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Sino-American Relations between Obama and Trump's Presidencies: the case of Taiwan

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Introduction

The following thesis will discuss Sino-American relations, focusing on Taiwan, during the Obama and Trump presidencies. The intent is to analyse the differences between the two presidencies and to understand the reasons for the shifts in the foreign policy between the two presidents. The research question is, therefore, centred on this issue, and is laid down as follows: “Why have the changes between the Obama and Trump presidencies affected Sino-American relations regarding the Taiwanese issue?”.

Before analysing the Sino-American relations in the time span covered by the two presidencies (2009-2021), this thesis will provide historical background. Chapter 1 will be structured accordingly. It will discuss the three main actors under analysis, Taiwan, the People’s Republic of China, and the United States. The first three sections will be organised symmetrically: each one will start with an overview of the geographic, economic, social, and political realities of the actor analysed, followed then by the examination of its recent history, to contextualise the observations on the two presidencies and the theoretical approach within a specific historical framework. Taiwan's history will be analysed from the moment in which its rise and economic growth started, therefore before World War Two, under Japanese rule, and will then proceed by unfolding the second half of the 20th century. Similarly, the period chosen for a historical analysis of China will start with the establishment of the Communist rule, after the Civil War, and will then proceed with an analysis of the evolution of party leadership that includes the Mao Zedong era and the consequent opening up under Deng Xiaoping. The chosen period of America history roughly corresponds to that of Chinese. Indeed, since the end of World War Two, the United States has significantly expanded their sphere of influence: this led the United States to be the sole and undisputed hegemon in the world after the end of the Cold War. Such a background is fundamental to understanding the causes and the historical patterns that led to the confrontation between China and the United States: an attempt is made to explain how, in the past seventy years, the domestic and international situation of each of the actors involved has changed, concurring, eventually, to the current scenario. In the first chapter, the bone of contention will be briefly discussed: the bilateral and international relations between the three actors will be discussed, pointing out the milestones that shaped the current situation; moreover, the fundamental concepts of One China Policy and Principle will be addressed, as well as the American position on them.

The second chapter will discuss the issue subject of the thesis in more detail. Indeed, after the historical framework, this chapter will focus on unfolding Obama and Trump’s presidencies. The first two sections of the chapter will be, however, focused on the counterparts' administration in that period of time. Therefore, Taiwanese and Chinese administrations that had to interact and engage with the two presidents under analysis will be addressed. The chapter's third and fourth parts of the chapter will be symmetrical: the third one about President Obama and the fourth one about President Trump. After introducing the President’s foreign policy, the bilateral relations with China and Taiwan will be considered.

Lastly, chapter three will provide the theoretical framework. As it will be discussed in the chapter, a theoretical approach based on realism was chosen for the analysis of the two presidencies. This choice is motivated mainly by the confrontational aspect of Sino-American relations and the belief that China threatens the American role as a hegemon. Indeed, Mearsheimer and Waltz's theories will be analysed to understand how the two countries have tackled their respective position and how the balance of powers may change in the future. Moreover, Schelling's strategic Realism will also be discussed: the importance of the threat in the process of bargaining that Schelling considered the basis of international relations will be contextualised in the Sino-American relations framework. The differences in the approach of the two presidents will be discussed under the lens of Mead's archetypes of U.S. Foreign Policies. Despite the two presidents presenting several differences in their values, communication style and overall approach to the world, realism points out how they are indeed pursuing the same national interest, which is the maintenance of American supremacy, avoiding an escalation. The risk of a potential war will be analysed in the last section of chapter three, where, building upon Allison's concept of Thucydides's trap, the thesis will focus on understanding the possibility of a military escalation. The answer to that question is impossible to give, but Allison proposes several examples that present a similar situation, where the emergence of a rising power threatens a ruling power.

In conclusion, the two presidencies will be shortly compared, highlighting the differences and the similarities, and scrutinising the implications they have on Sino-American, Cross-Strait and Taiwan-U.S. relations.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The first chapter of this thesis aims to introduce the problem to contextualise the following analysis in a precise framework.

To achieve this goal, the chapter will be divided into four sections: the first three sections will present the main actors, while the last section will include a brief analysis of the *casus belli*.

The introduction briefly explains the content of each section. The first three parts are symmetrical in structure: each introduces the actor under analysis, stressing its importance in the international scenario. They will then include a historical analysis of the relevant periods in order to explain, later on, the current situation. Finally, the last part of the chapter will be focused on the discussion of the bone of contention, as it will address the issue of ambiguity between the People's Republic of China (mainland China) and the Republic of China (Taiwan).

The first part of the chapter (1.1) will present Taiwan, briefly analysing its strategic importance, both geographically and economically (1.1.1). It will then examine the land's history, which is divided into four main chronologically ordered sections. The first section covers the period from 1895 to 1945, 5 decades during which the island was dominated by the Japanese (1.1.2). The second one will analyse the brief period of Chinese domination between the end of the war and the beginning of an independent government under the leadership of Chang Kai-shek (1.1.3). The latter's rule will be the focus of the third section, which will analyse the period known as the White Terror (1.1.4). Finally, the process of democratisation and modernisation will be addressed (1.1.5).

The second part of the chapter (1.2) is devoted to China. As said, the structure will be analogous to the first part. After a general economic and political introduction (1.2.1), the main historical events of China will be analysed to contextualise the object of research. Thus, it will briefly discuss the period of the Civil War that led to the separation from Taiwan and the founding of the communist party (1.2.2). The latter is dealt with in the following part, focusing on the party's expansion and Mao Zedong's role (1.2.3). Finally, the most recent years will be examined: from the Tiananmen Protest to the rise of China to its emergence as one of the most influential countries in the world (1.2.3).

The final actors shall be presented in the third section (1.3). Again, the first part will mainly provide an overview of the USA's economic and political importance (1.3.1). Then, the most relevant periods of American history will be analysed: from the fundamental role after World War II in shaping Europe (1.3.2) to its fierce opposition to Communism, with the imposition of a specific value system during the Cold War (1.3.3). Finally, the years between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries will be considered, as the United States faced internal challenges, such as terrorism, and its position as the sole superpower was questioned as the rise of China came to seem irreversible (1.3.4).

The last section of the first chapter (1.4) will represent the bone of contention. It will focus on understanding China's and Taiwan's claims of being the only China recognisable, and both the actors' international and bilateral relations will then be analysed (1.4.1). A brief digression on the 1972 turning point will be included in the same section, as Taiwan had to cede its seat in the United Nations to Beijing that year. To fully comprehend the status quo, explaining the One China policy and how the two Chinas see it is fundamental. Therefore, its historical roots and official status will be analysed in the second part of this section (1.4.2). Finally, American ties with Taiwan – despite the USA do not recognise it as a sovereign state – and its ambiguity on One China policy will be analysed in the very last part of the chapter (1.4.3).

1.1 Taiwan and its Importance

1.1.1 Taiwanese Geography, Political System and Economy: unveiling its Potential

Taiwan – whose official name is the Republic of China – is composed of one main island and another 167 smaller islands. The official government website states that the total surface is 36197 square kilometres. Taiwan has 23.2 million inhabitants, concentrated on the main island and in the capital city Taipei and its metropolitan area, in the flat territories on the Western part of Formosa. With an area roughly the size of the Netherlands, it is one of Asia's most densely populated land and more populous than three-fourths of the world. As for its geographical location, it is of immediate understanding its strategic importance: being located in the West Pacific, east off the southwestern coast of the People's Republic of China. It is separated from the continent by the Taiwan Strait, which is 110 to 140 km wide, while it is between the East China Sea on the north and the South China Sea in the south. Without a land border, it shares its maritime borders with China, Japan, and the Philippines, which are 270 kilometres south.

Due to its geographical location, it is of strategic importance, as it lies in the middle of the various economic routes that cross the China Sea.

The official governmental data claims that 95% of the population belongs to the Han ethnicity, which is also the predominant one in China, and this predominance has been the outcome of years of immigration from the mainland; for this reason, the most spoken language is Mandarin. Nonetheless, there is a good number of native tribes – seventeen – and a conspicuous international community attracted by the flourishing and rising economy.

Indeed, the country is economically interesting: it is one of the “Four Asian Tigers”, alongside Singapore, Hong Kong, and South Korea – a group of countries that has experienced a steady and noticeable growth since the '60s. Taiwan, in particular, can rely on solid exports, particularly in the technological and semiconductor field, producing intermediate goods to be assembled elsewhere, increasing its strategic importance. Its main trading partner is China, followed by the United States in the geographical area. As stated

on the Nasdaq website, where a report on the Taiwanese economy can be found¹, the backbone of the Taiwanese economy is small and medium enterprises (SMEs), which entered the high technology sectors in the 1980s. As mentioned, Taiwan's information and communication technology industry is among the best in the world, relying on high-skilled, yet relatively inexpensive, manufacturers. Taiwan is fundamental in the semiconductor market, occupying roughly 63% of the world share in 2020, according to CNBC². Specifically, one company is the world leader, the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturer Company (TSMC), which alone holds 54% of the global market share. Taiwanese semiconductors are indispensable for producing most electronic devices worldwide, from smartphones to car sensors, from industrial machines to war drones.

Taipei is classified as a high-ranking economy by the World Bank; it has been a member of the World Trade Organization since 2002 and is ranked among the best places to invest. Furthermore, according to the Nasdaq website, it is among the five countries with the highest foreign currency reserves and twelfth in gold reserves. The growth forecast is stable, and despite being already among the thirtieth highest GDP, it is expected to cross the 1 trillion mark by 2027, according to the International Money Fund Data. From these various economic data, it is clear that Taiwan's strategic position is not the only factor that concurs to put the island at the centre of the international scenario.

The most controversial aspect to be mentioned in Taiwan's snapshot is its political system and recognition. The official government website states that Taiwan is a democracy in which the president and vice president are directly elected every four years. The actual president is Tsai Ing-Wen, a member of the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), elected in 2016 and re-elected in 2020. In the international scenario, it is not recognised as an independent by the main powers (such as the United States, the People's Republic of China, Russia and the European Union), while it enjoys full diplomatic recognition only from 13 sovereign states: Belize, Eswatini, Guatemala, Haiti, the Holy See, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, Paraguay, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Tuvalu. However, its diplomatic ties are quite extended, with offices in 101 other states. Despite not being recognised as a sovereign country by the vast majority of the United Nations members, it is de facto independent and sovereign, managing to enforce its laws. If we accept the definition of a country customarily used in the international relations theory, we can state that Taiwan has all the required elements. Indeed, it has a population that enjoys rights and freedom as well as performs duties towards the state, it has a clearly defined territory, then it has a government with all three branches (executive, legislative and judiciary) that is able to enforce its sovereignty over the land. Finally, it has internal sovereignty, as it is sovereign within its borders; the question is to what extent it has external sovereignty, as it cannot participate in the United Nations assembly and therefore it does not enjoy the same rights – on an international level – as all the other members states.

After this brief introduction, intended to quickly present the bone of contention, this thesis will proceed by historically framing the happenings and causes that led to the current situation. Therefore, the following

¹ Bajpai, P. (2022) An Overview of Taiwan's Economy. Nasdaq.

² Lee, Y.N. (2021) 2 charts show how much the world depends on Taiwan for Semiconductors. CNBC.

part will be divided into periods that predate those analysed in this thesis. However, I will discuss only the more recent history, which is relevant to understanding the current situation.

1.1.2 A historical background: from the Japanese domination to World War II

Over the centuries, Taiwan has been subject to several dominations and part of different colonial empires. After some brief experience under Dutch and Portuguese colonisation in the seventeenth century and after a short span of self-rule, however, it was part of China for over two centuries. This part will focus mainly on the period following the Chinese rule, hence from the Japanese colonisation onward.

After China lost the First Sino-Japanese War, Taiwan and the Pescadores Islands were ceded to the Japanese Empire as a part of the Shimonoseki treaty. As the news reached Taiwan, the island's inhabitants proclaimed a Republic, willing to oppose the new coloniser. However, the resistance was feeble, and Japan managed to overcome it quickly and, with no help from the mainland, the island had to surrender. Soon after, the island became part of the Japanese Empire, which imposed itself with a firm hand, yet enforcing enlightened policies to boost the economy and the infrastructures of the newly acquired territory. In the words of John F. Copper, “Japanese colonial policy may be described as beneficial and progressive on the one hand yet discriminatory and predatory on the other. It was efficient and in many ways enlightened, but it did not lay the groundwork for self-rule, much less democracy.”³ Nonetheless, it indeed consistently increased the infrastructure system, building new roads, harbours, and communication facilities on the island, which also became the first place after Japan to use electricity at the dawn of the twentieth century. These innovations led to the institutions of small enterprises and industries, along with several improvements in agriculture, which was the main activity on the island. Furthermore, Japan enforced a protectionist economy, favouring local entrepreneurial activities and slowly prohibiting foreign investments. Overall, Japan was truly beneficial to the island's prosperity: not only from the economic point of view but also from the social one. Indeed, the population became better educated, and some diseases, such as the bubonic plague, that were endemic in China were eradicated. Generally speaking, Taiwan became a leader in several fields, second only to Japan itself. It has to be said that it was still considered a colony, therefore not as important as the mainland: although several social and economic reforms were carried out, they were usually enforced with little consideration of people's will. Moreover, Japan did not implement or encourage the settling of Japanese people on the island, as the latter was still considered inferior. However, the balance of Japanese rule before World War (1895-1939) may be considered extremely positive: an incredible economic growth and a social system made the population forget about Chinese domination. Moreover, Japan benefitted as well, and maybe even more than the island, from this domination: the two economies were strictly interlinked, and more than 90% of the island's exports were directed towards the empire.

³ Copper, J. F. (2019). *Taiwan* (7th ed.). New York: Taylor and Francis.

Despite some concessions to democracy in Taiwan – even if only on a small basis and for almost useless posts, as Japanese officials always retained veto power – Japan had to rethink their approach towards the colony on the verge of war. Indeed, in 1931 the conflict between Japan and China broke out with the Mukden Incident, when an explosion destroyed a railway owned by the Japanese in Manchuria: it has been claimed that Japanese officials planted the bomb themselves to have a pretext to start retaliating and invade the region. A couple of months later, the region was administrated by local Japanese authorities, even if officially, the new state of Manchukuo was created. This incident, for many historians, marks the beginning of World War II in Asia. Tensions started to grow from this point onward, leading to a full-scale war between Japan and China in 1937, with the Japanese invasion of China and the so-called Marco Polo Bridge Incident, when a handful of Chinese and Japanese clashed and exchanged fire thirty miles away from Beijing. As J.B. Crowley says, it was the beginning of the war as “this minor fracas precipitated a sequence of events that soon propelled Japan into full-scale hostilities on the mainland.”⁴

Taiwan was of paramount importance to Japan; it was technologically advanced, and because of its strategic position, the Japanese used the island as a military base. As a result, several war-related industries spawned, while others were converted to support the Japanese war effort. Economically wise, the first years of the war in the Pacific were prosperous for the island, as it was fundamental in supplying Japan; moreover, despite it being a feasible target for the Allies during the war, it did not suffer any significant bombing – limited to strategic and military sites – nor invasion during the war.

As said, a big challenge was posed to the Japanese ruler: it has to be remembered that the vast majority of the island’s inhabitants were Chinese, and therefore they were actively contributing to a war against what, for many, was the real homeland. Among

high ranking Japanese officials, the island's status appeared to be one that had to be dealt with. If the colonisation was based on the Western models and was even justified by the same ideals and reasonings, as pointed out by Ye: “Japan, which by the time it colonised Taiwan had reformed its law along European lines and emulated a modern and European-style regime.”⁵, it has to be said that doubts on the very same issues on how to treat and conceive the colony arose. Indeed, different streams were present in the Empire during the last decade of Japanese rule. While some proposed a more brutal ruling over the island, fearing retaliation from the Chinese population, others suggested a complete annexation: the latter view was officially endorsed by Japanese rulers, even if, due to the presupposed inferiority against the mainland, this policy was never enforced fully.⁶

As mentioned above, during the war, Taiwan played a fundamental role, considered as “unsinkable aircraft carrier” by Japan – even if this definition will be used referred to Taiwan by U.S General MacArthur

⁴ Crowley, J.B. A reconsideration of Marco Polo Bridge Incident. *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Volume 22, Issue 3, May 1963, pp. 277 – 291.

⁵ Ye, R. (2018). *The Colonisation and Settlement of Taiwan, 1684–1945* (1st ed.). New York: Taylor and Francis.

⁶ Lamley, H.J. (1968). *Taiwan Under Japanese Rule, 1895–1945*, in Rubinstein (ed), *Taiwan: A New History*, pp. 240-242.

only in the fifties— and as an essential supplier, it was even served as a pool where to draft soldiers: more than 200.000 Taiwanese were enrolled in the Japanese army and fought in the war, with some 30.000 casualties. As the war drew to a close, the tragic outcome for Japan was foreseeable, the first talks about the island's status began, with several options on the table. The international community's view was not homogeneous; if some pushed for a reunification with the mainland, others favoured an independent state or at least a Western protectorate. Even Mao Zedong, who was not in power, claimed he would have pushed for Taiwan's independence. At the Cairo Conference in December 1943, where Chang Kai-shek was present among the United States and the United Kingdom, Taiwan was included among the “lost territories” to be reannexed to China at the end of the war; the same conclusion was reached again in Potsdam in 1945 when Japan's defeat was imminent. The two treaties were enforced at the end of the war, and in 1945 all the Japanese on the island fled, moving back to their homeland: this group, representing roughly one-eighteenth of the population, was mainly composed of officials, entrepreneurs, soldiers, and police officers.

After fifty years of foreign domination, Chinese rule was re-established. However, sentiments among the inhabitants were quite confused and surely not homogeneous. Even the scholarly sources have differing views on what the population desired at that moment, and if the entirety of the academic community reports some degree of sense of liberation, it is quite impossible to outline with certainty the various feelings of the population. Indeed, while Copper suggests that the people accepted the Chinese re-institution without immense joy, Huang talks about an overall nostalgia towards China, still considered by many as the mainland. These two views are quite opposites, but they summarise the mixed feelings towards the population: if Japan was indeed to blame for the colonialist approach, the several improvements brought by foreign domination were undeniable. Moreover, China did nothing to oppose the settlement of Japan at first moment, and many on the island felt betrayed. Finally, they fought a war against China, and many were killed or wounded; all these factors must be considered. On the other hand, the hate towards the conquerors is undoubtedly a widespread feeling, and the sense of nostalgia is readily justifiable because they shared language, ethnicity, and culture with China, where Taiwan had its roots. Huang, in his work, cites several interviews and sources from this period, and his conclusions are the following: “They were ecstatic in two ways when they first made contact with China: individually, when they went to the mainland on their own, and, collectively, when the Chinese rulers came over to receive Taiwan from the defeated Japanese.”⁷ As we can see, Taiwanese people were profoundly divided: several factions and ideologies acquired popularity, and while many were “ecstatic” to reconnect with their motherland and its regime, others sought independence or at least a degree of democracy. Some smaller factions asked for international help, willing to become either a United States protectorate or a United Nations protectorate. The idea that it should enjoy a special status, because of its past under the Japanese regime was quite spread among the population.

⁷ Huang, C. (2017). *Taiwan in Transformation 1895-2005* (1st ed.). New York: Taylor and Francis.

If the analysis of the popular response to the last change in government may be quite difficult and not very important for the aims of this thesis, it is clear that Japanese settlers fled the island, Chinese ones entered it, establishing a new government and making it a province of mainland China.

