17 million dollars in 1988 to 266 million in 1990. Taiwanese interest in Italy were represented by different editorial initiatives. In 1992, after the termination of the Association for friendship and cultural and economic relations between Italy and the Republic of China, the Italy-Taiwan Interparliamentary Friendship Group was formed. On 6 July 1994 it held its first official meeting in the setting of Palazzo Brancaccio in Rome<sup>30</sup>. In 1993 Confindustria signed an agreement with the Euro Asia Trade Organization (EATO) of Taipei for the creation of a Joint Business Council. The agreement was signed in Rome by the EATO delegation with the then ministers of Foreign Trade Paolo Baratta and Industry Minister Paolo Savona.

<sup>29</sup> Y. YA-HWEI, *Government Policy and Strategic Industries: The Case of Taiwan*, in I. TAKATOSHI, A. O. KRUEGER (eds) "Trade and Protectionism", University of Chicago, 1993, pp. 387-411.

<sup>30</sup> PRIVATE ARCHIVE OF THE ITALY-TAIWAN INTERPARLIAMENTARY FRIENDSHIP GROUP (hereinafter PAITIFG), Invitation and material for Palazzo Brancaccio Reception.

#### 4. *The opening of the Italian Office in Taipei*

The first parliamentary motions and questions aimed at urging the establishment of an Italian representation office in Taipei and the appointment of an Italian Representative dated back to 1956<sup>31</sup>. Signed mostly by members of the post fascist party Movimento Sociale Italiano, the motion did not find widespread support in Italian politics. The issue was also complex on a diplomatic level: a formal interruption of relations between Taipei and Rome had never actually occurred. Taipei therefore argued that the opening of a Representation Office would be configured in terms of a simple “resumption of functioning” rather than an “institution” or “reopening”. However, Taipei’s diplomacy showed flexibility to facilitate the establishment of an office<sup>32</sup>. At least until 1994, Taiwanese ambition was not matched by an Italian political will, a series of summary documents produced by Taiwanese institutions on trade between the two countries contributed to changing Rome’s attitude. The Italian-Taiwanese trade volume amounted to \$2.6 billion in the early 1990s, while the flow of Taiwanese tourists grew exponentially. The intervention of the then Foreign Minister Antonio Martino and the pressure exerted by the Italian Taiwan Parliamentary Friendship Association were decisive for solving the matter. A bureaucratic problem that arose contributed to accelerating the Italian decision-making processes. The Italian Trade Promotion Office had in fact already started issuing tourist visas to Taiwanese citizens. In June 1994, the activity of the Travel Section of the Italian Trade Promotion Office was temporarily suspended due to misunderstandings that arose between Italian administrative branches. With the intervention of Minister Martino, the Italian presence in Taiwan finally became institutionalized. The solution for the Representative Office was modeled on the example of other Western countries’ offices. The Italian Trade Promotion Office (ITPO) changed its name to the Italian Promotion Office Economic,

<sup>31</sup> ARCHIVIO STORICO DIPLOMATICO DEL MINISTERO DEGLI AFFARI ESTERI - Historical Diplomatic Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (hereinafter ASDMAE), Affari Politici 1950-1957 (hereinafter AP 50/57), “Formosa Italia”, b. 1551. Relazioni con Formosa dell’8 ottobre 1954. Missione ufficiale Bettiol-Cerica a Formosa di Figarolo di Gropelo del 22 novembre 1956.

<sup>32</sup> UIPECC, Formosa, “Ufficio di Rappresentanza”, July 1994.

Commercial and Cultural ensuring that Italy could finally count on an institutional structure. A Representative, coming from the ranks of Italian diplomacy, was first sent to Taipei in 1995.

##### 5. *Italy and Taiwan towards present days*

In the following two decades, relations between Rome and Taipei were mostly carried forward by the Italian parliamentary friendship group and a small number of politicians. The economic rise of the People's Republic of China complicated any attempt of informal cooperation with Taiwan. The Chinese market became first attractive and then essential for Italian exports and Beijing's central role on the international stage emerged. Relations between Italy and Taiwan were unable to intensify, the peak of the 1990s with the visit of Minister Prandini and the many public works commissions assigned to Italian companies were not repeated. The People's Republic of China was starting to be considered a vital resource and an incredible opportunity. The democratization process in Taiwan had radically changed the country's positioning. In the years from 2000 to 2008 during which Chen Shui-bian served as president, Taiwan started a path of detachment from the Chinese cultural matrix<sup>33</sup> and the democratic and anti-authoritarian matrix became predominant<sup>34</sup>. While with Chen Shui-bian the discourse on transnational justice revealed the traumatic events of recent Taiwanese history<sup>35</sup>, the colonial past of the island was re-interpreted and grassroots movements pose new questions for Asian societies. Leftist parties in Italy - above all the Communist Party - were not endorsing the changes taking place in Taiwan. Support for Taiwan in Italy remained relegated to the conservative right-wing parties while the more liberal elements of the Italian political spectrum were all intent on developing political and commercial relations with the People's Republic of China.

