

INTERVIEW: ANDREA ORSINI

Behind China's calm façade storms brew over Taiwan.

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At the 80th session of the United Nations General Assembly, Chinese President Xi Jinping presented himself as a 'responsible' leader, in contrast to Trump's unpredictability. However, behind this façade lies a belligerent policy. The People's

Republic of China is continuing to marginalise and exclude Taiwan, which it replaced at the UN, from all international forums.

After the many wars of the 20th century, the Western Pacific is once again becoming an area of conflict. The *Daily Compass* discussed this issue with Andrea Orsini, an MP for Forza Italia, and the Vice President of the Italian Delegation to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, who has just returned from Taiwan.

Mr Orsini, the US diplomatic representation in Taipei accuses the People's Republic of China of using historical revisionism as a weapon to isolate Taiwan. In what way is Beijing rewriting history?

China claims that the Allied leaders' meetings during World War II, in particular the Cairo Conference in 1943 and the Potsdam Conference in 1945, stipulated that Japan was to return 'Formosa and the Pescadores Islands' (now known as Taiwan) to China. Japan accepted these conditions when it surrendered on board the battleship Missouri in Tokyo Bay. However, the Chinese position is incorrect both formally and substantively, because the Cairo and Potsdam conferences were not legal acts, but merely political and military directives. Moreover, the Chinese leadership at the time was firmly in the hands of Chiang Kai-shek. The only legally binding document was the San Francisco Peace Treaty, in which Japan renounced all claims to Formosa, but did not specify to whom it was relinquishing sovereignty. Furthermore, the UN General Assembly vote, which recognises the People's Republic of China as the sole representative of China and excludes Taiwan, makes no mention of sovereignty over the island. Therefore, Beijing's legal arguments are flawed and intended to increase political and military pressure to isolate Taiwan.

You were in Taiwan last week. What was the atmosphere like on the island?

I must admit, I was surprised. I thought I was arriving in a besieged stronghold. Instead, there was a very serene atmosphere, at least apparently. During our meetings with various Taiwanese authorities, they barely touched upon the subject of China. Their answers to my questions on the subject were also very reassuring. According to the Taiwanese leadership, the price of an attack on Taiwan — a powerfully armed country — would be so high for China, both militarily and politically, that no Chinese government would really do it. They call this the 'hedgehog strategy'. The little animal knows it could never survive a confrontation with a large predator, but if it deploys its quills, the predator will be hurt and avoid attacking it. A senior American official summed up the situation to me as follows: 'Taiwan could become Xi Jinping's Ukraine'. The Taiwanese are much more concerned about diplomatic isolation and their inability to participate in

international organisations such as the WHO, and they are determined to increase economic trade with Europe and the US. In simple terms, one could say that they are more concerned about tariffs than aircraft carriers.

Taiwan has always relied on undeclared US military support due to the One China policy, whereby the US recognises Beijing as the sole Chinese government, not Taipei. But with an isolationist Trump, might they not find themselves alone?

Before arriving in Taiwan, I attended several meetings in Hawaii and California with the US military leadership responsible for the Pacific theatre. They were very attentive to an issue that concerns the United States much more than Europe. When I asked them what their strategic priority was, they all replied, 'The Taiwan Strait'. Trump's somewhat erratic isolationism concerns the Atlantic much more than the Pacific.

What mood did you perceive among the American leadership?

Everyone I spoke to, including the top military leadership and my colleagues in the US Congress (both Republicans and Democrats) who participated in the NATO Parliamentary Assembly mission with me, expressed great determination and confidence in their deterrence capability.

Is the US's numerical and technological advantage sufficient to deter any Chinese aggression?

China has experienced impressive exponential growth since 2000, surpassing the United States and its allies — Australia, Japan and South Korea — in every type of weapon system apart from aircraft carriers. However, the West maintains technological superiority, as well as superior training, which currently guarantees credible deterrence. China's technological capabilities are improving rapidly, but the United States is not standing still in terms of research or the development of new armaments.

While Italy recognises the One China principle, Taiwan is a friendly democracy.

What can be done to better protect Taiwan?

While Italy recognises the One China principle, it, like the West as a whole, rejects any non-consensual changes to the Taiwan Strait. Clearly, our military options are limited, although the recent deployment of an Italian naval group led by the aircraft carrier Cavour in those waters was much appreciated in the face of continuous Chinese provocations and threats. Taiwan is asking us to intensify commercial collaboration and to support Taipei's admission to international technical and commercial organisations. However, I would like to raise a point that surprised me somewhat. Taiwan is no longer under the control of Chiang Kai-shek, who refused to be buried on the island — his

coffin is kept on a pedestal — in the hope of reconquering China and being buried in his hometown. Today, Taipei is reasonably not thinking of a reconquest at all and does not claim sovereignty over China. The governing Democratic Party, born on the left but now the most stridently anti-Chinese, envisages Taiwan as an independent state with no connection to China. Ideally, it would like to be recognised by the People's Republic, but Xi obviously rejects this. In opposition, Chiang Kai-shek's party, the Kuomintang, still sees itself as linked to China, but envisages an intensification of relations that would one day lead to unification. Both therefore accept the principle of one China, albeit for different reasons. However, both parties are determined to defend Taiwan's freedom and its extraordinarily successful political and economic model, which is resounding proof of the superiority of liberal capitalism. In terms of GDP per capita, calibrated to purchasing power parity, Taiwan ranks 13th in the world. Communist China, which seems to be breaking record after record, is 77th. Incidentally, Italy is 32nd.