1.1.3 A historical background: Post-war Taiwan under Chinese government, before 1949

If the sentiments before the installation of the new government were mixed, however the sense of nostalgia for the Chinese past rapidly vanished. Indeed, the newly established government behaved no differently from the previous one, and if it did behave differently in some respects, it was never for the better. On October 25th, 1945, Taiwan officially became part of the Republic of China, and if some islanders hoped for some form of democracy, they were quickly disappointed. Chang Kai-shek, leader of the Kuomintang, at that moment still in power in China, appointed Ch'en Yi as governor of Taiwan, handing him nearly absolute power in the administration of the country. During the first year of Chinese rule, the Taiwanese were treated with no respect for their past: China considered them as traitors, having them collaborated with Japan, and as inferior because of the cultural mix they had been exposed to. Furthermore, Mandarin Chinese differed from the language spoken on the island, and the government wanted to impose it on the population. The social and economic situation rapidly precipitated, and Taiwan, from being one of the most advanced industries in Asia, became a cradle for social unrest. After some incidents where civilians were killed or imprisoned for no reason, the unrest became a real rebellion after the so-called 228 Massacre⁸. The incident broke out after some police officers hit with the back of a gun a woman who was selling contraband cigarettes on the streets to make a living. Soon after, a crowd gathered on the streets, and a Chinese inspector fired, killing a person. Riots were spreading around the island, and military forces had to be recalled from the mainland to crush them. It is estimated that in the 228 incident resulted in 18000 to 28000 casualties among the protesters. It has been claimed that mainland Chinese wanted revenge for the several killings of the Taiwanese and persecuted anyone who did not speak Taiwanese during the uprisings. Ch'en Yi was considered as one of the main culprits for the happening, and after the incident Chang Kai-shek had him deposed along with several other high ranking officials, and state control was significantly decreased: several enterprises that were confiscated and placed under direct governmental administration were returned to the previous owners and a milder government was enforced. However, the last happenings had profoundly changed the feelings of Taiwanese, as the population was now completely alienated from the Chinese mainland and even the Japanese domination was reconsidered in a positive light.

The status quo, nevertheless, was ready to change soon after, as the events in the continent, where the Civil War was occurring, were taking a drastic turn in favour of Mao Zedong Communist Party and Chang Kai-shek was ready to flee China and repair in the island of Formosa.

⁸ Also referred to as er er ba, 2-28 Incident or February 28th Incident; 228 stands for the date on which it began: February 28th, 1947.

1.1.4 A historical background: Chiang Kai-shek and the White Terror

After the defeat that Chang Kai-shek and his faction, the Kuomintang (KMT), suffered in the Civil War, the leader sought repair on the island, where he initially wanted to regroup and organise a counterattack against mainland China. However, when he arrived with some 1.5 million people, the conditions in Taiwan were terrible: the economy collapsed after the war under the Ch'en Yi administration, and so were the social conditions after the 228 Incident and the diffused poverty as a result of the centralisation policies imposed by China. Soon it was clear that Chiang Kai-shek did not have the power to overthrow the Communist Party in the continent, therefore the only possible solution was to settle there, considering it as the KMT's new home. Soon after, Chang Kai-shek started to reform the island's political landscape: he had Ch'en Yi publicly executed as a traitor, and tried to eliminate all the corruption and bad administration that was well spread among Taiwan's eminent personalities. The Taiwanese population, remembering the few years of Chinese domination, had mixed feelings toward the mainland; however, the nostalgia for it was relegated to the past. Furthermore, after flourishing years and having become a quite rich land – despite the war and post war period – Communism had no appeal to the population, economically, ideologically, or socially. Therefore, being accommodating or at least tolerating the Nationalist KMT seemed, to many, the best possible solution. At this point, Taiwan's status became unclear for the first time. Even if Mao Zedong himself had expressed no interest in annexing the island, it was reasonable to consider it as part of the mainland. However, the recognised Chinese government settled there, hence it shortly became clear that the issue would have to be solved militarily. Mao Zedong organised an attack in 1950; however, due to an epidemic flu among the troops and thanks to American intervention, who shielded the island with their navy, the plan had to be postponed.

Meanwhile, Chan Kai-shek reorganised the island. His legacy may be considered mixed, because if, on the one hand, he prompted economic and social progress; on the other, he did so by opposing every form of internal conflict. Martial law was enforced – to be levied only in 1987 – and institutionalised political prisons were used to maintain the power. Chen, in his studies on the issue, defines Taiwan as “an important and fascinating case study, because the initial liberalisation process of Taiwan was led by the hegemonic party itself.”⁹ However, as the divide between the United States' democratic allies and Soviet Union's socialist satellites became evident, Taiwan stood with the former, enjoining all the benefits that followed, such as the support of his bid to represent China diplomatically and the United Nations, de facto being recognised as the legitimate Chinese government. With American support and an increasingly consolidated leadership, Chiang Kai-shek started the process known as the Taiwanese Miracle. With a solid team of economic planners, Taiwan prospered, following a market-oriented economy and prioritising industrialisation. Moreover, he managed to create and strengthen the middle class, which, despite could not change the political hegemony of the party at that time, will reveal itself as fundamental in the democratisation process. However, despite the period being marked by the starting of incredible Taiwanese growth, it was also characterised by political repression and

⁹ Chen K.W. (2008). *Disciplining Taiwan: The Kuomintang's Methods of Control during the White Terror Era (1947-1987)*. *Taiwan International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 4, No. 4, pp. 185-210 Winter 2008.

complete control by the KMT of every aspect of social and political life. Indeed, as mentioned before, Chiang Kai-shek's tenure was entirely occupied by the so-called White Terror. While initially directed against those suspected of being Chinese Communist spies, from the fifties onward its scope was widened to include every rebel or dissident, significantly suppressing the freedom of speech and expression and often imprisoning and executing – often with no verification – political opponents and anyone who could be perceived as a threat to KMT. The number of victims of this suppression reached 140.000, with some 4.000 of them killed or executed.¹⁰

Chiang's plan to take back mainland China was dismissed over time; on the other hand, after two crises on the control of the islands of Matsu and Quemoy, he concluded a mutual defence treaty with the U.S. in 1954.¹¹ However, by the end of the 1960s, the Sino-American relationship was moving towards normalisation, and in the early 1970s, after Nixon toured China seeking better relations with Beijing, Taiwan became diplomatically isolated. Even the representation in the United Nations changed, and the seat occupied by Chiang Kai-shek's nationalist Republic of China was taken by Mao's People's Republic of China.

Chiang Kai-shek's rule has to be remembered as during this period the Taiwan Miracle began: it was a period of sustained increase of the main macroeconomics indexes that led Taiwan to be recognised as one of the fastest-growing economies in the world. Thanks to ad hoc policies to incentivise in a first moment light industries and from the 1970s onward also heavy industries – in petrochemicals and steel sectors –, the government became an exporting leader in the world. With the enactment of the Statute for the Encouragement of Investment of 1960, financial aid and a favourable tax regime were provided to engage actively in international trade. The Taiwan Miracle was not exclusive of Chiang Kai-shek, as his son Chiang Ching-kuo will continue and even bring to the next level his father's political line, by interesting the high-tech sector as well. However, the input for the incredible growth Taiwan witnessed between the 1960s and the 1990s is surely to be attributed to Chiang Kai-shek.^{12 13}

As Chiang Kai-shek's tenure was coming to an end, his son was gaining more and more power. When, in 1975, Chiang Kai-shek died, he left as an inheritance to his eldest son Chiang Ching-kuo an economically stable and growing country, with minor democratic reforms – only on a local basis – and a solid central administration, held firmly in the hand of the Kuomintang. Despite the differences in demography, land potential and industrial opportunities, during the years of Chiang Kai-shek, Taiwan managed to gain a significant advantage over mainland China, as PRC was struggling with Mao's ill-advised policies – Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution – that will be deepened in the following parts of this thesis. The feud between the two leaders – Mao Zedong and Chiang Kai-shek –, that had shaped the geopolitical landscapes of China and south-eastern Asia ended with the demise of Mao, who died in 1976, one year later than Chiang.

¹⁰ Wu, C.S. (2022). *Cultures of Memory in Asia* (1st ed.). New York: Taylor and Francis.

¹¹ It will be further discussed in chapter 1.4.

¹² Lin, M. & Wong P. (2016). *Recapturing the Taiwan Miracle*. Milken Institute.

¹³ Gold, T. (1986). *State and Society in the Taiwan Miracle* (1st ed.). New York: Taylor and Francis.

In 1975, Vice President Yen Jiagan succeeded him as the highest post in the country, even if it was more a formal presidency since Chiang Kai-shek's son, Chiang Ching-kuo had a solid political basis in all strategic institutions, such as the military and the intelligence services: it was he who wielded real political power. Yen's term ended in 1978, and Chiang Ching-Kuo naturally succeeded him after decades of playing a supporting role, managing to move to the front stage. One of the first events he had to witness as president was the official and full diplomatic recognition of Beijing as China, implying the ending of Taiwanese external recognition as an independent state, which happened in 1979. Despite his academic formation in USSR and his socialist-leaning ideological inclination, his tenure was marked by a strong turn towards democracy and the dismantlement of the autocracy – and the autocratic institutions – established by his father. He gradually phased out the White Terror, allowing the freedom of assemblies and leading the country towards a democratic pluralism, while also continuing the economic policies initiated by his father, by further encouraging export-oriented investment and by keeping the growth rate stable. He managed to do so by implementing economic reforms to reduce unemployment and modernise the country: an example is the Ten Major Construction Project, announced when he was not yet president but was completed under his term. The project entails the construction of several infrastructures, such as new highways and the airport. He enacted major labour rights reforms as well, in a process that has as outcome both the modernisation of the economic system, an increase in the quality of life and eventually was influential in the democratisation of the country. Moreover, even if the U.S. official recognition ended, he agreed to formulate a new pact, the Taiwan Relations Act, which provided that the U.S. would continue to have commercial relations with the island, selling Taipei's government weapons, but lifting the promises of any defensive involvement in the event of an invasion: it aimed at maintaining some form of nondiplomatic relationship between the United States and the island. If on one side he managed to obtain at least something from the U.S. in the context of the diplomatic isolation into which Taiwan had fallen in after the 1978 recognition of PRC, on the other side, he also initiated some cross-strait talk, first by lifting the ban of overseas travel and, by doing so, leading for the first time since 1949, to economic and personal cross-strait. However, Deng Xiaoping suggested to him, in 1982, to solve the issue by using the “one country, two systems”¹⁴, he refused, claiming the independence of the country.

As per the process of democratisation mentioned above, he led it actively. As said, he slowly dismissed the White Terror regime, firstly by allowing criticisms and the institution of new newspapers that did not conform to the KMT line, then by officially lifting the Martial Law in 1987. As it became clear that his tenure was coming to an end because of his fragile health, in 1986, he refused to dismantle the newly formed Democratic Progressive Party, starting a multi-party system to drive the country out of the autocratic setting fully. On the occasion of the Constitution Day speech of 1985, he addressed the nation as follows:

“The first question is the succession to the presidency. This sort of question only exists in despotic and totalitarian countries. It does not exist in the Republic of China, based on the Constitution. So, the next

¹⁴ The same formula will be later used by PRC in the return of Hong Kong from the U.K. in 1997.

President will be elected in accordance with constitutional procedure by the National Assembly on behalf of the people. Some people may raise the question whether any member of my family would run for the next presidency. My answer is: it can't be and it won't be.

The second question: Is there any possibility that our country would be governed by the military? My answer is: it can't be and it won't be. The ruling party has always steered a course based on democracy, liberty, and equality; we will never deviate from the Constitution. Likewise, there can't be any kind of government run in contravention to the Constitution.”¹⁵

With this vibrant speech, he aimed at concluding the period of democratic transition, and in the last couple of years of his tenure he will maintain his words by enacting policies meant to fully inaugurate a new period of economic prosperity and political harmony. He did so at the right time, when the economic status was consolidated and when the threat of communist uprisings was over. He also empowered Taiwanese indigenous people by choosing Lee Teng-Hui as vice-president during his second term – in fact, the decade was formally divided into two terms, the second one starting in 1984 –, who was born on the island and of Hakka ethnicity. His legacy is impressive: in ten years he managed to definitely assess Taiwanese economic importance, democratise a country that, until that moment, has been governed through means similar to those of the PRC, reopen the strait for commercial relations and maintain solid the – non-diplomatic – relationship with the States, despite the international scenario was not favourable to him and to the rise of the country. On the other hand, it is true that the path that led him onto the main stage and the means often used were not democratic: “Even though he was a dictator, he made himself into the very last dictator in Taiwan.”¹⁶

1.1.5 The most recent history: from Lee Teng-hui to the early 2000s

When he died in 1988, Lee Teng-hui succeeded him. He was still elected through constitutional means, without a democratic process involving the entire population. He was also elected as chairman of the KMT, strengthening even further his power. He is widely considered as the father of Taiwanese democracy, as he experienced the first direct elections in 1996, winning them. In addition, he was also the first to abandon altogether the idea of a possible re-affirmation of KMT power in mainland China.

Lee aspired to the complete modernisation of the country's political system, aligning it with Western democracy, and to the full recognition of Taiwan's sovereignty. Moreover, during his two mandates, he always stayed consistent with his predecessors' economic policies by developing a highly export-oriented industry operating in several fields. During his office, Taiwan became increasingly relevant as a high-tech producer and the economy shifted completely toward a market-oriented one, despite being able to balance the agricultural tendencies with the industrial development. Indeed, he studied agricultural economics in the U.S.

¹⁵ Chiang Ching-kuo speech “Chiang: Constitution To Determine His Successor”. December 25, 1985.

Available on: <https://web.archive.org/web/20160808114036/http://www.taiwantoday.tw/ct.asp?xItem=117721&CtNode=103>

¹⁶ Hengjun, Y. (2014). Chiang Ching-kuo, China's Democratic Pioneer. The Diplomat.

and before becoming President he was a member of the National Taiwan Joint Commission on Rural Reconstruction. He, therefore, placed special emphasis on agricultural modernisation, financially helping farmers and enterprises with the mechanisation of the process. Lee symbolised the end of the mainland Chinese-born officers and politicians' class in Taiwan. Indeed, he started appointing to the highest posts Taiwanese-born and often technical individuals. He completely changed the political system, amending the constitution and shaping it increasingly similar to democracy. After some initial amending, a second round of constitutional reforms occurred in 1994: one amendment provided for the direct election of the president and the vice president. The following year, Lee Teng-hui announced that elections would be held in 1996 and that he would run for the presidential office. In the first years of his tenure, he started a process aimed at normalising the relationship with China. However, in 1995 he visited his alma mater, Cornell University, visiting the U.S, the tensions between the two Chinas increased again: as a response, Clinton dispatched two aircraft carriers in the area. As a result, on-going normalisation talks with China were put on hold. On the eve of the first democratic elections in the country's history, the crisis between China and the U.S. undoubtedly helped the nationalist leader. Indeed, he was granted by the electorate another term in 1996. "It was a big victory for Lee and Lien Chan (Lee's vice-presidential running mate), the ruling Nationalist Party and democratisation American-style in Taiwan."¹⁷.

As for the relationship with the mainland, Lee always advocated in favour of a rapprochement based on mutual recognition: it meant that, while on the one hand he abandoned his predecessors' claims on mainland China, on the other, he also wanted the complete independence and recognition, as he argued, in 1996, in an interview with a German radio, Deutsche Welle. In the interview, when asked how he intended to cope with Beijing's view of Taiwan as a "renegade province", he answered:

*"The 1991 constitutional amendments have designated cross-strait relations as a state-to-state relationship or at least a special state-to-state relationship, rather than an internal relationship between a legitimate government and a renegade group, or between a central government and a local government. Thus, the Beijing authorities' characterization of Taiwan as a "renegade province" is historically and legally untrue."*¹⁸

In the same interview, he reaffirmed the intention to foster stable relations between the countries, "through exchanges" and "through mutual trust".

The democratisation process was completed, and despite some political chaos following the elections as the institutions had to adapt to the new system, the President managed to distress it and to make the state mechanism work properly, leaving as an inheritance to his democratically elected successor a perfectly

¹⁷ Copper, J. F. (2019). Taiwan (7th ed.). New York: Taylor and Francis.

¹⁸ Lee Teng-hui interview. Interview of Taiwan President Lee Teng-hui with Deutsche Welle radio. Available on <https://www.taiwandc.org/nws-9926.htm>

working administration system, a strong economy and an unstable yet clear geopolitical situation, with a new ambition for independence and peaceful coexistence with China.

In 2000, as Lee Teng-hui's term was over, Chen Shui-bian was elected, marking a historical moment for the country. It was a member of the opposition Democratic Progressive Party who was elected as the fifth president of the Republic of China. Moreover, he was also completely different from the precedent presidents: he was young – he was elected when he was 49 – came from a humble background and had no experience abroad. He was also more radical than any other president in a focal stance on Taiwan's status: independence. His views soured the relationship with China, significantly reducing economic ties across the strait. Moreover, he halted the construction of a nuclear power plant, generating several criticisms from the members of the KMT that, despite the recent loss at the elections -due mainly to internal clashes and to the existence of two main streams -, was still the principal party and was holding several significant posts. He quickly became unpopular, firstly in the eyes of the opposition and then, when he ceded and resumed the work on the nuclear plant, in the eyes of his party. His administration was often stuck, as the opposition, which held the majority of seats in the legislative chambers, opposed several of his proposals. Overall, his first term was marked by slower economic growth, even turning negative in 2001, and by a deadlocked relationship with China, as he refused to pledge to the One-China Policy, a requirement considered fundamental for Beijing even to start the talks. Meanwhile, the relationship between Taiwan and the U.S. remained stable and improved, as he toured the country and was also the first president to visit Europe.

His second term started with a suspicious event. As he ran for the elections in 2004, it was clear that the opposition could overthrow him and win. However, he and his vice-president were shot the day before the polls opened. He obliged the police and the military to stand to their post, depriving them of the possibility to vote. He won by a slight margin, less than 300.000 votes on the 13 million total. He became unpopular both in his country and abroad, even in the United States. Several accusations of corruption were moved towards him, and as his wife and his son-in-law were arrested, and the popular discontent was rising, his second term ended ignominiously. After the end of his term, having lost the presidential immunity, he was convicted of sentenced to life in prison for corruption and several other charges. His sentence was then reduced to 19 years, and eventually he was released on medical parole in 2015. His presidency significantly slowed Taiwanese economic growth and significantly harmed his party, as it was seen as a missed opportunity to show how the democratisation process was healthy and positive for the country.

With absolutely no surprise, after his term, the Kuomintang returned to the presidential post in 2008 with the election of Ma Ying-jeou. The topic will be discussed later, as the period consequent to Ma's election is entirely comprehended in the scope of analysis of this thesis.

1.2 China and its Role

1.2.1 China as a Superpower: the role as Regional Hegemon

People's Republic of China¹⁹ is a country situated in East Asia. It is the most populous country in the world, with a population of more than 1.4 billion people – around one-fifth of the entire world population is of Chinese nationality – and the third for geographical extension, with 9.6 million square kilometres. It has five time zones and it borders with fourteen other states. The capital city is Beijing, as well as the main cultural, economic and communication centre of the country; Shanghai is the principal industrial city and a worldwide recognised financial hub, while Hong Kong, which enjoys the status of a special administrative region, is the main port and commercial centre. The most common ethnicity is Han, however China is home to several different indigenous people; the official language is Mandarin Chinese, but due to its vastity and heterogeneity, several other languages and dialects are spoken. Furthermore, because of its geographical extension, its landscapes vary a lot, as well as the population density. Some areas are among the most densely populated in the world, while others are quite entirely desert.

As per the political sphere, China is ruled by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), which does not allow democratic competition²⁰ and has been steadily in power since 1949. The actual General Secretary of the CCP is Xi Jinping (since 2012): that role means that he is the president of China (since 2013) and the country's paramount leader. China is entirely ruled by one single party, dominating all branches of China's political system, whose organs are superior to – and interlinked with – those of the State. The Party has some 90 million members, and it is truly capillary. The party, and therefore the state, is organised in a vertical hierarchical way: at the bottom of the pyramid there is the National Party Congress, not to be confused with the legislative state branch, the National People's Congress, while at the top of it there is the Standing Committee of the Politburo, composed of seven members, all led by Xi Jinping. As said, the legislative state branch, which in theory is supposed to be the governing body of the Chinese Government, is the National People's Congress, composed of about 3000 delegates, not all of them members of the CCP; de facto, it is, as every other body in China, ruled by the Communist Party. The Communist Party is involved and present in every decision that regards the state: the judicial system is, practically, the rule of the party, the foreign relations and military decisions are exclusively administered by the party, and every economic or social reform must be proposed, approved, and enforced by the party itself.