<sup>33</sup> B-Y. CHANG, *From Taiwanisation to De-sinification: Culture Construction in Taiwan since the 1990s*, in "China Perspectives", n. 56, 2004, pp. 34-44.

<sup>34</sup> G. SCHUBERT, S. BRAIG, *How to Face a Rising China? The DPP's Identity Politics and Cross-Strait Relations at the End of the Chen Shui-bian Era*, in J. DAMM, G. SCHUBERT, (eds) "Taiwanese Identity from domestic, regional and global perspectives", Routledge, 2012.

<sup>35</sup> A. LIPINSKY, A. SCHICK-CHEN (eds), *Justice restored? Between rehabilitation and reconciliation in China and Taiwan*, Peter Lang, 2012.

A dynamic partially fueled by the relationships that the post-communist parties had developed with Beijing but above all by the genuine belief, shared with other Western countries, that progressive democratization of China is linked to the process of the country's conversion to a capitalist economy<sup>36</sup>. An approach became even more relevant during Ma Ying-jeou's two presidential mandates<sup>37</sup>, from 2008 to 2016, when relations between Taipei and Beijing experienced a period of détente that led to unprecedented economic cooperation<sup>38</sup> and institutional dialogue<sup>39</sup>. A path that culminated in the Singapore meeting with President Xi Jinping in November 2015<sup>40</sup>, a historic and first meeting between the leaders of the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China. In the Ma presidency years, the whole world looked favorably on the gradual rapprochement between the two sides of the Strait. Italy and other Western powers, including the United States, hoped for a joint solution to the Taiwanese issue, while the success of Chinese development seemed unstoppable, and Beijing's ambitions seemed exclusively focused on economic development. During these years, relations between Italy and Taiwan were carried out by the Italy-Taiwan Interparliamentary Friendship Group, and from 2008 also by the Taiwan-Italy Interparliamentary Friendship Group at the Taiwanese Parliament which was replaced in December 2016 by the Association for Interparliamentary Friendship between Taiwan and Italy. The visits of Italian parliamentary delegations to the island became the main driver of institutional cooperation between the two countries. The missions attempted, through parliamentary interpellations and other spaces for debate in the institutions, to develop informal relations with Taipei. But the efforts seemed to clash with the limits of the One China Policy, a

<sup>36</sup> P. CABESTAN, J. DELISLE (eds), *Political Changes in Taiwan Under Ma Ying-jeou. Partisan Conflict, Policy Choices, External Constraints and Security Challenges*, Routledge, 2014.

<sup>37</sup> A. BECKERSHOFF, G. SCHUBERT (eds), *Assessing the Presidency of Ma Ying-jiu in Taiwan: Hopeful Beginning, Hopeless End?*, Routledge, 2018.

<sup>38</sup> Y. MATSUDA, *Cross-Strait Relations under the Ma Ying-jeou administration: From Economic to Political Dependence?*, in "Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies", vol. 4, n. 2, 2015.

<sup>39</sup> W. HU (ed.), *New Dynamics in Cross-Taiwan Strait Relations. How Far Can the Rapprochement Go?*, Routledge, 2013.

<sup>40</sup> W. CHAI, *Xi Jinping and Ma Ying-jeou's Historic 2015 Meeting in Singapore: An Interpretation*, in "Asian Affairs: An American Review", n. 4, 2015, pp. 195-202.