In the international relations field, due to China's critical role as hegemon in the area, it has acquired a growing importance. The entirety of the scholastic community regards PRC as the only threat to United States' post as global hegemon. It is the second world economy, and after the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the end of the bipolar balance of powers, it is the only real threat to American sole domination. Its stature in bilateral relations has become increasingly aggressive and firm, and it is claiming its role as a major actor in the international scenario. It is a member of the United Nations, occupying a permanent seat in the Security Council, and it is recognised as a nuclear power. Despite not having changed the structure of the State and the

¹⁹ During the entire course of the thesis, People's Republic of China will be referred as China.

²⁰ Other parties are present, but they have to declare in their constitution that they accept the Communist Party Leadership.

way it is administered, in the last 50 years China underwent miraculous growth, basically relying on the flourishing economy that opposes the usual Western binomial of freedom and prosperity. Indeed, China's economy still presents some socialist traits, as the state presence in strategic economic sectors; however, in 1979, under the leadership of President Deng Xiaoping, reforms started to open up the economy and inaugurate the socialist market economy. From 1992 onward, China grew significantly, as state-owned enterprises became private, the de-collectivization of agriculture started, foreign investment was encouraged, and protectionist measures were lifted; in the early 2000s, private sectors accounted for most Chinese GDP. If in the last decades the economy experienced the incredible growth mentioned above, these reforms backlashed leading to social inequalities and pay gaps. Furthermore, the fast-growing industrial sector concurred with polluting the country, which is among the most urgent and pressing challenges the government has to tackle.

According to the Observatory for Economic Complexity²¹, in 2021 China was the second economy in terms of GDP, but the first one in total export and the second one in imports. However, it was the fifty-eighth economy in terms of GDP per capita, and this data highlight the social inequalities in the country. China's main trade partners are the United States, the European Market and all the other countries from the Asian region, mainly South Korea and Japan, as well as Taiwan.

After this brief presentation of China's geography, economy and state organisation, this thesis will proceed with the historical framework, analysing the history of the country from the civil war that led to the separation from Taiwan and to the establishment of the CCP as the sole leading party in the country, to the rise and modernisation of one of the biggest economies in the world.

1.2.2 A historical Background: The Civil War

Chinese Civil War can usually be divided into different phases; however, for the purpose of the thesis, only the last one, which ended with the establishment of the Chinese Communist Party in Beijing and with the consequent retreat of KMT to the island of Taiwan, will be discussed.

The civil conflict was fought from 1927 to 1949, even if during World War II a united front against the Japanese was formed. After decades of occupation and years of brutal warfare in the Sino-Japanese war, the Potsdam Declaration²² established Japan's defeat and, consequentially, set off a race between the Nationalists and Communists to control the land. Up to the start of this stage of the Civil War, the Communists were slightly more important than a regional power. However, they quickly managed to strengthen their foothold in the countryside of north and central China, and, as presented by Lew they managed to even the war potential, posing a real threat to the KMT: "was at this decisive moment, when both sides were as closely matched as they ever would be in terms of military and political power, that the Third Chinese Civil War began."²³ As the

²¹ OEC, China Profile, The Observatory of Economic Complexity. Available on <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/chn>

²² August 14, 1945. It has already been cited in the thesis as it was the declaration in which Taiwan was ceded from Japan to China.

²³ Lew, C. (2009). *The Third Chinese Revolutionary Civil War, 1945-49* (1st ed.). New York: Taylor and Francis.

two sides started reorganising themselves, the United States tried to mediate, sending General George Marshall to assist in creating a coalition government and a permanent cease-fire. However, both factions opposed this solution and stood strong on their ideological positions, as well as on the strategical sphere of influence they managed to control. A short truce was respected, but the hostilities started over in 1946, and General Marshall was called back to the United States, condemning extremists in both factions. As the negotiations failed, the last part of the war started. In 1947, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) gained control in northern and central China and conquering Manchuria completely by the end of the year. Tianjin was under the control of the PLA by January 1949, while the march on Beijing happened, unopposed, later the same month. Shanghai, Nanjing, and Guangzhou -where the government was moved- were captured soon after.

At 3 p.m. on October 1, 1949, "in his thick Hunan accent"²⁴ proclaimed the People's Republic of China. In November, even the last Nationalist capital city, Chongqing, was conquered and Chang Kai-shek with some 600.000 soldiers and 2.000.000 civilians started a long march to reach the coast, from where, with the help of the United State Seventh Fleet, they reached Taiwan. The last pockets of resistance were destroyed at the beginning of 1950 and the war was over when the PLA managed to conquer the island of Hainan was conquered in the May of the same year. Freed from any resistance, Mao Zedong was ready to create an independent country ruled solely by the Chinese Communist Party, which was, is and will be a threat to the world's geopolitical equilibrium.

1.2.3 A historical background: establishment of the Communist Party, Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution

When faced with the challenge of government, the Chinese Communist Party was not ready to do it, having little expertise and a huge population to lead. Indeed, the population under the control of the CCP – roughly 200.000.000 before the conquest of the entire China – was more than triplicated and, despite being at ease in more rural areas, they were quite estranged from cities' dynamics. When interviewed by Field General Montgomery, Mao Zedong claimed that the main concern when power was seized was that neither he nor other party members had enough experience to face the problems ahead.²⁵ Moreover, the situation, after years of wars, was desperate. The infrastructure system collapsed in the previous decade, as did the economic and financial solidity. The communist currency had no market value abroad, the industrial field could not be adequately supplied, and the administrative void left by the nationalists seemed impossible to fill. Overall, the Kuomintang proved unable to keep up with the pace of the rest of the world between the two wars, and China was several steps behind modernity. However, despite all the problems and challenges they had to face, the Communist regime managed to give unity to China again, establishing order and was, overall, well accepted by the population, which was mainly content about the end of the war and was ready to accept a new rule to

²⁴ Kerr, G. (2013). *A Short History of China*. Harpenden: Oldcastle Books.

²⁵ Sunday Times (Magazine Section), London, October 15, 1961.

modernise the country openly. Unity also meant that the government could dispose of the entire Chinese land resources, that were comparable to those of the Soviet Union and the United States and could, alone, guarantee a seat on the table of the superpowers.

In the beginning, despite the project to aim at a full socialisation of the society was clear, “it was still a question of restoring, transforming, or building the political, economic, educational, and cultural foundations that were essential for these great changes.”²⁶.

However, because of the inheritance of equipment left by the previous government and by the Americans, to the help of the Soviet Union and to the amount of natural resources at their disposal, the Chinese Communist Party had some solid basis to undertake the path for modernisation.

The most critical and urgent challenge to tackle was the one concerning the agricultural organisation and, more specifically, the land distribution among the people. Between 1950 and 1952, the entirety of lands was redistributed among the entire population, aiming at the socialisation of the agrarian sector.

At the beginning of the fifties, China was engaged in the Korean War (1950-1953), which has to be cited as the first deployment abroad of the newly formed PRC’s army. During the war China sided, along with the Soviet Union, the Communist government of the North, which claimed to be the only legitimate one²⁷.

Veterans from the PLA were sent to Korea and played a significant role in the war: it was obviously an interesting and well-planned strategic move, as establishing communist friendly governments in the periphery of the newly formed PRC was paramount for Mao Zedong.

In 1953 the first Five Year Plan²⁸ started, on the model of the Soviet Union, aiming at achieving an intensive program of industrial growth and socialisation. Indeed, the plan changed the shift from agriculture to industry, as Mao Zedong wanted to increase Chinese power as an industrialised economy. The First Five Year Plan was made possible also with Soviet technical and financial assistance, which contributed to the construction of large and sophisticated plants: during this period heavy industries experienced rapid growth, partly at the expense of other sectors, such as the agricultural one, which was encompassed only by minor reforms such as the establishment of small cooperatives. Agriculture was however largely interested in the Second Five-Year Plan, in which communes were formed, resulting in the abolishment of private plots. The second plan, started in 1958, was characterised by the presence of the “Great Leap Forward” economic philosophy and programme, aimed at boosting the rhythm of industrial and agricultural modernisation. The Great Leap Forward “had no detailed blueprint but there were some underlying strategic principles”²⁹. Still, it led to radical organisational changes intended to make the Chinese countryside able to provide for its own

²⁶ Guillermaz, J. (2019). *The Chinese Communist Party In Power, 1949-1976* (1st ed.). New York: Taylor and Francis.

²⁷ At the end of World War II, the Korean peninsula was divided into two zones of occupation, along the 38th parallel. The Soviets administrated the North, while the Americans administrated the South. A socialist state was created in the north, under the communist leadership of Kim Il-sung, while a Western democracy was established in the north. Both governments claimed to be the only legitimate ones, wanting to conquer and unify the entire peninsula. China and the Soviet Union helped the Socialist government, while the United States and the United Nations enormously helped South Korea.

²⁸ The Five-Year Plans are a series of social and economic development initiatives that copies the methodology of Soviet Unions. The same system is still enforced today, and currently the Fourteenth Plan (2021-2025) is being applied.

²⁹ Britannica, Editors of Encyclopaedia (2023, April 4). Great Leap Forward. Encyclopedia Britannica. Available on: <https://www.britannica.com/event/Great-Leap-Forward>

development and for the one of the industrialised cities. Moreover, it encompasses the creation of backyard furnaces in every commune, intending to boost and decentralise industrial production. However, the commune system, aimed at mandatory agricultural collectivisation, proved itself ineffective, as the communes were far too big, the means of allocating resources was not an incentive to work and the infrastructural system was not feasible at the request of the central organisation. As the first results did not meet the expectations, several criticisms were brought up in the Lushan Conference 1959. Even if the Great Leap Forward was scaled back, the main critics were identified and removed, along with all the “rightists”, as to say whoever opposed the plan, starting with the defence minister Peng Dehuai, who was replaced. Soon after, the collaboration with the Soviet Union also came to an end, as Mao argued that Khrushchev had started a soft cohabitation with the Western power, renouncing the core principle of Socialism. As a reaction, all assistance from the Soviet Union was withdrawn, leaving China isolated.

In the following year, as Liu Shaoqi became chairmanship of the PRC and Deng Xiaoping was appointed as General Secretary, policies were enacted to try to bring the country out of the huge crisis, leading to a complete regain of the output by 1965, recognising the dramatic failure of the Great Leap Forward and altogether abandoning it, leaving as a trace one of deadliest famines in human history, with some 30 million deaths.

Soon after, another defining period of Chinese modern history began: the so-called Cultural Revolution. The Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was a period of social chaos caused by “Mao’s bid to use Chinese masses to reassert his control over the Communist Party”³⁰, after he lost popularity and credibility as a result of the Great Leap Forward outcomes. Started in May 1966, with Mao’s claims of infiltration by the bourgeoisie and the counter-revolutionary revisionists into the party and the state organs, arguing that many of the main cultural and political organisations or departments were no longer in the hands of Communists. Initially, the urge to purify the party’s ranks was positively embraced by the population and was considered a necessary and illuminate act, however, during the ten years it lasted, it consistently crippled the economy and turned China into a stagnant country, characterised by turmoil and, again, lack of economic and social growth. After Mao’s claims, the party’s official newspaper urged and instigated the masses to start a revolution against the bourgeoisie, fighting against the evil habits of the old society³¹. Students' organisations quickly emerged, actively fighting against whoever did not completely accept Communism. Churches, universities, libraries, and shops were closed and ransacked, people wearing “bourgeois” clothes were assaulted, and even party officials and intellectuals were beaten and murdered. Mao did nothing to stop the chaos; on the contrary, he ordered not to interfere with the newly instituted Red Guard operations. Soon after, the turmoil spread across the country. China became a battlefield, with different factions battling out in the fields or in the street, halting economic progress – the slow recovery after The Great Leap suffered several setbacks – and any other form of development. In 1971, having understood that the situation was unbearable, Mao ordered the army to restore

³⁰ Philipps T., 2016. The Cultural Revolution: all you need to know about China's political convulsion. The Guardian.

³¹ Peking Review, Vol. 9, #23, June 3, 1966, pp. 4-5. Sweep Away All Monsters.

Available on: <https://www.marxists.org/subject/china/peking-review/1966/PR1966-23c.htm>

order, turning China into a military dictatorship. Semblances of normality were restored again, but this period caused large-scale destruction of China's cultural heritage, as well as the complete demolition of anything considered bourgeois, religious, traditional, or capitalist. The Cultural Revolution ended only in 1976, and the death toll is impressive: scholars disagree on an estimation; however, it is claimed that between 500.000 and two million people died in this period.

Two major events happened during the last five years of the decade 1966-1976. On October 25, 1971, "The UN General Assembly passes Resolution 2758, on the Restoration of the lawful rights of People's Republic of China in the UN"³², recognising Beijing as the legitimate Chinese government and, de facto, removing Taiwan from the United Nations. The second event was the visit of United States President Nixon, who toured China in 1972 in an attempt to normalise the relationship between the two countries. The specifics of the events will be further discussed in this same chapter (1.4.1), but the happenings may be considered of paramount importance as they ended a twenty-five years period of no diplomatic relations and complete Chinese isolation – after the split with Soviet Union – and marked the beginning of a period of cooperation or, at least, of normalisation of the relationship with the United States, opening as well an economic and commercial channel.

1.2.4 A historical background: Reforms and Opening-Up under Deng Xiaoping

The Cultural Revolution ended with Mao Zedong's death on September 9, 1976. In the years before the leader's death, the political career of Deng Xiaoping was not constant: indeed, during the various purges that occurred during the cultural revolution, he was often a target. Mao often accused him of leaning towards capitalism and feared him as the one who could rend the Chinese revolution, removing him from all the official posts he retained. However, as all the other feasible successors either died or were purged, at the death of Mao a void had to be filled. Initially, Hua Guofeng succeeded Mao as Chairman of the Communist Party, but soon, by mobilising his supporter within the party, Deng Xiaoping managed to get to power, ousting Hua from his top leadership position. However, in opposition to Mao's habits, he did not physically harm or purge Hua Guofeng, allowing him to maintain his position in the Central Committee until he quietly retired from the political scenario. During his office, he never held the highest post in the party's hierarchy; nonetheless, he still was the most influential and considered figure of China, both internally and abroad. Deng Xiaoping's era lies its basis in the two-year period 1978-1980, when he managed to reach the influence to govern the country fully until 1992, even if he remained influential until his death, which occurred in 1997. In these years, he managed to reform China completely, and the entire scholastic community agrees on claiming that he lied the basis for what China is nowadays: in the words of Vogel, in his 2013 book "Deng Xiaoping and the

³² United Nations in China.

Available on: <https://china.un.org/en/about/about-the-un>

transformation of China”, “he guided the transformation of China into a country that was scarcely recognizable from the one he had inherited in 1978.”³³.

His mission was to make China rich and recognised as a world power, and he could enjoy several benefits that his predecessors did not have. Mao unified the country, boosted the industrial sectors, and built a strong and functional governmental structure; however, he could not incorporate Western lessons into the Chinese system, *de facto*, preventing a real modernisation of the country. What Deng realised and put into place in the course of his rule, was that more radical reforms were called for to place China among the main powers. When the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee convened in 1978, Deng outlined a completely new party line: he declared reforms and opening up as the core points of his programme, and in the ensuing years he managed to reach his goals skilfully. Under Deng's leadership, China changed consistently in every aspect: from the ideological and policy orientation to the industrial organisation, foreign policies, and commercial ties. The goals set forth by the leader in 1978 were addressed as the “Four Modernizations”, intended to strengthen four strategic fields to develop China to its maximum potential: agriculture, industry, defence and science and technology. The major changes he was about to enforce drastically opposed the previous Maoist policies. Agriculturally wise, the commune system was completely abandoned, favouring a more liberal set of policies, promoting the freedom of owning a private plot and establishing an enterprise, legitimising personal initiatives and material rewards. He acted similarly in the industrial field, by giving each factory manager the liberty to set a balanced output level, boosting the economy by granting material rewards to each industry and by de-collectivising several enterprises, losing the ties of the bureaucratic centralisation and granting unprecedented degrees of autonomy in every matter related to the internal organisation of a firm, such as the allocation of the resources and the distribution of the profits. Moreover, he encouraged the creation of small and medium enterprises, granting financial aid to stimulate production further and diminish unemployment.

Overall, his line on internal policy was clear from the beginning: a complete turn from the previous Mao Zedong administration toward a more modern and competitive market economy. From an economy completely run by the state, that owned every single enterprise and activity, Deng Xiaoping managed to drive China to a market economy, where the state was present more as a guide than as a centralised and unappealable ruler.³⁴ He strongly condemned the Cultural Revolution, inaugurating the so-called Boluan Fanzheng period³⁵, during which he led a program to correct the mistakes made during the cultural revolution, rehabilitating the victims and abolishing several habits and words symbol of the Cultural Revolution. He also proposed a systematic reform of the Constitution, lying the base of the actual one: the 1982 Constitution was passed and a complete reform of the organisation of the statal organs was enforced. His reformist intentions were clear and were at the beginning of the opening-up of China. The binomial that always linked the market economy

³³ Vogel, E. (2013). *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

³⁴ Kau, M.Y.M & Marsh, S.H. (2016). *China in the Era of Deng Xiaoping: A Decade of Reform* (1st ed.). New York: Taylor and Francis.

³⁵ 拨乱反正, literally Eliminating Chaos and Returning to the Normal.

to capitalism, and the one linking the planned economy to socialism lost value, as Deng Xiaoping started the so-called Socialism with Chinese characteristics, as the official party objective was still to achieve communism, using however foreign funds and tools associated with the Western management of state economics. Indeed, through several reforms and losing the centralised system, he strengthened the trade and cultural ties with the West, opening Chinese enterprises to foreign investment. He managed to normalise relations with the Soviet Union after Mao's split.

However, despite Deng Xiaoping is unanimously seen as a great reformer who posed the basis for the current Chinese greatness, some negative sides have to be cited as well. Along with his several economic reforms, Deng significantly impacted Chinese society: he promulgated the most famous policy to organise and control demography, the One-Child Policy. As the population was rapidly approaching the one billion mark, by 1980, several recommendations on family planning and birth control were turned into an actual official law, made up by several incentives and sanctions. The policy was intended to be universally applied, although it was implemented mainly in the city and in industrialised environments, as in rural areas the traditional extended agrarian family resisted the policy. As a result, the goal of reducing population growth was reached; moreover, there were other – unexpected – outcomes. The sex ratio skewed drastically toward males, between 3 and 4 percent more than females³⁶, due to increased abortions of female fetuses and even infanticides of baby girls. Furthermore, it led to a significant problem in the distribution of the population age: with an increasing life expectancy, the number of elders consistently surpassed the number of younger members of the population. Lastly, it brought to instances in which births went unreported to avoid sanctions: despite the number of such children being unknown, estimates have ranged from hundreds of thousands to millions.

Other critics of Deng's period claim that, despite the massive modernisation and opening-up of the country, democracy was never an option. Even if more liberal political directions were undertaken in the economic field, the political leadership was held tightly in the hand of the party. The legitimacy of the Party was questioned in this period, and despite the various benefits that the market economy brought to some people, it also increased disadvantaged other sectors of the population; moreover, corruption was again rampant, as it was collateral damage of decentralisation. The social unrest was precipitated when the general secretary of the Communist Party Hu Yaobang, pro-reform, died in April 1989. Protests asking for a real democratisation of the country spread out, organised by students. Meanwhile, workers organised other protests, focused on inflation and the erosion of the welfare system. As the two groups united, the primary goals became a mixture of the different voices. Among democratic demands, such as the freedom of the press and speech, economic and social claims were also advanced. The protest peaked when one million people assembled in Tiananmen Square in Beijing. The government responded to the protest with different tactics, both conciliatory and more brutal. On May 20, martial law was declared, and 300.000 troops were mobilised to Beijing. The troops started to occupy the city centre, killing several demonstrators and bystanders,

³⁶ Britannica, Editors of Encyclopaedia (2023, April 4). One Child Policy. Encyclopedia Britannica. Available on: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/one-child-policy>

culminating on June 5 with the iconic photograph of the so-called Tank Man. The government claimed that some 300 people were killed during the events; the Chinese Red Cross gave a figure of 2600 deaths.

Having analysed the main events and reforms in Deng Xiaoping's era, it is important to notice the incredible amount of reforms and innovations he brought to China, laying the basis for the paramount power that China enjoys today.

1.2.5 The most recent history: Deng's Legacy and the Building up of an Empire

In 1989, Jiang Zemin started his term as General Secretary of the Communist Party, and became President in 1993, ruling for the entirety of the last decade of the twentieth century and overseeing the passage to the new millennium. He was seen as a compromise, accepted by both the reformist side of the party and the more conservative one, which wanted to strengthen the Communist party leadership in the aftermath of Tiananmen. Indeed, his rule was characterised on the one hand by a market-oriented economic policy, on the other by the affirmation of the Communist Party as the sole leader. Jiang became the paramount leader in 1997, as Deng Xiaoping died, leaving the country's leadership entirely in Jiang's hands. However, Deng was not the only other important personality limiting the power of the secretary-general, indeed as pointed out by David Lampton, he was constrained by Premier Li Peng in the administration of foreign policy for more than half of his term until 1998, while Zhu Rongji, Premier from 1998 to 2003, was extremely influent in the administration and in the setting of the economic agendas, even if often in strong agreement with the president.³⁷

Representative of the third generation of Chinese leaders, Jiang continued to hold Deng Xiaoping's policy line, opting for the privatisation of several sectors and a complete socialist market economy, to the point that, in some specific cases, it was even too liberal and needed some form of control: indeed, because of the economic choices made by Deng and his successor, several rural areas were completely under-developed, and unemployment was rampant in several urban areas. These various issues led to an overall decrease in the social condition and increased criminal activities.

On the international scene, the decade was marked by the re-annexation of Hong Kong from the United Kingdom, which ruled over the city for ninety-nine years as per the Treaty of Nanking, concluded in 1898 as an outcome of the first Opium War. After negotiations for a peaceful passage under China, Hong Kong was handed over in 1997, fully respecting the treaty's terms. The system adopted was "one country, two systems", meaning that Hong Kong would enjoy a high degree of autonomy, and it could maintain its strongly capitalistic economic system, despite being formally part of China. He had to cope with the third Taiwan crisis, which will be analysed later, and, in general, he had to lead China to the role of only American competitor, as the disintegration of the Soviet Union made the U.S. the sole superpower.

Overall, during his leadership, despite he was not always able to exercise it fully, he managed to establish solid neighbourhood relationships, to create a strong network of friendly states in central and southern

³⁷ Lampton, D. (2019). *Following the Leader* (1st ed.). Berkeley: University of California Press.

Asia, also through the creation and consolidation of international organisations to counterbalance NATO's power: the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation in Central Asia, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in Pacific Asia and the South East Asian Association ASEAN. Moreover, during this period, a biannual summit between Moscow and Beijing was institutionalised to establish privileged relationships between the two countries. The activity in the United Nations significantly augmented as China became often involved in peacekeeping missions, signifying a strong and innovative multilateral view from the Chinese government. Finally, after the Taiwan crisis, Sino-American relations were normalised again, as proved by Jiang Zemin's visit to the U.S. in 1997- the first official summit in twelve years- and Clinton's visit the following year.³⁸

He was succeeded by Hu Jintao, who received a developed country, ready to seize the "strategic opportunity"³⁹ given by the relative American weakness – due to the 9/11 terrorist attack and by the recent commitment to the war in Afghanistan – and to focus on the internal social-economic situation, improving the living conditions of a growing population to maintain the party's legitimisation. Hu Jintao's tenure marked indeed a period of unprecedented economic growth, while he also aimed at harmonising the society by reducing social inequalities and at build up national esteem. As reported by the BBC commenting on his period as it was over, in 2013, China indisputably and visibly grew economically under every single indicator, becoming "an economic superpower, whatever its geopolitical status"⁴⁰. Managing to drive China through the storm of the 2008 crisis with limited damages was one of the main results: indeed, even if the economy was slowed down by the international crisis, China's economy managed to get back on its feet quickly, with the major macroeconomics indexes a fast rebound, even if with a lower rate than before. Several financial packages were introduced to boost the economy, by reducing unemployment and supporting businesses. However, these packages also implied increased debt levels, as the government needed to borrow to fund infrastructure and financial aid.

Overall, it can be said that Hu Jintao managed to lead China through the biggest recent financial crisis consistently, developed massively both industrial and technological fields and increased even further China's role in the international field, also by hosting the Olympics Games in 2008⁴¹, that were crucial for the image of China abroad, now seen as a modern and developed country, collocating it among the undiscussed world's most important economies and country.

It is with this legacy that Xi Jinping started his first term in 2012. However, his presidency will be analysed later in the thesis, as the decade marked by his tenure is under analysis because of the concomitance with – half of – Obama's presidency and Trump's presidency.

³⁸ Onnis, A. (2022). Jiang Zemin: portare la Cina nel mondo. ISPI.

³⁹ 战略机遇期, from Jiang Zemin's inauguration speech of the XVI Party Congress.

⁴⁰ Brown, K (2013). What did Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao do for China? BBC.

⁴¹ Used as a platform to showcase China's development and progress, even if they happened during Hu Jintao's presidencies, the 29th Summer Olympic Games were secured by Jiang Zemin. It was the first time that China hosted them.

1.3 The United States of America: the World-Leading Democracy

1.3.1 *The United States of America, the “other” Superpower*

The United States of America is a highly influential, populous, and large country located in North America. It ranks fourth as per land mass, with 9834633 square kilometres and the population is of some 335 million people, making it the third most populous country; it shares its land borders with Canada and Mexico. The capital city is Washington, D.C, however the most inhabited cities are New York, Los Angeles, and Chicago. The USA is a federal republic, composed of fifty states, with two legislative houses, the Senate, and the House of Representatives. It is widely has been regarded as an example of Western democracy, and for years it has been considered as a model for the West. All the major democracy indexes recognise the country as a liberal democracy, usually referred to as the oldest one in the world. There is a strict separation of powers. The U.S. Congress, comprising the House of Representatives and the Senate, forms the legislative branch; the judicial power is exercised by the Supreme Court and by all the other lower federal courts; and the executive power is in the hands of the President who, according to the White House website, is “responsible for implementing the laws written by the Congress and, to that end, appoints the heads of the federal agencies, including the Cabinet”⁴². The president is elected every four years through an indirect process where the citizens are called to vote for the members of the Electoral College, who, in turn nominates the President. Two main parties have always dominated the political landscape: the Democratic Party and the Republican Party, although others have run for the presidency. The Democratic Party, which is currently in power under Biden’s presidency, wide-speaking enacted more left-of-centre policies, while the Republican Party, whose last elected President was Trump, is more right-centrist. Because of the federal organisations, the fifty states enjoy a high level of autonomy, and the three branches of power are also present on a state basis. Each state has its own constitution, and despite they all follow similar patterns, they may differ in the administrative organisation and in some more detailed and specific characteristics. It is interesting to notice how the various states may legislate upon every inherent subject unless limited by a National provision. Therefore, in several aspects of the internal policies, the state is more decisive than the federal government and enjoys a higher degree of discretionary power. However, the federal line is the predominant in international relations and foreign policies, as the USA interacts as a unique entity with other states. The United States are, and has been in the last century, a predominant actor in the international sphere, influencing the course of history deeply. It does sit in the main international organisations: it is the most influential member, as well as the creator, of NATO and it retains the veto power in the UN Security Council as a winner of the Second World War.

From an economic point of view, the United States is the strongest economy in the world. According to the data reported by the OECD⁴³, by the Bureau of Economic Analysis of the U.S. Department of

⁴² The White House, The Executive Branch.

Available on: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/about-the-white-house/our-government/the-executive-branch/#:~:text=The%20President%20is%20responsible%20for,Presidency%20should%20the%20need%20arise>.

⁴³ OECD, United States Economic Snapshot. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Commerce⁴⁴, and by the International Monetary Fund⁴⁵, United States nominal GDP is the highest in the world, and the esteem for 2023 is accounted for 26.854 trillion dollars (IMF). The nominal GDP per capita is the seventh in the world, and overall there is sustained growth in the American economy. Being the most powerful economy in the world, the vast majority of the population is employed in the service sector, however the industrial one is also very profitable, and the main American exports are indeed manufacturers. United States' main trade partners are the European Union, China, Canada, Mexico and Japan and it is among the largest importers and exporters in the world in several fields, including natural resources.

This introduction is followed by an analysis of the steps the United States took to become the world's leading economy and superpower. The focus will be on the post-war period, which saw the consolidation of American power and influence in the West and significant developments in relations with China, with peaks of favourable interactions and moments of profound distance and clashes.

1.3.2 A historical background: the role in the Creation of the West after World War 2 and the Cold War

Unlike China, the United States never saw its territorial unity endangered. Indeed, since the foundation of the first thirteen colonies on the East Coast during the seventeenth century, the United States has always flourished with no external risks. Over the centuries, they managed to gain independence from the British Empire in 1763, with the American Revolution, and to start a process of expansion toward the western coast, by assimilating and anthropising all the land between the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans. The other big crisis the state had to face was the civil war, which started in 1861, when the northern and southern states, completely different socially, economically, and politically, came to a clash, with the focal point being African American slavery. After the secession of eleven southern states in 1861, unity was restored four years later through the force of arms. From then on, national unity was never questioned again, and a progressive, liberal, and industrial country was to be created. Despite some periods of crisis, such as the Great Depression of 1929, the United States of America managed to grow significantly, contributing decisively to the international scenario. In World War II, after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor, the United States declared war on Japan. Soon, the U.S. was fully engaged in the war, with massive mobilisation, deploying millions of troops worldwide. Moreover, to support the war effort, around seventeen million new jobs were created during the war, drastically decreasing the unemployment rate and enabling the country's economy to get back on its feet after the 1929 depression. Besides, because of its position, the war did not touch American soil, therefore the infrastructures and industries did not have to be reconstructed, giving the US a significant advantage over Europe, which, devastated by the war, had to start a process of rebirth. With a stable economy, which, at that moment was in better condition than any other country in the world, and having won the war, America was ready to lead the

Available on: <https://www.oecd.org/economy/united-states-economic-snapshot/>

⁴⁴ BEA, U.S. Economy at a Glance, Bureau of Economic Analysis.

Available on: <https://www.bea.gov/news/glance>

⁴⁵ IMF, United States Profile, International Monetary Fund.

Available on: <https://www.imf.org/en/Countries/USA>

Western world towards peace and stability. As many veterans returned to the mainland, several policies were made to let them attend college and graduate or to financially aid them in purchasing houses and lands, while the ones that did not participate in the conflict kept their posts in several industries, mainly located on the coasts.

Meanwhile, despite the alliance during the war, tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union, already present during the war, were getting worse. As the post-war negotiations were happenings, at two main conferences – Yalta in February 1945, before the official end of the war, and Potsdam, in August 1945, when the war in Europe was over – the allies began to shape and divide Europe into different spheres of influence. As a result of the Yalta conference, Nazi Germany was divided into four spheres of influence, administrated respectively by the U.S., the Soviet Union, Great Britain, and France; moreover, Poland was reorganised under a provisional communist government, as Stalin promised to allow free elections soon after. The Soviet Union accepted to enter the United Nations, which will be officially operative from October 1945. As of the Potsdam conference, it was clear that Stalin wanted to hold his power in Poland tightly, and the conference was a way to confirm it, as, as an outcome of the negotiations, the recognition of the Soviet-controlled Polish government was accepted. In addition, the division of Germany and Austria in the zones outlined at Yalta was reaffirmed, as well as the persecution of Nazi war criminals and the re-establishment of all countries annexed by the Nazis during the war, as well as sanctions and the transformation of the massive heavy-industry German economy into a light domestic industry. The Soviet Union was set to invade Japan, but the U.S., willing to exclude Moscow from the post-war treaty, anticipated the invasion by atomically bombing Hiroshima and Nagasaki less than a week after the conference, forcing Japan to surrender and showing its nuclear prowess as a warning to the rest of the world, and, in particular, to the Soviet Union. In America, Truman succeeded Roosevelt as President, and he was present at the Potsdam conference and focal at the beginning of the Cold War.

In March 1946, George Kennan, the Deputy Chief of Mission of the United States to the USSR, sent the “Long Telegram”, where he thoroughly analysed the Soviet system, strongly criticising it, highlighting several concerns regarding the relationship between the two countries: particularly, he stressed how the Soviet Union believed that communism and capitalism could not co-exist, and therefore capitalism has to be strongly opposed and fought. In the long telegram, Kennan quotes Stalin’s words to explain it: "In course of further development of international revolution there will emerge two centres of world significance: a socialist centre, drawing to itself the countries which tend toward socialism, and a capitalist centre, drawing to itself the countries that incline toward capitalism. Battle between these two centres for command of world economy will decide fate of capitalism and of communism in entire world."⁴⁶ The telegram, intended as a caveat for Kennan’s government, surely influenced the Truman doctrine, and was fundamental in the containment theory

⁴⁶ Kennan himself reports the words that Stalin used in a speech to a delegation of American workers in 1927.

Kennan, G. (1946). The Long Telegram.

Available on <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/coldwar/documents/episode-1/kennan.htm>

used as a foundation for American cold war policy.⁴⁷ Therefore, as tensions increased and the possibility of a peaceful coexistence between the two states diminished, in 1947, Truman launched two striking US initiatives, to contrast the spread of communism and to strongly assert the American sphere of influence in Europe. The Truman Doctrine consisted in providing political, military, and economic aid to nations facing threats from internal and external forces; this doctrine led to its practical enforcement, the European Recovery Programme, dubbed Marshall Plan. The plan started with several economic aid to Greece and Turkey; however, it soon interested all the western European countries. In some cases, such as Italy, the plan was strictly interlinked with the results of the elections: when in 1947 the possibility of a communist party victory was concrete, the United States actively intervened, by sponsoring the political campaign of other parties and even by threatening the stop of the aids in the eventuality of a red government. The elections were won by the Christian Democracy.

As financial aid was bestowed in every major Western democracy, the Soviet Union strongly opposed the interference in domestic matters, pushing for bilateral treaties rather than the multinational approach chosen and forcing all East European nations to leave the Marshall Plan. Obviously, while the plan was intended to fight communism and to generously help European countries not to let them fall under Soviets influence, it also managed to bind the countries involved to the U.S., by opening the market to import from Europe. Also China, as already mentioned before, gained something from the plan: indeed, Chang Kai-shek, who at that time was still the leader of mainland China, received 3 billion, as opposed to the 10 billion distributed in Europe. Among the other outcomes, there was the isolation of eastern European countries from the rest of Europe: in turn, this made them dependent on Moscow, which obliges its satellites to avoid entering the plan and the newly created Bretton Woods system – the International Money Fund and World Bank.⁴⁸ The Marshall Plan and more in general the Truman Doctrine, intended to create a solid relationship with the Western states of Europe, fully worked.

During the following decades, the Cold War was a constant, as the two superpowers were opposed ideologically and economically to break the equilibrium and the balance of powers that the creation of the spheres of influence caused. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization was created in 1949 as a collective defensive alliance, led by the United States and comprising several Western countries. As a response, USSR formed the Warsaw Pact, a similar organisation intended to counterweight the increasing power of NATO and to provide military aid in case of Western expansion to the member states.

With the purpose of containing communism, American foreign policy was very active: indeed, in the Korean War, the U.S. sent its troops to fight the northern communist government.

1.3.3 A historical background: USSR Dismantlement in the last decades of 1900

⁴⁷ Center for European Studies, The Cold War/ Part 1.

Available on: <https://europe.unc.edu/iron-curtain/history/the-cold-war-part-1/>

⁴⁸ McCauley, M. (2021). *Origins of the Cold War 1941–1949* (5th ed.). New York: Taylor and Francis.

In 1953 Stalin died, and as a consequence, U.S. President Eisenhower continued to increase the American sphere of influence: a focal individual in this period was the Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, who shaped American foreign policies. Dulles was a fervid speaker, known to have the figure “of a Presbyterian moralist ever ready—and eager—to do battle with the devil: that is, the communists.”⁴⁹ The US – similarly to the Soviet Union- interfered in several countries’ domestic businesses: the aim was to stop communist parties from seizing power, democratically or not, in several countries considered to be American’s friendly governments. Using the threat of the nuclear ability and infiltrating in the national system with a capillary intelligence system – the Central Intelligence Agency, CIA, was created after World War II, among other reasons, as a tool to control and influence foreign activities strategic to the United States – , the US managed to overthrow governments in the Soviet Sphere of influence, such as in Iran and Guatemala, and to assist economically and military leaders threatened to by communist expansion, as in Lebanon. In this period, as the war in Korea ended, another war started for similar reasons. Indeed, similarly to the Korean peninsula, also Vietnam was divided into two separate states: a communist government was created in the North, backed by China and by the Soviet Union, while an American-sponsored government was established in the South. As the Northern part completely got rid of French colonial ties in 1954, the communists wanted to unify the country, annexing the south, which was aligned with Western powers. The war started in 1954, and American military and political advisors were sent to the country. Active combats unit were introduced in 1961; by 1969, more than half a million troops were stationed in Vietnam. However, the North enjoyed military support from China and the Soviet Union, both willing to expand communism beyond their national borders. American troops retreated in 1973, and the war ended in 1975, as South Vietnam fell, and North Vietnam managed to control the entire Taiwanese land.

In this period, besides the confrontation between the two superpowers around the world through proxy wars, the conflict never broke out, even if, on more occasions, the confrontation was close to escalating. Scholars agree on individuating the Cuban missile crisis, which occurred in 1962 under Kennedy’s administration, as one of the most dangerous situations. As a spy plane detected Soviets nuclear missile sites on the island, an American blockade was placed around the island. For days, the world waited and hoped for a peaceful resolution, seemingly on the brink of a nuclear war. An agreement was reached between Kennedy and Khrushchev, both willing to avoid a devastating nuclear confrontation. Cuban missile sites were dismantled in exchange of an American pledge of non-invasion to the island. If the crisis was over, the cold war was not: the arms race and the space race remained constant even in the following years. However, in 1963, through the establishment of a teletype “Hotline” between Moscow and Washington and with a treaty limiting Nuclear Tests, the relationship became slightly warmer, indicating a progressive approach between the superpowers. The Cold War continued in the technological field, as winning the space race was among the two countries' main objectives.

⁴⁹ Immerman, R. (2021). *John Foster Dulles and the Diplomacy of the Cold War*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, shocking the country. He was succeeded by Johnson, who distinguished his presidency for social measures to fight poverty and assist the lowest classes. As already said, America participated in the Vietnamese conflict for the entire duration of his office, as it ended in 1968 with Nixon's election. During his presidency, Nixon managed to win the race to the moon, as on the 20th of July 1969, Apollo 11 mission, operated by the American National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), landed on the moon two astronauts, both U.S. citizens. As Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin walked on the moon, they left a plate signed by Nixon, who managed to leave a perpetual signature as a token of the moon race victory.