general disinterest in the Taiwanese issue and the low institutional relevance of the members of the various missions. Since Minister Prandini's visit, only two Italian undersecretaries visited Taiwan, none of them in their official capacity. In 2007 Gianni Verneti - from the center-left Margherita/L'Ulivo group - Undersecretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, went to Taiwan – in a private and non-official capacity (he claimed to have gone on 'holiday'). In 2013, Salvatore Mazzamuto, member of the Monti government and at that time Undersecretary of the Ministry of Justice went to Taiwan when the Italian government had already announced its resignation. The main successes in Italian-Taiwanese relations were the establishment in 2010 of the Italian-Taiwanese Economic, Industrial and Financial Cooperation Forum which supports the strengthening of exchanges between Italian and Taiwanese companies<sup>41</sup>. Probably the biggest achievement has been the double tax law approved in April 2015 by the Italian government to avoid double taxation in relations between Italy and the Republic of China-Taiwan. The peculiarity of law 62/2015 is that it does not ratify an agreement made with Taiwan, due to the limitations of One China Policy. An analysis of the private correspondence shows a dense activity of promotion of Taiwanese interests within Italian political institutions. These initiatives were the main driving force behind the development of Italian-Taiwanese relations, an activity that is exercised both in the form of institutional pressure and the organization of parliamentary work, drafting of documents to support individual legislative initiatives. This can be described as a lobbying activities aimed at redefining the Italian approach towards Taiwan. Those actions are carried out under the supervision of both Taiwanese institutions in Taipei and the Taiwanese representative office in Rome and they can be clearly defined as a way to develop a “channel of influence” in order overcome the limitations that Taiwan's international status places on its own diplomacy. The activities were not met with great interest - everything connected to Taiwan was considered of only marginal interest for Italian interests, and any attempt to promote ties with Taipei was dangerous in view of the possible repercussions on relations between Rome and Beijing.

<sup>41</sup> The Forum is co-chaired, for the Italian side, by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and for the Taiwanese side by the Ministry of Economic Affairs.

## 6. *The US PRC hegemonic clash and a new role for Taiwan*

When Tsai Ing-wen became president with a landslide victory in January 2016, the status of relations between Taipei and Beijing changed drastically. A deafening silence pervaded Cross Strait relations as the geopolitical and strategic competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China became increasingly evident. Washington's strategic documents<sup>42</sup> reiterate how Taiwan's security is essential to the United States while Beijing's increasingly aggressive military actions and statements alerted the entire world. The Taiwanese issue is more present in the Italian media, too, while Taiwan is increasingly represented as a pluralist democracy in contrast to the authoritarian regime in Beijing. Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the methods of containing the contagion in Taiwan, *i.e.* a series of actions that did not rely on coercion and bans<sup>43</sup>, caught the attention of the media particularly in comparison with the Chinese strategy. Taiwan became an important element for Italian posture in foreign policy, even if the natural radius of action remained limited to the wider Mediterranean Region and the traditional areas of interest the concept of Taiwan as like-minded partner was increasingly making its way into Italian politics. Taiwan security started to be increasingly associated with an approach based on values, in a dimension clearly marked by a dichotomy between democratic values and authoritarianism. Taiwan entered, for the first time, into an Italian electoral campaign, with the meeting between Giorgia Meloni, whose party emerged as clear favourite of Italy's general elections, with the Taiwanese diplomatic representative in Italy at the time, Andrea Sing Ying Lee<sup>44</sup>. In addition

<sup>42</sup> The two main strategic documents produced by the Trump and Biden administrations respectively agree in affirming Taiwan's crucial role for US strategic security: WHITE HOUSE, *The national security strategy of the United States of America*, 2017, [bit.ly/3AguHrj](https://bit.ly/3AguHrj); WHITE HOUSE, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, 2021, [bit.ly/3AgAkWL](https://bit.ly/3AgAkWL).

<sup>43</sup> Wang, C. J., CY, Y. N. & Brook R. H. , Response to COVID-19 in Taiwan: Big Data Analytics, New Technology, and Proactive Testing. *JAMA*, 323(14), 2020, pp. 1341-1342.

A. W. CHANG, *Making Our Best Move with Audrey Tang and Taiwan's Digital Democracy*, in "American Quarterly", vol. 73, n. 2, 2021, pp. 363-369; S. PELAGGI, *Covid-19 e il modello taiwanese*. Geopolitica.info, <https://bit.ly/3b9bz6a>, visited 15 October 2023.