In 1972, as mentioned, Nixon visited China, normalising the relations between Beijing and the U.S.; in this period, a peaceful and collaborative approach towards USSR was inaugurated, even if some latent tension endured. Soon later, after the Watergate scandal, to avoid impeachment, Nixon resigned from his post, and was replaced by Ford, then followed by Carter. The 1980s were characterised by Reagan's administration. Accusing his predecessors of "appeasement" towards USSR, he concluded the period of détente –however, in the last years of Carter's administration, the relationship between the two superpowers was again tense –, adopting a hard line and reaching, again, level of tensions similar to those of the Cuban missile crisis. Reagan pressed USSR with another arms race, further debilitating the Soviet Union, which was already weakened when, in 1985, Gorbachev became president. His administration, coinciding with the beginning of Reagan's second term, marked the end of the cold war. Indeed, the reformist line of Gorbachev ended years of economic and political struggle, both domestically and in the satellite countries. Gorbachev's policies led to several changes: *glasnost*, openness, and *perestroika*, restructuring, represented a significant departure from the previous policies of secrecy and censorship. Together, they aimed at significantly reforming the country, by both revitalising USSR's struggling economy, with a market-oriented shift, and by increasing transparency and openness in government, promoting a wider public discussion and debate and eliminating corruption. The policies and the U.S. policy of engagement led to other negotiations on armaments control and the limitation of nuclear weapons. Meanwhile, Reagan was pursuing the so-called Reaganite political ideology, which also entails the build-up of a massive arsenal and focusing on maintaining high defence spending to support the U.S.'s position as a superpower.

The Cold War was gradually ending, as the Soviet Union's influence on East European countries was diminishing, and several countries were replacing the communist government with democracies, usually closer to the Western block. Democratic governments were established in East Germany, Czechoslovakia, and Poland, and as the reunification of the two Germanies occurred in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall, it was clear that the bilateral balance between the two superpowers was about to become heavily unbalanced, as the U.S. was maintaining and further expanding their influences and Soviet communism was to be completely

beaten. Indeed, only two years later, in 1991, USSR itself collapsed, giving rise to 15 new nations, including Russia, led by an anti-communist leader.^{50 51}

1.3.4 The most recent history: Internal Changes and the Fear of Terrorism

After Reagan's double mandate, in 1988 George H.W. Bush was elected. Former vice president and director of the CIA, he decided to maintain a rather cautious and careful approach to foreign affairs. During his presidency, the U.S. officially won the Cold War, as Soviet communism was defeated. Moreover, he supported Kuwait in the 1990-1991 Gulf War against Iraq, in response to the latter's invasion of Kuwait. Bush and the United Kingdom deployed troops in Saudi Arabia, urging other countries to do the same, to follow the strong condemnations and sanctions imposed by United Nations. The war, won by the coalition led by the U.S., marked an important point, as it set a precedent in the American use of force abroad, defining the balance of force and the far-reaching area of influence in the post-Cold War era. The U.S. policy was still aggressive in the international scenario, trying "to instil democracy in lands that have known tyranny" (Boot, 2003)⁵².

In 1992 Bill Clinton was elected as president, and he mainly focused on domestic issues. However, the U.S. was still present with important deployment and presence abroad, both as a member of the United Nations, as a member of NATO or on its own. In the mid-1990s, Clinton intervened in Europe trying to stabilise the Balkans, resulting in several bombings that cause casualties among soldiers and civilians. Moreover, he shelled Iraq several times as a response of Saddam Hussein's several violations of UN resolutions against him and the dictatorship he was exercising in the country. Islam radicalism in the U.S., as a retaliation to the massive American presence in the Middle East, opened the terrorist attack period, with the World Trade Center in New York 1993.

Clinton was followed by George W. Bush, who swore in in 2001. As the economic progress of the late 1990s was coming to an end, America and the rest of the world were shocked by the terrorist attack that occurred on September 9, 2001. Four planes were hijacked and crashed. Two of them completely destroyed the towers of the World Trade Center, one hit the Pentagon in Virginia, while the last one crashed in Pennsylvania. About three thousand people were killed, and as Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for the attack, the U.S. invaded Afghanistan with the objective to destabilise the Taliban Islamic fundamentalist government and to arrest several al-Qaeda leaders, including bin Laden himself. With the invasion of Afghanistan and with a definitive invasion of Iraq, the American presence in the Middle East became even more consistent.

Domestically, Bush managed to recover the economy from the recession that occurred in early 2000s, even if this economic boom would later bring the explosion of the financial bubble and the consecutive crisis in 2007-

⁵⁰ Armstrong, D. & Goldstein, E. (2013). *The End of the Cold War* (1st ed.). New York: Taylor and Francis.

⁵¹ Hudson, C., & Davies, G. (2008). *Ronald Reagan and the 1980s*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan US.

⁵² Boot, M (November 2003). "Neither New nor Nefarious: The Liberal Empire Strikes Back," *Current History*, Vol. 102, no. 667.

2008. He had also to cope with the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, which resulted in 1392 fatalities and caused damage for billion, mainly in New Orleans.

Bush administration ended in 2008, with the election of Barack Obama, whose administration will be further discussed in the next chapter.

1.4 PRC and ROC: Introduction to the Problem

1.4.1 Bilateral and International Relations between PRC, ROC, and the U.S.

The thesis will now introduce the bone of contention, as to say the issue of recognising who is *the* China. The previous pages aimed to give an exhaustive overview of the historical processes that shaped the countries involved under analysis, by looking at the most significant economic and political pushes and events that occurred before the period delimited by the beginning of Obama's presidency by the ending of Trump's one. With that goal, a focus on internal main clashes and development has been kept to this moment, postponing examining the three actors' foreign and international involvement. This part will therefore focus on how the People's Republic of China, the Republic of China and the United States have dealt with the subject matter before the period under scrutiny, profoundly analysing the issue of external sovereignty – as to say, to which extent was Taiwan recognised as an independent actor, and how did it affect the relations with other states – the lengthy debated One China Policy and American posture towards the issue. To begin with, it is fundamental to fully recognise how the world's understanding of “China” has changed in the last eighty years, from the end of the Chinese Civil War onward. In this subchapter, the main turning points in the bilateral relations between the two Asian states will be discussed, as well as the relations with the United States in the second half of the previous century.

If before the Civil War everyone agreed on identifying China as the continental mainland and the island of Taiwan, after 1949, the situation became unclear. When Chiang Kai-shek, after having lost the war, decided to seek repair on the island, he intended to use it only as a military basis to organise a counterattack to regain control over the mainland the KMT used to administrate. However, the Communist government quickly stabilised its power, by effectively organising the country and the army and making it impossible for the nationalist factions to overthrow it and seize power again. On the other side of the strait, the Kuomintang was enhancing policies to re-establish law and order on the island, making Taipei the provisional capital. At that moment, it was difficult to understand if war was still ongoing, as the first observer thought of the situation as another stage of the Civil War, in which the PLA had conquered the entirety of the mainland and the KMT was repaired on one of the last Chinese regions: the possible results foreseeable after this period of impasse were either the complete unification of pre-1949 China – therefore with both mainland China and Taiwan – or the comeback of nationalism. Indeed, even after the retreat of the KMT, the war continued on the continent, with thousands of soldiers left behind to continue the fight in the form of guerrilla and to attempt to stop the

Communist establishment. Soon after, in 1949, the PLA failed to conquer Quemoy and Matsu Island groups, which remained Nationalist and will be at the centre of two future crises in the following years.

Initially, Clinton claimed that America did not want to interfere in what seemed to be a domestic matter, and President Truman, in the “Statement on Formosa”, on January 5, 1950, addressed the press as follows: “The United States has no predatory designs on Formosa, or on any other Chinese territory. The United States has no desire to obtain special rights or privileges, or to establish military bases on Formosa at this time. Nor does it have any intention of utilising its Armed Forces to interfere in the present situation. The United States Government will not pursue a course which will lead to involvement in the civil conflict in China.”⁵³ This statement was consecutive to a UN Resolution that called all the states to refrain from seeking to influence the outcome of the war significantly or to acquire any special privilege within the territory of China. In this first period, the UN recognised Chang Kai-shek government as the only legitimate government of China.

However, in the following couple of years it became clear that Taiwan was ready to become a Western outpost: already from the beginning of the war in Korea, the issue of avoiding the spread of Communism was paramount for Western liberal democracy. As the war broke out, with the involvement of both the PRC and the U.S., Truman reversed the course from Statement of Formosa, and deployed the Seventh Fleet to shield the island from an upcoming attack to annex it to mainland China. Therefore, Mao had to postpone the attack, entering a military stalemate that would last for three decades, even if several escalations brought the possibility of war closer. In 1953, after the conclusion of the Korean War and with the new Eisenhower presidency, the U.S. changed their posture into cross-strait relations from defensive to offensive, claiming that the Seventh fleet would no longer prevent ROC’s activity against the PRC. The new policy of “unleashing Chang” against mainland China consisted also of several aids, both politically and militarily, intended to train and advise the nationalist army. Consequently, the idea of a joint operation was also considered, with the ROC forces under the U.S. command, changing the Taiwanese government’s attitude from a defensive and survival one to a bolder one, attempting to conquer mainland China again. From this point onward, Chiang’s confidence grew, and it became clear that, having guaranteed the survival of ROC, it was even time to entertain the idea of returning to mainland China.⁵⁴

In 1954 the first significant crisis between the two Chinas occurred: the First Taiwan Strait Crisis was a brief armed conflict between the PLA and the nationalist army. The crisis escalated as a consequence of the deployment of Nationalist troops in the islands of Quemoy and Matsu, close to the Chinese shore, and the following construction of defensive and military basis. The two islands were considered, by both sides, as a possible launching pad for a Nationalist invasion, therefore as soon as the military presence significantly increased, representing a concrete threat to Chinese integrity, PRC started to bomb Quemoy, soon expanding the scope of the shelling to include Matsu and other islands in the zone. As a response, US policymakers

⁵³ Truman. Harry S Truman, “Statement On Formosa” January 5, 1950.

Available on: <https://china.usc.edu/harry-s-truman-“statement-formosa”-january-5-1950>

⁵⁴ Matsumoto, H. (2012), The First Taiwan Crisis and China’s “Border” Dispute Around Taiwan. *Euroasia Bprder Review*, 3 (Special Issue), 75-91.

considered several options, weighing the integrity of their outpost against communism on the one hand and the possibility of being drawn into a war on the other. In 1954, the Mutual Defense Treaty was signed, asserting the continued support to Taiwan legitimacy and active involvement in the event of a broader conflict, without, however, committing to defend the off-shore islands of Quemoy and Matsu. Therefore, the United States was not obliged to intervene, nor had an interest in doing it as long as the scope of the conflict remained the islands near the Chinese shore. However, the situation deteriorated in late 1954 and early 1955, prompting Eisenhower to intervene.⁵⁵ In 1955 the Formosa Resolution was passed by Congress, which authorised the president to act at his discretion to defend Taiwan: “the President of the United States be and he hereby is authorized to employ the Armed Forces of the United States as he deems necessary for the specific purpose of securing and protecting Formosa and the Pescadores against armed attack, this authority to include the securing and protection of such related positions and territories of that area now in friendly hands and the taking of such other measures as he judges to be required or appropriate in assuring the defense of Formosa and the Pescadores.”⁵⁶ The American commitment changed the Chinese plan, as in April 1955, at the Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung, PRC Foreign Minister Zhou Enlai opened the negotiation with the US. The negotiation, at Geneva, resulted in a ceasefire.

In the aftermath of the first crisis, Washington was arming the ROC, even deploying tactical nuclear weapons on the island to deter future aggression by PRC, which was itself building up its military in the strait area. Meanwhile, Mao was planning another attack on the two islands. As America was occupied in the Middle East, in 1958 Mao decided that the moment had come, and in July 1958, the second Taiwan Strait Crisis started. As a pretext, he claimed that China's active role as an opposer the US imperialism was crucial, to pin down American troops to provide relief to the Middle East and to slow down the American plan to spread its influence all over the globe. As claimed by Michael Sheng, “He now saw the offshore islands conflict as part of a global struggle in which China would play a big role”⁵⁷. Besides the pretext, the objective was to force an evacuation of the two islands. While the United States refused to issue any official statement, they did intensify the military assistance to Taiwan. In August, the Joint Chiefs of Staff urged the White House to intervene, even utilising nuclear weapons if necessary. As America intervened, even the second crisis was quickly sedated. Most military operations ceased in September – even if minor clashes and artillery rounds were shot even in the following months. PRC announced a unilateral ceasefire, even if optional: the condition was that no American ship would be allowed to escort ROC military forces. The condition was met, and the situation remained stable despite the war being never officially ended. From this moment onward, the two factions decided to shell each other on alternate days, and soon live shells were replaced by propaganda leaflets. To

⁵⁵ Office of the Historian. The Taiwan Strait Crises: 1954-55 and 1958.

Available on: <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1953-1960/taiwan-strait-crises>

⁵⁶ Formosa Resolution, Congress of the United States. 1955.

Available on: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/STATUTE-69/pdf/STATUTE-69-Pg7.pdf>

⁵⁷ Sheng, M. (2008). Mao and China's Relations with the Superpowers in the 1950s. *Modern China*, Volume 34 Number 4 October 2008

fully comprehend the period's happenings, the Memorandum written in 1966 by Morton Halperin is exhaustive and underlines all the details that lead to the situation at the time of writing.⁵⁸

After the ceasefires, the situation remained stable during the 1960s. Since 1955, Ambassadorial talks have been carried on between China and the United States, and they continued for the entirety of the decades: these meetings consisted in the meeting of individuals of ambassadorial rank to represent the country's interest, to ease the tension and avoid misunderstandings that could possibly lead to war. However, several issues mined the positive outcome of the talks. First, the United States did not recognise Beijing as the legitimate government and was unwilling to engage in high-level meetings. Additionally, one of the conditions for more decisive talks was the PRC's complete renouncement of the use of war towards Taiwan. However, these talks continued on and off, representing a means to relieve the tension and to contain possible escalation, also considering that in 1964 China developed and tested the nuclear bomb. The talks were not decisive, however they were fundamental to pave the way to future negotiations.

After the talks reached a hiatus, signs of rapprochement negotiations started in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The reasons for this were mainly strategic for the US, as in the light of Sino-Soviet tensions, a normalisation of the relation with Beijing could have been used as a lever against Moscow, specifically in the ongoing war in Vietnam. Besides the ambassadorial talks, the relationship between the two countries has always been tense, with no official diplomatic talk. The rapprochement talks started officially in 1971, during Nixon's presidency, his national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, visited the country twice before the official presidential visit in the country the year after, through mediation with the Pakistan government, which had strong ties with China. In the same year, the 1971 World Table Tennis Championships were held in Nagoya, Japan, and they were an occasion to start the exchange of players between the two countries, with an American delegation that was invited to China less than a month later than the end of the tournament in Japan. The encounters between Chinese and American players became known as "Ping-pong diplomacy" and further relieved the tension. Nixon toured China in February 1972; the event was widely televised and viewed, causing a sensation both domestically and abroad as the unprecedented visit allowed millions who had seen little about China in the previous decade, to discover and get to know more about a debated country. Moreover, it was always widely noticed as one of the fiercest Republican and anti-communist politicians was the one to inaugurate a path of peaceful coexistence.⁵⁹ He met Mao Zedong, eleven years after Eisenhower's visit to Chiang Kai-shek in Taipei. As a result of this visit, trade was opened between the two countries, which decided to temporarily put aside the issue of Taiwan to reach a cooperation unbelievable only a few years before. China agreed to solve the matter peacefully, despite the question about the status being left open. The visit was concluded with a joint communique, the Shanghai communique, aimed at inaugurating people-to-people contact and agreeing that both countries should work for a bigger framework rather than fossilise on the several

⁵⁸ Halperin, M. (1966). *The 1958 Taiwan Straits Crisis: A Documented History*, Rand Corporation.

⁵⁹ Hughes, K., *Richard Nixon: Foreign Affairs* UVA Miller Center.
Available on: <https://millercenter.org/president/nixon/foreign-affairs>

differences and incongruences. It marked the first official outcome between the two countries in over thirty years.

Meanwhile, in 1971, UN resolution 2758 marked another fundamental step in the path of Beijing's recognition by the international community. Indeed, the General Assembly, reunited in a plenary meeting, decided to admit the People's Republic of China representatives into the United Nations, explicitly claiming that Chang Kai-shek's representation was unlawful. The resolution, entitled "Restoration of the lawful right of the People's Republic of China in the United Nations", meant that the ROC representatives had to be replaced by PRC's representatives in the UN and any other related organisations.⁶⁰ Despite several countries had already changed the status of the PRC in the matter of recognition (the first one being the UK, which had recognised Beijing as legitimate China since 1950), 1971 marked a fundamental year, as from this moment onward, it became clear that Taiwan would be diplomatically isolated in the near foreseeable future, while PRC was preparing to be unanimously seen and conceived as the only legitimate government and representative of China.

However, despite the precedent approach with the U.S. and the UN recognition, Washington diplomatically considered Taiwan only legitimate China until 1979, when the Sino-American relationship was fully normalised. In 1978⁶¹, a joint communique between Beijing and Washington established diplomatic relations between the United States of America and the People's Republic of China.

JOINT COMMUNIQUE ON THE ESTABLISHMENT OF DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS BETWEEN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

JANUARY 1, 1979

The United States of America and the People's Republic of China have agreed to recognise each other and to establish diplomatic relations as of January 1, 1979.

The United States of America recognises the Government of the People's Republic of China as the sole legal Government of China. Within this context, the people of the United States will maintain cultural, commercial, and other unofficial relations with the people of Taiwan.

The United States of America and the People's Republic of China reaffirm the principles agreed on by the two sides in the Shanghai Communique² and emphasise once again that:

—Both wish to reduce the danger of international military conflict.

—Neither should seek hegemony in the Asia-Pacific region or in any other region of the world and each is opposed to efforts by any other country or group of countries to establish such hegemony.

—Neither is prepared to negotiate on behalf of any third party or to enter into agreements or understandings with the other directed at other states.

⁶⁰ Restoration of the Lawful Rights of the People's Republic of China in the United Nations. UN General Assembly (26th sess.: 1971).

Available on: <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/192054?ln=en>

⁶¹ Carter was the American president at that time, while Deng Xiaoping had recently succeeded Mao in China.

—The Government of the United States of America acknowledges the Chinese position that there is but one China and Taiwan is part of China.

—Both believe that normalisation of Sino-American relations is not only in the interest of the Chinese and American peoples but also contributes to the cause of peace in Asia and the world.⁶²

The Joint Communiqué is of fundamental importance, as it represents the beginning of the official diplomatic relations between the two countries. Its consequences in the international scenario marked a turning point in history. The communiqué is based on and reaffirms the principles laid down in the Shanghai communiqué of 1972, however it goes way further because “recognising the PRC as the legitimate government of China” coincided with ending the U.S. official recognition of Taiwan as the official government of Taiwan. The embassy was migrated from Taipei to Beijing, and none was re-established in Taiwan. After these events, PRC sought to peacefully annex the island, exploiting the change of recognition in the international field as leverage. The proposal, known as the “Three Links”, concerned the opening up of postal, transportation and trade connections, intending to unify the country under the sole capital of Beijing. The stoic Taiwanese response to the sudden isolation and the Chinese proposal was the reiteration of the “Three No’s policy”, stating that there would be No contact, No negotiations and No compromise with the mainland. This policy will be later softened to allow for goods and people movement, despite firmly stating the complete contrariety to the unification. The 1980s saw a change in Taiwanese cross-strait relations, lowering the tension and looking forward to at least an amicable exchange, as Chinese influence in the international field and industrialisation process could not be ignored.