<sup>44</sup> IL TEMPO, *Giorgia Meloni incontra l'ambasciatore di Taiwan. Il segnale sulla politica estera di governo*, 26 July 2022, <https://www.iltempo.it/politica/2022/07/26/news/giorgia-meloni-fratelli-ditalia-politica-estera-incontro-ambasciatore-taiwan-cina-governo-32545406/>.



to the choice to meet Taiwan's representative in Italy, the statement in which Giorgia Meloni referred to Andrea Lee as the "Taiwan ambassador to Italy"<sup>45</sup> stood a very precise semantic choice. Current Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni gave an interview the main Taiwanese news agency Central News Agency (CNA), in which she clearly condemned China's military threats toward Taiwan and foreshadowed the adoption of EU sanctions in case of a Chinese invasion<sup>46</sup>. As Michael Malinconi stressed "Taiwan represents a valid test for Italy's ambitions on the global stage. Rome could play a significant role in preserving deterrence, improving communication, and reducing the risk of escalation in the Taiwan Strait, while showing at the same time its commitment to the defense and promotion of democratic values and freedoms"<sup>47</sup>.

### *Conclusions*

Relations between Rome and Taipei remain bound, similarly to other members of the European Union, by the limits of the One China Policy and the need to keep an open dialogue with Beijing. Necessity linked both to the importance of the Chinese market and to the defense of Italian industrial interests in the PRC. However, recent statements and actions show an unprecedented approach, which - although not radically modifying Italian policy towards Taiwan - reflect significant changes. In particular, the aforementioned changes are relevant within the complex of dynamic of Taiwanese diplomatic relations, regulated by a sort of semantic compromise accepted by all involved actors. Reconstructing the diplomatic relations between two countries is a complex task that often goes beyond the actions of the respective diplomacies and the official declarations of the governments, in the case of Taiwan the peculiarity - and the limits - of Taipei's international

<sup>45</sup> CHINA NEWS AGENCY, *Italy's PM hopeful has concerns over China, vows closer ties with Taiwan*, <https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202209230009>, consulted on 10 July 2023.

<sup>46</sup> M. MALINCONI, *The New Italian Government Signals a Closer Relationship with Taiwan*, in "Global Taiwan Brief", Vol. 7, Issue 23, 2022.

<sup>47</sup> M. MALINCONI, *Italy's Taiwan Policy at a Crossroads*, China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe, <https://chinaobservers.eu/italys-taiwan-policy-at-a-crossroads/>, consulted 14 September 2023.

projection further hinder the understanding of the dynamics in the field. Declarations and verbal support acquire enormous relevance within a framework regulated by semantic expressions. After 2020, European states have been asked to express a position on the Taiwanese issue, partially abandoning the traditional reluctance to express a clear position on the matter.

**Riassunto** - L'articolo analizza la storia delle relazioni diplomatiche tra Italia e Taiwan dagli anni '80 ad oggi, attraverso sia gli scambi istituzionali tra Roma e Taipei, sia le interazioni informali che hanno sopperito alla mancanza di relazioni diplomatiche ufficiali tra i due paesi. La ricerca si basa sui documenti d'archivio, perlopiù inediti, provenienti dall'Ufficio Italiano di Promozione Economica, Commerciale e Culturale a Taipei. La vicinanza della sinistra italiana alle posizioni di Pechino, la forte volontà degli ambienti industriali di penetrare il mercato cinese e l'azione di lobbying per gli interessi taiwanesi portata avanti dalla destra conservatrice italiana sono gli elementi essenziali che hanno caratterizzato il percorso delle relazioni italo taiwanesi sin dal secondo dopoguerra. L'incredibile sviluppo dell'economia taiwanese, contestuale al progressivo isolamento diplomatico del paese, ha generato una inedita capacità di attrazione nei confronti di Taiwan nel periodo preso in esame

nella ricerca. L'avanzamento delle relazioni italo taiwanesi negli anni Novanta è riconducibile sia all'azione di lobbying di Taiwan in Italia sia alla concessione di importanti appalti pubblici ad aziende italiane. Un percorso interrotto, nei primi anni Duemila, dall'ascesa economica e industriale della Cina; la capacità di attrazione di Taiwan diminuisce drasticamente e le relazioni tra Roma e Taipei si complicano all'interno dei limiti della One China Policy. L'approccio revisionistico di Pechino e la crescente competizione egemonica tra la Repubblica Popolare cinese e gli Stati Uniti modificano in maniera radicale la percezione di Taiwan, e conseguentemente lo stato delle relazioni italo taiwanesi. La questione taiwanese diventa un elemento rilevante per la politica estera italiana, tradizionalmente lontana dal quadrante Asia Pacifico, mentre le relazioni con Taipei sono sempre più associate a una dimensione valoriale, segnata dalla dicotomia tra valori democratici e autoritarismo.