On April 10, 1979, Carter signed the Taiwan Relations Act into law, creating domestic authority for maintaining unofficial relations with Taipei, after the island's government was legally delegitimised. The Act condemned any future military intervention from the PRC to destabilise the status quo and reassessed the commitment of the United States to provide Taiwan with armaments and “defence services” to maintain Taiwan's self-defence capability. Moreover, it also marked the establishment of the American Institute in Taiwan, AIT, and gave it the means and capabilities of an embassy, establishing it de facto diplomatic relations with the government despite the change in the official recognition status. The Taiwan Relation Act was seen as a way to maintain the situation stable, warning China about the possible reaction in case of aggression and

⁶² Due to the historical importance of the Communiqué, here is reported the first part. Joint Communiqué on the establishment of diplomatic relations between the United States of America and the People’s Republic of China. Address by President Carter to the Nation. Washington, December 15, 1978. Available on: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v01/d104#:~:text=JANUARY%201%2C%201979-,The%20United%20States%20of%20America%20and%20the%20People%27s%20Republic%20of,sole%20legal%20Government%20of%20China.>

strengthening the ties with a significant and strategic ally, without renouncing the benefits that the normalisation of the Sino-American relationship implied, mainly in the scope of the Cold-War.^{63 64}

In 1982, under Reagan's administration, a third joint communique was issued, regarding American arms sales to Taiwan. The communique reaffirms American recognition of Beijing as only legitimate China, despite maintaining solid and continuous economic and cultural ties with Taiwan. The matter of arms sales did not find a resolution in the meetings that preceded the communique, however the U.S. agreed to lowering the sales gradually until a complete resolution. On the other hand, both countries strongly affirmed their willingness to prevent any armed conflict. In contradiction with the communique, in July of the same year, Taiwan presented six points to the American government to be used as guidelines in conducting United States – Taiwan relations. The six Assurances, that Washington granted Taiwan with, included the maintenance of the Taiwan Relations Act and the promise not to set a date for the termination of the arms sales to Taiwan. Moreover, they pledged the United States not to mediate in cross-strait relations, alter its stance on Chinese sovereignty over Taiwan, and not intervene as a mediator in the talks between the two Chinas.⁶⁵

However, even if this was the case and these six assurances were respected, Reagan in his administration worked to bring coexistence with China to the next level, aiming at creating a cooperation system to contain and fight USSR: he visited Beijing twice and opened the weapon market to Beijing as well, providing armaments to both sides of the strait. Meanwhile, as China was expanding and modernising its arsenal, so was Taipei, both with the help of America and on its own, mainly by developing the technological and industrial field to become as self-sufficient as possible.

The 1980s were characterised by a deep modernising process in China, which had loosened the objective of annexing Taiwan through war and was more prone to peacefully annex the island through diplomatic and political means. However, the democratisation and westernisation process occurring in Taipei, added to the Tiananmen Incident of 1989, changed several countries' views and stances, making China a pariah and, consequently, allowing Taiwan to be watched with extreme favour. Despite some brief opposition and impasse in these decades, an overall approach between the two sides of the strait occurred. Over the years, as Taiwan opened up for people to visit mainland China, economic and trade activities quickly increased. Moreover, both China and Taiwan opened institutions entitled to manage cross-strait relations: in 1991, the Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Strait (ARETS) became operational in Beijing, and so did the Strait Exchange Foundation (SEF) in Taipei. In this period, both governments aimed to unify the country, at least officially, under a sole capital city and government: which one was unclear. When in 1992, the two agencies, ARATS and SEF, met in Hong Kong operating as proxies for their respective governments, they met in Hong Kong, the question of assessing the island's political status became important, also for the

⁶³ Taiwan Relations Act. Congress of the United States. 1979.

Available on: <https://www.congress.gov/96/statute/STATUTE-93/STATUTE-93-Pg14.pdf>

⁶⁴ Yates, S. (1999). *The Taiwan Relations Act After 20 Years: Keys To Past And Future Success*. The Heritage Foundation. Executive Summary.

⁶⁵ Six Assurances to Taiwan, 1982.

Available on: <http://www.taiwandocuments.org/assurances.htm>

administration of daily problems⁶⁶. They did not reach any agreement, so they decided that both countries should orally state their position separately. Both governments supported the One China policy, meaning that only one China, which includes both mainland China and Taiwan, should exist. However, from the viewpoint of communist authorities, “one China” refers to the PRC, while from the Taiwanese perspective, “one China” refers to the ROC.⁶⁷ Both countries used this consensus to achieve their own objectives and to sustain their relative stances on the issue. Beijing used it as a basis for justifying its narrative, while the ambiguity always gave Taipei enough room to consider itself fully independent and to claim its sovereignty over mainland China. The chairmen of the two agencies met again in 1993 in Singapore, to promote cross-strait trade and people-to-people exchange. This second meeting was dubbed the Wang-Koo summit, from the names of the two chairmen: Wang Daohan (ARATS) and Koo Chen-fu (SEF).

Despite the positive relations, in 1995-1996 the Third Taiwan Strait Crisis erupted. After refusing to grant a visa to Taiwanese President Lee Teng-hui in 1994, they reversed the decision in 1995, to allow him to hold a speech at his alma mater Cornell University about the ongoing democratisation process in Taiwan. Internal debate in PRC focused on how to coerce the United States into ending the tacit support for Taiwan’s cause, which implicitly meant abandoning the One China policy. In response to the visa granted to Lee, China suspended cross-strait dialogue and downgraded diplomatic contacts with the United States. Moreover, between July and August, the Chinese army conducted ballistic missile launch exercises in the strait. As a response, the US, seeking to preserve its interests with China but also its credibility in the region, deployed two aircraft carriers battle groups to send a strong message. It was mainly provoked by the belief that the PLA was not strong enough to engage in a war and was more a demonstrative act rather than a real preparation for using force. On the other hand, Taiwan downplayed the threat, by increasing the defence system and reassuring the public. Massive intelligence cooperation was conducted between Taiwan and Washington and, despite the crisis was considered severe, it was never perceived as a potential war.⁶⁸

As the crisis was averted, Taiwanese fear and resentment towards China grew to the point that, in 2000 Chen Shui-bian from the Progressive Democratic Party was elected: he was a fervent advocator for independence and in his inauguration speech he addressed the question of Taiwanese status with the famous Four Noes and One Without. The policy, to be enforced as long as China refrained from using force, consisted of not declaring independence, not changing the national name, not promoting the state-to-state special status with China and not holding any referendum to change the status quo, in favour of independence or unification. The one without regarded on the other hand the question of abolishing the Guidelines for National Unification, not the National Unification Council.⁶⁹ He also pushed for cooperation and reconciliation, avoiding

⁶⁶ The two agencies met couple of months before in Beijing to address technical matters such as the compensation for loss mails and the authentication of documents exchanged across the straits.

⁶⁷ Chen, Y. & Cohen, J. (2019). *China-Taiwan Relations Re-Examined: The “1992 Consensus” And Cross-Strait Agreement*. Penn Law: Legal Scholarship Repository.

⁶⁸ Guinness K. & Saunders P. (2002) *Averting Escalation and Avoiding War: Lessons from the 1995-1996 Taiwan Strait Crisis*. Institute for National Strategic Studies.

⁶⁹ Chen Shui-bian Inaugural speech. President Chen's 520 Inaugural Speech: Taiwan Stands Up: Advancing to an Uplifting Era(excerpt). May 20, 2000.

“unnecessary obstacles”, recognizing the miracle of economic openness created by Deng and Jiang. However, as already mentioned in Chapter 1.1.5, Chen’s tenure was for many reasons ignominious, as was the end of it. Indeed, an intense political polarization and negative economic growth started an exodus of many important companies – mainly of their operational parts - that sought to take the advantage of Chinese better fiscal conditions and cheaper labor costs. Chen became quickly unpopular, even in the United States, to the point that the presidential personnel usually refused to talk to him and he could neither transit nor enter the United States. His sharp decrease in popularity meant that the KMT was rising again, and in 2005 a delegation of the Nationalist party visited China, led by the vice-leader of the party in an attempt to ease tensions in cross strait relations.⁷⁰ However, even if the KMT party engaged in this visit to increase the contacts, at a more institutional level Chen’s tenure was not well received by Beijing. If, on the one hand, people-to-people contacts and talks with apolitical or opposition groups led to more peaceful coexistence, institutional hostilities peaked in 2005, with the promulgation of the Anti-Secession law by the National People’s Congress. The law was intended to establish a dominant position unilaterally, asserting the PRC’s view on One China principle and claiming that the Taiwanese matter should be resolved internally. More importantly, the law established that the use of force might be used under the circumstances of unilateral secession by Taiwan, or in case any other peaceful means to achieve unification should be exhausted.⁷¹

Meanwhile, the relations between China and the United States were reaching a point of complete normalisation. As the reciprocal visits became an established convention rather than a historical event, the two countries worked together for economic and financial cooperation. However, some minor incidents threatened to jeopardise the situation. An unintentional bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade during the NATO air campaign against Serbian forces occupying Kosovo killed three journalists. It caused several anti-US protests in China, and the crisis was resolved only by Clinton’s formal apologies. Another incident was represented by the crash of an American and Chinese military jet over a contentious part of the South China Sea, claimed by China and Vietnam. Again, after ten days of tension and after careful negotiations, also this crisis ended. From an economic point of view, in 2000 the US-China Relations Act aimed at completely normalising the economic relations between the two countries, granting permanent trade relations among them. It was a prelude to China joining the World Trade Organization in 2001 and represented an institutionalisation of an already very hot trade route.

In 2008, as China surpassed Japan as the larger holder of US debts, the ties between the two countries are of paramount importance. The cross-straits relations, under Chen’s administration witnessed a period of increasing tension at the institutional level, even though the exchange of goods and talks at the non-institutional level grew significantly with the KMT’s visit to mainland China and the continuing negotiations between ARATS and SEF. No high-level contacts occurred in this period, and the 2005 Anti-Secession Law marked a

Available

https://www.mac.gov.tw/en/News_Content.aspx?n=BEC36A4A0BB0663C&sms=BF821F021B282251&s=96E288EA0E9DEE17

⁷⁰ Wu, Z. (2005) KMT makes China return in historic trip to ease tensions. *The Standard*, March 29, 2005

⁷¹ Anti-Secession Law. National People’s Congress. 2005.

Available on: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004_2009/documents/fd/d-cn2005042601/d-cn2005042601en.pdf

significant attempt to isolate Taiwan. Meanwhile, China continued the process of build-up of the army, becoming a recognised and threatening power. As a response to the isolation attempt advanced by China, the U.S. strengthened their relationship with Taipei, increasing the arms sale and the volume of trade.

In this context, Obama was elected in 2008, concurrently with Ma Yeng-jeou's election in Taiwan, which marked the return to power of the KMT and the consequent rapprochement between Beijing and Taipei.

1.4.2 One China Policy and One China Principle

At the basis of the contention, there is the different views the two actors across the strait have of themselves and the other. The purpose of the previous pages was to explain the historical context that led to this different understanding, which is unclear and had been exploited by both to state their legitimacy and superiority over the other government.

First of all, it is important to differentiate the One China Principle from the One China Policy. The former refers to an unchangeable and core principle, an assumption that influences but does not shape the way policies are promulgated or enforced. The principle is advocated by the People's Republic of China, and claims that there is only one China, and Taiwan is a part of China. One China Policy is formulated on the principle, however it entails the various policies and solutions formulated to solve the Taiwanese issue. A policy is adaptable and can adjust and be interpreted. A principle is immutable.⁷² As Jessica Drun noted in her article for the Center for Advanced China Research, the principle came into effect in 1949, when the PRC was trying to establish diplomatic relations with other countries and therefore had to be recognised as the legitimate government representing the entirety of China, and implied that other countries should refrain from establishing diplomatic relations with Taiwan authorities. Under this principle, Beijing seeks reunification and the peaceful incorporation of Taiwan. One China policy- or rather policies, as Drun notices- are each individual country's approach to Taiwan and China, which is useful to consistently undertaking relations with both authorities. In her understanding, each country has its own One China policy: the author gives the example of the United States' One China policy, claiming that it is grounded in the Joint Communiques, in the Taiwan Relations Act and in the Six Assurances, yet is never explicitly outlined⁷³.

The terms are often misleading, also because every party involved used them repeatedly in an ambiguous way. Before the 1990s, each side agreed on identifying only one geographical entity named China, which included both mainland China and Taiwan, and each side claimed the legal jurisdiction and sovereignty over said geographical area; however, neither side managed to practically enforce the sovereignty on the entirety of the geographical entity, therefore two different governments and authorities developed in Beijing and in Taipei.

As said, the term One China "policy" refers to the sets of policies that other countries adopt in addressing the issue of Taiwan, therefore, for the continuation of the thesis the One China policy that will be

⁷² Hsieh, M. (2019). One China "Policy" vs "Principle": how language is used to obscure discussion on Taiwan. New Bloom.

⁷³ Brun, J. (2017) One China, Multiple Interpretations. Center For Advanced China Research.

analysed is the American one -unless if explicitly stated otherwise: the sets of communique, treaties and statements that acknowledge the existence of a sole legal China.

In addressing what One China means, it is fundamental to look upon the 1992 Consensus, where the two sides of the strait agreed on the existence of only one China and agreed to disagree on which one should it be, leaving open many interpretations. These interpretations had changed during the course of history, both because of internal pushes and because of major international events. However, it is important to notice how the two sides interpreted the 1992 Consensus and what the results of the interpretations were.

In 1992, the Taiwanese National Unification Council promulgated the official interpretation of the consensus, claiming that:

“Both sides of the Taiwan Strait agree that there is only one China. However, the two sides of the Strait have different opinions as to the meaning of " one China. " To Peking, " one China " means " the People's Republic of China (PRC)," with Taiwan to become a "Special Administrative Region " after unification. Taipei ,on the other hand, considers " one China " to mean the Republic of China (ROC), founded in 1912 and with de jure sovereignty over all of China. The ROC, however, currently has jurisdiction only over Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen, and Matsu. Taiwan is part of China, and the Chinese mainland is part of China as well.”⁷⁴

However, even within Taiwan this view is not accepted by every party and political force. Indeed, the Democratic Progressive Party rejects the One China Principle altogether, claiming a completely independent country.

On the side of the strait, the preamble of the People’s Republic of China states that:

“Taiwan is part of the sacred territory of the People’s Republic of China. It is the sacred duty of all the Chinese people, including our fellow Chinese in Taiwan, to achieve the great reunification of the motherland.”⁷⁵

To sum up, One China principle is the principle that there is a sole legitimate China, that mainland China is part of this entity, and that Taiwan is part of it, too. It is the basis upon which the entire Beijing narrative on reunification lies. In PRC, this principle is considered immutable, and its agreement is a prerogative to start diplomatic talks with every state. In Taiwan, the idea of a unique Chinese country, under nationalist rule, was strong until the 1990s, both under Chang Kai-shek and his son. If initially the claims on the totality of China came from both shores of the strait, nowadays Taiwan advocates for its independence, and it considers itself a sovereign and independent state, whose foreign policies should be conducted “in a

⁷⁴ One China. National Unification Council. The Meaning of "One China" Adopted by the National Unification Council Taipei, August 1, 1992.

Available on: https://web.archive.org/web/20090301061906/http://www.mac.gov.tw/big5/rpir/2nda_4.htm

⁷⁵ Constitution of the People’s Republic of China.

Available on: <http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/constitution2019/201911/1f65146fb6104dd3a2793875d19b5b29.shtml>

spirit of independence and self-reliance and based on the principle of equality and reciprocity”⁷⁶. A fundamental cornerstone of the principle is the above-mentioned 1992 Consensus: in 2017, Xi Jinping, in the opening ceremony of the 19th Chinese Communist National Congress, addressed the Taiwan issue stating that “The 1992 Consensus embodies the one-China principle and defines the fundamental nature of cross-strait relations.”⁷⁷

On the other hand, the concept of “one China policy” implies other states’ understanding of the legitimacy of China. The United States regulates its approach towards the issue using the three Joint Communiqué, the Taiwan Relations Act and the Six Assurances mentioned above as guidelines.

As long as the participation in international organizations, Taiwan lost its seat in the United Nations in 1971, when the PRC delegates replaced the ROC ones. The United Nations, from that moment on, have always recognised the existence of a sole legitimate Chinese government, the one in Beijing. From Taiwan, the requests were initially to gain full recognition again, but in the 1990s the policy changed. Indeed, several attempts to join, partially or fully, the United Nations started from the early 1980s, with Lee Teng-hui presidency. From 1993, in accordance with his “pragmatic diplomacy”, the president started to ask for some form of special recognition in consideration of the exceptionality of the situation. The approach aimed at establishing Taiwan as a sovereign state was however opposed by China and by all the other states who embraced a strict One China policy. Later on, in 1996, another lower-profile approach was aimed at getting some form of representation on the international stage, which was again opposed, successfully, by China. In the following years, several claims were presented to the United Nations, all fiercely opposed by the PRC and, therefore, failed. In 2007, Taiwan changed its approach requesting for full membership, wanting its sovereignty legitimised seeking representation for the territories over which it has de facto jurisdiction and that it administers on a daily basis. However, this proposal was, again, refused. Ban Ki-moon, secretary general of the UN at that moment, refused to accept the application for full membership, rejecting it as legally impossible to receive as “by resolution 2758 (XXVI) of 1971, the General Assembly decided to recognise the representatives of the People’s Republic of China as the only legitimate representatives of China to the United Nations. This has been the official position of the United Nations and has not changed since 1971.”^{78 79} It is therefore clear that the United Nations officially supports, and so they consequently behave, the recognition of a single legitimate Chinese government, represented by Beijing.

To understand the One China Principle, the One China policies with its many interpretations and the differences between Taiwanese and Chinese claims is fundamental in order to understand how the Sino-American, the Taiwanese American and the cross-strait relations have been conducted throughout the year

⁷⁶ Constitution of The Republic of China, Article 141.

Available on: https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Taiwan_2005.pdf?lang=en

⁷⁷ Xi Jinping. Opening ceremony of the 19th CPC National Congress.

Available on: <http://live.china.org.cn/2017/10/17/opening-ceremony-of-the-19th-cpc-national-congress/>

⁷⁸ Ban Ki-moon. Transcript of press conference by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon at United Nations Headquarters, 18 September 2007.

Available on: <https://press.un.org/en/2007/sgsm11164.doc.htm>

⁷⁹ Winkler, S. (2012) Taiwan UN Dilemma: To Be or Not To Be. Brookings.

under the lights of these assumptions, even if somehow without full clarity and often adjusting and interpreting them according to each own convenience.

1.4.3 American Strategic Ambiguity

Strategic Ambiguity refers to a deliberately unclear policy, which, towards different means, aims at reaching a certain interest or objective without permitting the other parties involved to know the intentions and possible actions or reactions. Ambiguity is not a prerogative of the United States, and is widely used to achieve stability or any other particular interest a country may have. Several countries, for example, deliberately keep their military capacity unclear: nuclear ambiguity is widely employed by several countries, such as Israel, while others are unclear about their response in case of an attack.

In this particular situation, the United States has always been unclear about their reaction to a possible escalation in the strait. The aim of this uncertainty is to allow the United States to pursue its own interest in dealing with both Beijing and Taipei, avoiding any possible escalation by means of deterrence and diplomatic missions, however without crossing a line that would suggest an open endorsement to one side or the other. Substantially, what the United States has been tried to achieve in the past decades is the preservation of the status quo, asserting, however, its presence in the strait, both militarily and diplomatically. The reasons why the U.S. values so important the preservation of said status quo are the economic and strategic ties that it has with both sides of the strait. Indeed, China is a fundamental market for the U.S., among its top trading market, and a confrontation with Beijing would seriously harm the American economy. On the other hand, Taiwan is also a fundamental market for the United States, and it is regarded as an example of democratisation: abandoning it in case of a cross-strait escalation would seriously harm American credibility in the area and interrupt American interest in Taipei.

The first example of strategic ambiguity was witnessed during the First Strait Crisis in 1954. As the PRC's threat to military intervention on the offshore islands, especially Quemoy, became more concrete, the U.S. had to decide to what extent to defend Taiwan. During Eisenhower's tenure, the commitment to defend Taiwan was never in question: American highest priority was the containment of the communist expansion, and it was considered in its own security interest to defend the integrity of Taiwan. However, soon after the end of World War Two, Eisenhower could not risk being involved in a highly unpopular war, therefore the issue of whether to defend the offshore islands as well was crucial. On the one hand, the military annexation of the two islands did not imply that the PLA would have continued towards Taiwan, on the other it was a risk that the U.S. was unwilling to undertake. However, what was clear was that the military escalation had to be avoided. Thus, Eisenhower started a policy of uncertainty, giving China the impression that the commitment to Taiwan was solid, while convincing Chiang Kai-shek that the offshore islands were not of paramount interest to the U.S., therefore the intervention was not to be given for granted, especially if caused by any ROC provocation. When China started limited shelling on the offshore islands, a mutual defensive treaty was signed

between US and Taiwan, determining that the U.S. committed to defending Taiwan and the -deliberately vague- close localities to be established by mutual agreement. The treaty managed to end the crisis, as China had to assume that Washington was serious about Taiwan's defence and therefore stepped down. Moreover, Eisenhower alternatively threatened military involvement, even by making statements about the possibility of using nuclear weapons, although on other occasions he significantly downplayed the gravity of the situation. As a result, the crisis ended.

In the decades after this crisis, the situation drastically changed; with the normalisation of Sino-American relations, the United States officially recognises that only One China exists, and that Taiwan is a part of this China. It goes even beyond it, as as a result of the three Joint Communiques it appears clear that the stance of the U.S. is that the cross-strait relations are to be considered China's internal affairs, and therefore should be resolved by the Chinese themselves. However, it also appears clear that, in any case, the solution has to be achieved peacefully. The U.S. also established continuous and solid relations with Taiwan through the Taiwan Relations Act, even if Taiwan is considered part of China. The policy perpetrated and the positions maintained by the United States are clearly dense of contradictions.

Benson and Niou in their 2001 manuscript about the issue, summarise and explain the American policies and intentions as follows:

“The policy’s ambiguity derives from its contradictory appearance. On the one hand it maintains that China is the sole legal government of China and acknowledges that both China and Taiwan agree that China includes Taiwan. Moreover, the US also agrees with China that the Taiwan issue and its resolution is a domestic issue that should be resolved between Chinese on both sides of the Strait. Yet, on the other hand, US foreign policy seems to contradict itself by insisting that the US may choose to interfere in what it has already determined to be a domestic Chinese issue. That is, the US insists that any solution must be achieved peacefully and reserves for itself the right to defend Taiwan if it so chooses.”⁸⁰

With the new century, however the strategic ambiguity developed and showed many perils and risks. The first and most evident one is that strategic ambiguity is per-se an hazard, or at least, it risks to become so. Indeed, as Willasey-Wilsey noticed in an article in 2023, strategic ambiguity often hides a vacuum, where there is rather a lack of policy than a specific policy which is just made unclear. In other words, there is the risk that the uncertainty made up and staged for the other parties involved also becomes internal. As the tension broke out again in recent years, strategic ambiguity could easily mean that the American president has to decide whether to start a war. Indeed, threats and other means of deterrence are useful political tools, but if they fail to prevent a war, a country should have some explicit policy.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Benson, B. V., & Niou, E. M. (2001). Comprehending Strategic Ambiguity: US Security Commitment to Taiwan. Manuscript, Duke University.

⁸¹ Willasey-Walsey, T. (2023) US Policy on Taiwan and the Perils of ‘Strategic Ambiguity’. RUSI.

Moreover, if strategic ambiguity may have been useful in avoiding some crises and in stabilising the situation in the past, it was framed in a specific historical context, that is now obsolete. Indeed, as it was first adopted -and for all the second half of the century – China was considered as an ally to combat Soviet communism in the scope of the cold war. Additionally, it was not perceived as a legitimate threat to the United States, but rather as needing Western help, to even begin, in an indefinite future, a democratisation process.⁸²

In the light of the development of the times and having changed the frame in which the ambiguity should be applied, in the last two decades it has become less unclear, granting more assurances to Taiwan, even if always officially standing by the One China Principle, in order to limit the expansion of a country that is becoming a threat to American national security and an undisputed regional hegemon.

⁸² Chaffee, E. (2023). Strategic Ambiguity on Taiwan Has Run Its Course. U.S. Naval Institute.

Chapter 2

Introduction

After the analysis of the historical framework, this thesis will proceed with an investigation of American international relations with China under the Obama and Trump administrations. In order to achieve a comprehensive analysis, both presidencies' main agreements, negotiations or statements will be taken into account, as well as the responses from other actors and the implication they had.

The analysis of the two presidencies will be preceded by an overview of the presidential tenures in ROC and the PRC in the period under investigation. Therefore, the first part of this chapter will focus on examining the presidencies of Taiwan and China between 2008 and 2021. Specifically, Chapter 2.1 will be focused on Taiwan, with the presidencies of Ma Ying-jeou (2.1.1), who served as a president between 2008 and 2016, and his successor, Tsai Ing-Weng (2.1.2), who assumed office in 2016 and is the current president of Taiwan.

Chapter 2.2 will then analyse the development of the People's Republic of China under Xi Jinping's tenure, as Hu Jintao's presidency was already the topic of chapter 1.2.5.

The chapter will then unfold the American presidencies of Obama and Trump. Obama's first two mandates will be covered in Chapter 2.3, describing the administration's main strategies and foreign relations approaches. Precisely, an overview of Obama's administration in the field of foreign policies, with a focus on cross-strait relations (2.3.1), will be followed by the bilateral agreement and statements regarding his position with China (2.3.2) and with Taiwan (2.3.3), the latter will include the controversial issue of arms sales.

Chapter 2.4 will be focused on Trump's administration; similarly to the previous part, an overview (2.4.1) will be followed by the bilateral relationship with China (2.4.2) and with Taiwan (2.4.3).

2.1 Taiwan Administrations during Trump and Obama's Presidencies

2.1.1 Ma Ying-jeou, the Preservation of the Status Quo

Ma Ying-jeou was elected in May 2008, and from the beginning the attempt to stabilise and increase cross-strait relations was evident. He had a long and successful career in Taiwanese politics as a member of the Kuomintang. After having graduated in the United States and having worked in the United States, he then started working for the Taiwanese government under Chiang Ching-kuo. He retained several high-ranked positions, both in the party – he was chairman of the KMT from 2005 to 2007 and again from 2009 to 2014 – and in the statal apparatus, indeed he was justice minister from 1993 to 1996. Before becoming president, he served as was elected as Mayor of Taipei, from 1998 to 2006. He had strong personal ties with the United States, having studied there. He succeeded Chen Shui-bian in 2008, ending the presidential experience of the Democratic Progressive Party and restoring the KMT leadership in the country.

As early as his inaugural speech, Ma Ying-jeou sought to boost the economy by restoring the 1980s and 1990s growth rate and promoting trade and investment in China. In the speech, he outlines his priorities and political program, and among the various points mentioned, he profoundly analysed the cross-strait relations and the approach he intended to uphold. Presupposing that there is only One China, and that the ROC represents China, a more rational and pragmatic approach had to be maintained. Indeed, to secure Taipei's stability, growth, and independence, he wanted to retain, stabilise, and even increase the ties with the mainland. Therefore, the priority was preserving the status quo, in which Taiwan could prosper and recover from the economic damages made by his predecessor. In his speech, he maintained that it is fundamental for both sides of the strait to recognise that no one had de facto jurisdiction over the other. Therefore the normalisation of cross-strait relations should occur under this shared conception. He advocated for an incremental approach to thaw the bilateral ties, encouraging people-to-people exchange, trade, and commercial partnership. However, he claimed that the process of rapprochement should be conducted under a policy that “must maintain the status quo of “no unification, no independence, and no use of force””⁸³.

During his two terms of presidency, Ma had to face the aftermath of the global economic crisis, and despite a timid positive sign of economic growth in 2009, his tenure was instead characterised by a stagnant economy. However, he managed to stabilise the situation, avoiding excessive negative results by negotiating and maintaining ties with the mainland. In 2010, he approved the Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement with Beijing, which reduced tariffs on the commercial exchange; after this first sign of rapprochement, several other economic and financial agreements were concluded between the two sides of the strait. Besides the economic crisis, he had to cope also with the devastating consequences of a tropical cyclone, Typhoon Morakot, that resulted in nearly 500 deaths. He reacted by granting several responsibilities to local authorities, and by doing this, he significantly dissatisfied the public.

Toward the end of his second term, as the populism of DDP was becoming more and more popular under the guide of Tsai Ing-wen, Ma had to face several protests and general discontent, provoked both by the stagnant economic situation and by the closeness with China, by many considered a threat to Taiwanese sovereignty. In 2015 he met with Chinese President Xi Jinping: the encounter marked the first-ever meeting of the heads of the two governments. It was applauded in the United States, as it significantly increased the stability in cross-strait relations.

2.1.2 Tsai Ing-wen Presidency and the Evolution of Cross-Strait Relations

In 2016, Tsai Ing-wen won the election, exploiting the sentiment of those Taiwanese who felt increasingly less propense to a rapprochement with Beijing. Her election in May 2016 marked a turning point in cross-strait relations and in Taiwan history: not only was she the first woman ever to occupy the presidential

⁸³ Ma Ying-jeou. Inaugural Address, 2012.
Available on: <https://english.president.gov.tw/NEWS/3887>

post, she was also a member of the DPP – able to clean the party’s reputation after the end of Chen’s term – and she was an expert in cross-strait relation, as she previously worked in the government dealing particularly with that matter. Before entering office, she travelled to the United States to win support for her claims, pledging to maintain the status quo and avoiding provocation in the relationship with the mainland. In her inaugural speech, Tsai Ing-wen, besides laying out the domestic policies intended to overcome the country's economic and social difficult situation, also addressed the issue of cross-strait relations. In the address she took further steps “to allay Mainland concerns about any “Taiwan independence” aspirations. But she still refrained from openly embracing the “1992 Consensus” or any other form of “one China,” and from disowning “Taiwan independence.””⁸⁴. Indeed, in her speech, she stresses the importance of maintaining the relations stable, avoiding any escalation into the use of force, and granting Taiwan’s absolute dedication to reaching a peaceful collaboration, both in the bilateral negotiations and in regional cooperation programs. She also focused on the importance of involving Taiwan more in international organisations to avoid the marginalisation of the country, whose sovereignty has to be recognised according to people’s will.⁸⁵

Even if in her speech she advocates for further collaboration with mainland China, in the course of her double mandate, the cross-strait relation reached a historical level in terms of tensions, and the break-out of a conflict seemed more probable than ever. If, on the one hand, Xi Jinping's aggressive posture is to be blamed, on the other, many observers claim that Taiwan has a significant share of responsibility. During Ma’s presidency, mainland China and Taiwan managed to reach an unprecedented level of cooperation, with several agreements and a large volume of goods exchanged; when Tsai entered into office the situation dramatically changed, isolating Taiwan and bringing the strait close to becoming the stage of a war. Indeed, in the words of Hickey, who condemned Tsai Ing-wen and sees her as among the main culprits for the instability in the region her administration “unilaterally junked the 1992 Consensus.”⁸⁶. Even if the author’s opinion is debatable, the fact that she opposed Beijing more fiercely than her predecessor is clear: already in a 2015 debate, she claimed that the truce with mainland China caused the diplomats to lose their efficiency, while she wanted to create a “combat ready” team of diplomats.⁸⁷ The relations with mainland China were further deteriorated by her non-acceptance of the One-China principle as a prerequisite to the negotiations and talks. Moreover, in 2017, she phoned American President Trump, who accepted the telephone call, going against the diplomatic protocol and marking the first conversation between the American and Taiwanese heads of government since 1979.

During Tsai’s first term, modest economic growth could be observed; however, she did not manage to reduce the social gap drastically. In 2020 she was elected against, and soon after the election Taiwan, like the rest of the world, has to face the COVID-19 pandemic. The government combated the pandemic with policies aimed at reducing the spread of the virus. Quarantine periods, border control, contact tracing and mask-

⁸⁴ Romberg, A. D. (2016). Tsai Ing-wen takes office: A new era in Cross-Strait relations. *China Leadership Monitor*, 50, 1-13.

⁸⁵ Tsai Ing-wen. Inaugural Address, 2016.

Available on: <https://english.president.gov.tw/News/4893>

⁸⁶ Hickey, D (2023) Tsai Ing-wen Must Share the Blame for the Deterioration of Cross-Strait Relations. *The Diplomat*.

⁸⁷ *Ibid*.

wearing were tools used to fight the virus. In the following years, the policy shifted to a “living with the virus” approach because of the high percentage of people who had been fully vaccinated.

Nonetheless, during the second term the economy grew significantly thanks to the production of semiconductors, whose request sharply increased as the world shifted to an agile working mode, requiring more laptops and other electronic devices. As a result, in 2020, Taiwan’s economic growth outperformed China’s.

If relations with China significantly deteriorated during Tsai Ing-wen, those with America maintained a level of ambiguity. If on the one side, both Trump and Biden upheld the One China policy, the arms sales directed to Taiwan significantly increased, as well as the diplomatic ties, culminating with the visit of the Speaker of the White House Nancy Pelosi in 2022. It was the highest-ranked U.S. official to visit Taiwan in some 25 years, and in the context of the tense cross-strait relation, the visit was seen by Beijing as a provocation.

2.2 Chinese administration during Trump and Obama’s presidencies

2.2.1 Xi Jinping Posture in the International Scenario

Xi Jinping succeeded Hu Jintao as General Secretary of the party in 2012, and as president of China in 2013. From that moment on, he managed to hold power firmly, increasing his authority to the point that many recognised him as a dictator, or at least on the path to dictatorship. Before being elected President by the National People’s Congress, he worked his way to the top of the party’s hierarchy for the entirety of his career, holding essential posts – Secretary of the Party in Shanghai, member of the standing committee of the CCP’s Politburo, vice chairman of the Central Military Commission and eventually Vice President of China-, building up the reputation of a prudent man, loyal to the party line. Moreover, as a child, he experienced life in Mao’s inner circle and life in a rural environment, as his father was a victim of the Cultural Revolution’s purge. As he advanced in his political career, this duality allowed him to grasp more broadly and openly all the different issues and problems in China.

Xi’s presidency is characterised mainly by the affirmation of the Chinese role as a hegemonic power, incredible economic growth, and the consolidation of the party’s leadership -even if it may be argued that it is becoming more and more a one-person rule rather than a one-party rule- and an aggressive and expansionistic view of international affairs. He rapidly emerged as one of the most influential Chinese leaders ever, and although his administration is not over, he already managed to get his ideology and thought enshrined in the party’s constitution and, later, in the country’s one. Moreover, during his presidency the term limits for the President and Vice-President have been abolished. His significant achievements for developing the country elevated his status, making him a historical and influential figure in the party’s narration even before the end of his presidency.

In a recap of the first ten years published by the Guardian in 2022, some central themes of Xi Jinping's tenure are stressed. First, when he got to power in 2012, the GDP was around 8 trillion dollars, while in 2021, it accounted for 17.73 trillion dollars, with an increase of over 100%, even if the growth rate is slowing. Income and disposable income have also doubled, and in 2021 the CCP declared that the eradication of poverty was completed. However, the unemployment rate has increased, which is one of the main problems the party has to tackle.⁸⁸

Another sector in which Xi Jinping heavily invested is R&D, as to say scientific research and technology development, valued as essential to drastically decrease Chinese dependence on Europe and the United States for several critical technologies. Moreover, he seeks to change the economy from a manufacturer of cheap goods to a developer of advanced products.

With the significant economic growth, and an increase in the budget spent on the military and on the build-up of a credible army, China's posture in the global scenario has significantly changed. Indeed, as China started to perceive itself as the only possible contender to the United States economy, it began to ask for a multipolar centre, therefore reducing the power of the United States and increasing its own, with the perspective of surpassing the United States in the future. To this end, Xi Jinping has tried to establish a Chinese presence in several international agencies, gaining support from other countries and expanding the scope of its influence. As a result, China not only managed to gain significant importance in the existing institutions, but also to create and consolidate several other, alternative, organisations, China-centred, to oppose the Western ones, to seek the support of countries that are not under the influence sphere of the United States. To bolster its expansionistic approach, under Xi Jinping's tenure, one main project has been launched: the Belt and Road Initiative, a colossal infrastructure investment to connect China to the West and the South, by creating a vast network of railways, highways, and pipeline and by the establishment of special economic zones. According to the official Belt and Road Portal provided by the government⁸⁹ 149 countries, including China, have signed or are willing to commit somehow to the project. The BRI is among the most critical Xi Jinping initiative, as it promotes a worldwide vision of a proactive and assertive China. Moreover, the project would surely boost the global economy and function as significant geopolitical leverage for Xi Jinping, as it would put China in the highly favourable position of encouraging trade and facilitating connections and communications.⁹⁰ The initiative is intended to expand the Chinese sphere of influence beyond the regional borders, while at the same time posing a severe threat to American hegemony, both in the world and in the Western hemisphere.

As Xi Jinping tried to expand his sphere of influence significantly, his position on the cross-strait relation mirrored the aggressive approach that Xi Jinping had in international affairs. During the first years of Xi Jinping's tenure, signs of a rapprochement. Indeed, Ma's policy towards mainland China paved the way for

⁸⁸ Davidson, H. (2022) China's decade under Xi Jinping explained in seven charts. The Guardian.

⁸⁹ Belt and Road Portal.

Available on: https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/info/iList.jsp?cat_id=10076&cur_page=1

⁹⁰ McBride, J., Berman N., Chatzky A. (2023) China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative. Council on Foreign Relations.

several diplomatic encounters. Remarkably, the so-called Wang-Zhang meeting in 2014, when the ministers of the respective offices concerned cross-strait relations met several times. The discussions led to a more important and historical meeting, mentioned in Chapter 2.1.1, between Ma and Xi Jinping in 2015.⁹¹ If a peaceful rapprochement seemed possible, from 2016 onward the situation drastically changed. As Tsai Ing-wen was elected president of Taiwan, Xi Jinping initially tried to maintain a negotiating channel, based on the common acceptance of the 1992 consensus. However, when it became clear that Tsai Ing-wen had a more independentist stance than her predecessor and did not fully endorse the consensus, the situation changed and the relationship quickly deteriorated. It also has to be said that Xi Jinping, even before Tsai's election, resumed some minor form of military activity and presence in the strait, being however careful not to exacerbate the situation. Xi Jinping's pressure on Taiwan increased drastically when it was clear that Tsai Ing-wen was unwilling to accept any compromise. It has been claimed that initially the pressure sought mainly to force Tsai and DDP to change their policies to some more accommodating ones in favour of mainland China. However, when she made clear that her stances were solid and because of the mounting U.S.-China competition that followed Trump's election, Xi's policy took a more assertive nature, regarding Taiwan and the United States.⁹² In 2017, in his speech at the 19th Party Congress, Xi Jinping revealed the plan to make China a strong and mighty nation, remarking on this ambition to restore China's glory and importance and instil an idea of the "China Dream" worldwide. Regarding cross-strait relations, he stressed the importance of the 1992 Consensus to regulate the process towards a peaceful reunification, based on the "One Country, Two Systems" policy already enforced in Hong Kong and Macau. Despite formally adhering to the same policy China had maintained previously, many scholars viewed a shift in the premises of reunification. Indeed, if before cooperation was bilaterally considered the only way to reach reunification, Xi Jinping changed the emphasis on reunification itself. It has been observed by Liao in 2021, that Xi Jinping started a process that consists in "gradually unlinking "Reunification" from "Peaceful""⁹³.

The number of coercive measures ramped up after Tsai's election, intended to convince the island's people that the best option is the reification. Thousands of cyberattacks have been reported, the cross-strait communication official channel was shut down in 2016 and the international pressure on other countries showing support for Taiwan is rampant. From 2019 on, the situation reached its lowest level since the 1996 missile crisis, if not worse. In 2019, Xi Jinping maintained that unification is an unstoppable, unavoidable process and claimed that "Taiwan's independence is a reversal of history and a dead-end road." Moreover, in the same speech he added that the use of force cannot be excluded, although significant efforts to maintain peaceful relations should be made. It was the first time that the use of force was mentioned as a viable option, even if it was still considered the last resort: Xi Jinping, however, said that China would take all necessary means. He added that the question was internal, so no foreign intervention would be tolerated. Tsai Ing-wen

⁹¹ Madoka, F. (2023). The characteristics of Xi Jinping's policy-making on Taiwan affairs: the conflict between institutionalization and centralization. *Journal of Contemporary East Asia Studies*, 1-20.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Liao, H. (2021). An Interpretation of Xi's Taiwan Policy- and Taiwan's Response. *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, 25-29.

replied by stating that China had to acknowledge the existence of Taiwan, peacefully handling the differences between the two countries in the name of respect and equality.⁹⁴ From 2019, Xi Jinping's response to the increasing level of arms sales by Trump consisted of a massive presence of the PLA in the strait. Biden's policy remained consistent with Trump's, by significantly increasing relations with Taiwan and arms sales. In a 2021 report by the U.S. Department of Defense, it is said that the PLA is "likely preparing for a contingency to unify Taiwan with the PRC by force, while simultaneously deterring, delaying, or denying any third-party intervention, such as the United States."⁹⁵ Xi Jinping's posture over Taiwan remains, to that day, significantly aggressive: as the use of force is considered a viable option and because of the military build-up and modernisation of China, the possibility of a war is becoming increasingly remote.

Xi Jinping's contribution to the affirmation of China as a superpower is undoubted: he boosted the economy with unprecedented results, modernised and increased the army's size and expanded the Chinese sphere of influence through the Belt and Road Initiative and the significant presence in international organisations. However, several critics of his administration were advanced. He concentrated the power on his sole person, often by using censorship, shifting the command from the party to himself, by taking complete control of the military and every other branch of the party and the state.

During his term main concerns were raised by the international community. Many observers claim he is the main culprit of the genocide, crimes against humanity and torture of Uyghurs, a Turkic ethnic group in the western region of Xinjiang. During his tenure, beginning in 2014, more than one million Turkic Muslims were incarcerated and interned in "re-education" camps, without any process, officially for counter-terrorism reasons. The human rights groups Amnesty and Human Rights Watch have published reports accusing China of crimes against humanity. The U.S. Secretary of State Blinken accused China of committing "genocide and crimes against humanity".⁹⁶ Economic sanctions were issued by the European Union, UK, US, and Canada. Moreover, Xi's administration was always accused of extreme violence against protesters in Hong Kong. The protests were caused by excessive interfering behaviour by Beijing, which was seen as not respecting the "One Country, Two System" method. The outcomes of the protests in 2019-2020 were first of all an excessive use of force by police, as reported by Amnesty⁹⁷, then the shutting down of various Western or – considered – pro-democratic media.

Among the several other misconducts that the Western Countries accuse China and Xi of, the management of the COVID-19 pandemic represents an interesting case. Indeed, if at the beginning there was complete opacity on the Chinese situation, soon as the issue became global, China adopted a rigorous policy

⁹⁴ Kuo L. (20129). 'All necessary means': Xi Jinping reserves right to use force against Taiwan. The Guardian.

⁹⁵ Office of the Secretary of Defense. 2021. Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 2021. Annual Report to Congress.

Available on: <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Nov/03/2002885874/-1/-1/0/2021-CMPR-FINAL.PDF>

⁹⁶ BBC, 2021. Uyghurs: Western countries sanction China over rights abuses.

Available on: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-56487162>

⁹⁷ Amnesty International, 2019. Verified: Hong Kong Police Violence Against Peaceful Protesters.

Available on: <https://web.archive.org/web/20190820011839/https://www.amnesty.org.hk/en/verified-hong-kong-police-violence-against-peaceful-protesters/>

of zero-COVID, by imposing mass testing and lockdowns. While initially the world applauded this policy, it soon became apparent that it was too stringent, and that the economic outcomes could be devastating. Waves of protests started in 2022, but they were all sedated by the end of the year. Chinese policy in 2023 is less strict, reducing the power of local officials to implement lockdowns and decreasing quarantine times and the number of mass testing.

2.3 Obama administration

2.3.1 Introduction to Obama's Foreign Policy

As Barack Obama won the presidential election in 2009, he inherited a complex political situation, both domestically and internationally. Indeed, as the economic crisis was at its peak, the focus on internal reforms to rebuild and strengthen the American economic and financial system was an absolute concern for the president, who, in his electoral campaign, focused mainly on the internal issue rather than on the international scenario. However, two international topics had to be addressed with urgency. In addition to the severely damaged economic scenario, he also inherited two wars from the previous Bush administration: one in Iraq and the other in Afghanistan. He opposed Bush's decision to invade Iraq since the beginning, in 2003, and during the electoral campaign he often assured that the massive military deployment in the Middle East had to be reduced. As far as the war in Iraq is concerned, the number of troops deployed at the beginning of his presidency accounted for 160.000, and his plan, as he announced in 2009, was to reduce this number to 50.000 by the end of 2010. The withdrawal proceeded smoothly; by 2012, only 150 troops were left in the country. The other major campaign aimed to reduce Taliban influence in Afghanistan, to avoid them gaining power. As thousands of soldiers left Iraq, thousands were deployed in Afghanistan, where the number of troops rapidly increased, peaking in 2014 with some 97.000 women and men serving to contain the Taliban's power. In 2011 the killing of Osama bin Laden, al-Qaeda leader, did not end the war. So in 2015 the president decided nonetheless to start a slow retreat of military forces, maintaining the presence of some 12.000 soldiers in the area.

Another central involvement occurred during Obama's presidency in Syria, mainly during his second term, fighting against ISIS after initially underestimating their potentiality. However, the main difference between the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan was that the American presence on foreign soil was drastically reduced, preferring air strikes and intelligence work rather than war on the ground.

Another main issue the Obama presidency had to stabilise was the presence of nuclear weapons in Iran, or rather the possibility that the country could conclude its nuclear programme quickly. To that end, Obama succeeded in reaching an agreement with Iran, which surrendered almost the entirety of its enriched uranium in exchange for lifting economic sanctions imposed previously.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Nelson, M., Barack Obama: Foreign Affairs. UVA Miller Center.
Available on: <https://millercenter.org/president/obama/foreign-affairs>

The massive military involvement in the Middle East, already started in the aftermath of the terrorist attack in 2001, combined with a dense net of relationships with European countries in the joint fight against the outcomes of the economic crisis, shifted away the attention from China and the cross-strait relations. In many regards, it may be claimed that Obama, at least at the beginning, merely continued the policies enhanced by his predecessor, deteriorating the relationship with China while maintaining stable the core decisions and principles laid in the One China policy. The aim of Obama's administration was on the one hand to strengthen Taiwan's military capabilities, on the other to avoid a severe deterioration in the relationship with China. As said, the matter was non-existent in Obama's speeches and press releases for the entirety of the electoral campaign and the beginning of his first term. Despite the absence of an explicit policy on the issue, Obama valued was always clear about the value of the Sino-American relationship, claiming that it would be of paramount importance, and the most important bilateral relationship, in assessing the world order of the 21st century. Starting from his first visit to China during his first year of office, Obama's administration was always quite prone to seek a regime of peaceful collaboration with Beijing, whose status as the second-biggest economy was already evident. Obama made it clear, on several occasions, that he welcomed the rise of China as an important economy, valuing it as profitable both for the American interest and for the overall development of the world. In this situation, it is self-evident that Obama had a significant interest in avoiding any escalation. Therefore the main aim of Obama's policy was to work, with Beijing and Taipei, towards maintaining the status quo. In reaching this goal he was initially helped by the election of Ma Ying-jeou in Taiwan. Obama was elected less than a year later than Ma, who, as discussed before, firmly pushed for the normalisation of cross-strait relations. Therefore, as the strait was not considered a hot spot to focus military and strategic efforts, Obama could develop its sphere of influence in the South Asian zone unchallenged.

Starting from 2011, Obama characterised his administration with a shift of the geopolitical focus to Asia. Indeed, as said before in the first years of his administration, the political efforts were focused internally – having to cope with the financial crisis and its outcomes – and in the Middle East, in the two wars he inherited. However, in 2011 then Secretary Hillary Clinton emphasised the importance of prioritising American international efforts in the Pacific Area. In an Article Clinton published in 2011 on Foreign Policy, she claimed that “the future of geopolitics will be decided in Asia, not in Afghanistan or Iraq, and the United States should be right at the centre of the action”⁹⁹. The *Pivot to Asia* is a process that involves increasing investment in the region, strengthening diplomatic, commercial, and economic ties with the Pacific countries and deploying military forces in the area. In the optics of the new policy, a strategic rebalancing of American interests from the Middle East and Europe to Asia is necessary to limit Chinese expansion and to assert American supremacy as the only global superpower. Among the various reasons that impelled the United States to change the international focus towards Asia were the growing Chinese regional power and the protection of the strategic basis in the Indo-Pacific zone. As China was becoming the leading US rival, all the states that were undisputed American alliances were now contended between the two largest economies.

⁹⁹ Clinton, H. (2011). America's Pacific century. Foreign policy, (189), 56.

Moreover, North Korea represented a crucial topic, as it threatened the zone's stability with a rising provocative approach, culminating in testing nuclear weapons.

The engagement in the region was based on the desire, shared by the Asian partners, for a peaceful and stable area, with a prosperous economy and an essential role in the multipolar context. Therefore, the plan to achieve this goal was mainly based on increasing the diplomatic, military and economic presence in the region by strengthening the alliances system, and improving the relationship with the emerging countries – not only China but also Singapore, New Zealand, Japan, etc. – through bilateral and multilateral agreements and through the presence, or at least the influence, in the international and regional organisations, to promote cooperation and address global challenges¹⁰⁰. Lastly, the program increased the military presence in the area. However, if many scholars regard it as one of the main characteristics of the pivot to Asia, others point out that it was only one of the many aspects, and it “would not be possible if it was not embedded in a much broader national agenda including diplomacy, trade, development, values and multilateral institutions.”¹⁰¹.

The Pivot to Asia obviously had obvious repercussions on the bilateral relations with China and Taiwan. The former will be analysed in the next part, and the latter in the subsequent one.

2.3.2 Obama's Bilateral Relation with China

As previously mentioned, during Obama's tenure, one of the main concerns and objectives was to shift the focus from the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific region, stressing the importance of a growing China. As he assumed the presidency in 2009, as the interest and commitment to Middle East affairs were winding down, the one towards China and South-East Asia was, on the contrary, growing significantly. Obama himself has said, "The relationship between the United States and China is the most important bilateral relationship of the 21st century" Indeed, the statement has been proven, is proving, and will prove itself correct. However, at the beginning of his administration, Obama merely continued to work in the framework of Bush's legacy, which involved an overall accommodating relationship, despite the maintenance of the ambiguity. Obama became the first U.S. president to visit China during his first year in office, even during an economic crisis and with two wars to handle. His visit in 2009 was also his first visit to China, as before he had never had the opportunity, nor as a lawyer or US senator. Initially, Obama's attitude towards China was highly positive. As already mentioned above, he welcomed with favour the economic rise of Beijing: indeed, in 2008 China became the largest U.S. foreign creditor, surpassing Japan, and only two years later, in 2010, it became the second largest economy, a position that it has occupied ever since. Conscious of China's increasing power, several scholars and think tanks in the United States argued for establishing a G-2 framework, to allow China and the United States to assume the role of guides of the international community towards a supportive and peaceful international order. However, China continued to grow consistently economically and militarily wise, and the

¹⁰⁰ The United States was the first non member country to open a session of the ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.

¹⁰¹ Campbell, K., & Andrews, B. (2013). Explaining the US pivot to Asia. *Americas*, 1, 1945-1975.

urgency to contain Chinese expansion became more and more concrete. To that end, the Pivot to Asia in 2011 was launched, to broaden American interests throughout the Indo-Pacific region. Although Obama's aim was undoubtedly to contain China, but to do it peacefully, the vast deployment of soldiers in Australia and the presence in the South China Sea was received with concern from China. This exacerbated an evident security dilemma, as Beijing significantly increased the military build-up, and so did Washington. It was clear that, despite Obama declaring that cooperation with China was vital and claiming to "welcome" Chinese growth, the Pivot to Asia aimed to contain Chinese influence. Moreover, from 2008, the United States started the talk to enter and further develop the Trans-Pacific Economic Partnership Agreement, an agreement signed in 2005 by Brunei, Chile, Singapore, and New Zealand to boost cooperation in several fields. On its website, the office of the United States Trade Representative states that "The Obama Administration is pursuing TPP to unlock opportunities for American manufacturers, workers, service providers, farmers, and ranchers – to support job creation and wage growth."¹⁰² The agreement ratified by the Obama administration included eleven countries, however China was not among them, contributing to further exacerbating the relations.

In 2012, tensions rose even further, as the United States, Japan and the European Union challenged China's trade practices bringing the matter to the attention of the World Trade Organisation. Specifically, the bone of contention was represented by the export restrictions of rare earths applied by China. Rare earths are vital minerals to products as smartphones and every other technological good, and China dominated the globe's mining and processing of such minerals. Whereas Obama, and the other countries which opened the trade case, casted it as a fight to defend America's manufacturing sector, on the other hand China replied that the quota issued were in accordance with WTO rules and aimed at protecting the country's resources.¹⁰³ The U.S. claimed that the quota violated the international norms as they forced multinational firms that had the necessity to use these metals to relocate to China. China responded by calling the move "rash and unfair".

As Xi Jinping replaced Hu Jintao as president, Communist Party General and chairman of the Central Military Commission, the relations between China and the United States did not suffer any major complication. In 2013 a "shirt-sleeves" summit was hosted by Obama at Sunnylands, in California. The meeting was considered informal and it was rather a way for the two heads of state to pave the path for peaceful cooperation in the following years.¹⁰⁴ The two leaders decided to intensify the talks and agreed to build a "new model" of relation, moving closer on pressuring North Korea and addressing climate change issues together. The agreement on combating together climate change had a significant follow-up in 2014, when the two leaders shook hands on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit, as both committed to reduce carbon emissions. Despite these agreements, however, the situation remained tense, as in 2015 the American Defence Secretary Ashton Carter called for a pacific resolution in South-China Sea, calling for a halt in the claims over disputed areas, affirming that the United States would continue to sail wherever the international

¹⁰² Office of the United States Trade Representative. Trans-Pacific Partnership: Summary of U.S. Objectives. Available on: <https://ustr.gov/tpp/Summary-of-US-objectives>

¹⁰³ Lee, D. & Parsons C. (2012) U.S. opens trade case against China over rare earth export limits. Los Angeles Times

¹⁰⁴ Rucker, P. (2013) At U.S.-China shirt-sleeves summit, formalities and suspicions abound. The Washington Post

law allows them. Moreover, in the same occasion, U.S.'s general called also China for the deployment of military equipment in the area.

In an op-ed by Cheng Li, the Obama's administration is analysed as it was ending. The author, in assessing the results of the president, notices how, despite an incredibly fruitful relationship from an economic standpoint and culturally speaking. However, "China and the United States not only have refrained from directly airing ideological differences, but they also have avoided dwelling on politically sensitive events"¹⁰⁵.

To conclude, Obama's two terms have been guided by the desire to increase the level of cooperation, in every field, and maintain the status-quo in cross-strait relations. Moreover, one of the most important achievements of Obama's administration surely was the establishment of an influence sphere in Asia, with the Pivot to Asia, that on the one hand, managed to create a network of alliances and of friendly governments to expand the scope of American interests, on the other limited and contained China's expansion in the region. Overall, it can be said that Obama maintained the same ambiguity in addressing cross-strait relations as well as Chinese economic and military growth. During this period China achieved the status of a responsible world power, raising optimism for bilateral interaction between China and the United States, under the maxims of "non conflict, non-confrontation, mutual respect and win-win cooperation".¹⁰⁶ Obama sought to exploit this status by reaching agreements and starting a path of cooperation and at the same time useful to limit Chinese expansion.

2.3.3. *Obama's Bilateral Relations with Taiwan*

Obama's presidency coincided almost entirely with the Ma Ying-jeou regime in Taiwan. As previously mentioned, Ma tried to de-escalate the situation since his inaugural speech, and Obama set his policy consistently with the de-escalation attempt, adhering to the "no unification, no independence and no use of force" principles laid down by Ma. He welcomed the peaceful development of cross-strait relations, advocating and pushing for the maintenance of the status quo. Obama always reassured Beijing that he would not intervene in favour of Taiwan's independence and had always stuck with One China policy, however on the other hand, significant rapprochement between Taipei and Washington occurred during Obama's two term. Indeed, if he was re-assuring China of the adherence to One China policy and advocating for a peaceful resolution and development, on the other he was continuing and even increasing arms sales to Taiwan. It can be claimed that Obama's Taiwan policy had two sides: upgrading the United States – Taiwan relationship while welcoming the peaceful development of the cross-strait relationship, sticking to the One China Policy.

As for the arms sales, there were three main rounds of arms sales during his presidency. According to Reuters, in 2010 the administration announced a package of arms for \$6.4 billion, including Black Hawk helicopters, missiles and mine-hunting ships. Then, in 2011 the government announced another package, worth \$5.58 billion, including upgrades for 145 Taiwan's fighter jets. Lastly, after four years, in 2015, the government

¹⁰⁵ Li, C. (2016) *Assessing U.S.-China relations under the Obama administration*. Brookings

¹⁰⁶ Vinodan, C. & Kurian, A. L. (2021). *US-China Relations in the 21st Century* (1st ed.). New York: Taylor and Francis.

announced a significantly smaller package of \$1.83 billion, including two frigates, anti-tank missiles, amphibious vehicles and other equipment.¹⁰⁷ Providing weapons to Taiwan increased the level of dependency that the latter had towards Washington, which could increase its soft-power in the island. However, the natural Chinese response was an increase in the tension that did not reach a critical level: Beijing threatened to impose sanctions on American companies involved in arms sales in two occasions, in 2010 and in 2015. Not only did the United States supply weapons to Taiwan, but several other military cooperation programs took place in this period. The military ties between the U.S. and Taiwan were strengthened by personnel training programs, exchanging intelligence and high-level officials. Moreover, under the guidance of the U.S., Taiwan forces were organised to better fight in case of a cross-strait escalation. China responded to the increasing military ties through the official diplomatic channel and expressed that it was “totally unacceptable”.

During Obama’s presidency, the ties between the two actors increased not only from the military point of view, but only in the economic and people-to-people relationship. Economically wise, the volume of trade increased and, despite not being officially interested by the American grand plan of expansion in the Indo-Pacific region, Taiwan enjoyed several benefits from the American geopolitical aspiration. The negotiations for Taiwan's entry in the Trade and Investment Framework Agreement, which had stopped in 2007, restarted in 2013 and were finalised in 2016, when Taiwan actually entered the association. Again, the close relationship between Taiwan and the U.S. was applauded by Taiwan, which saw it as a major opportunity to express itself in the international community and to gain more space in the international scenario, but was heavily condemned by China, which was however reassured by the constant American pledges to respect and adhere to One China policy. As for people-to-people relations in 2011, the United States Congress nominated Taiwan as eligible for the visa waiver program. In November 2012, Taiwan actually became a visa waiver, meaning that a Taiwanese could travel in the United States without a visa. This program strongly influenced the population: American tourism programs were marketed broadly, and the American culture was sponsored through leaflets and other means. Moreover, it was useful also to mark the Taiwanese identity as separated from the one of mainland China, even if in a subtle way.¹⁰⁸

Lastly, Obama successfully tried to increase Taiwan’s representation in international organisations. Even if he refused the requests of some interest groups, the public and congressmen to explicitly support Taiwan joining the World Health Organization (WHO) and the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), he advocated for significant participation. Indeed, the Obama administration made positive efforts to allow Taiwanese participation as an observer in the activities of the WHO. Moreover, Obama strongly supported the Taiwanese claims to obtain observer status in the ICAO; he did so without questioning the “One China” policy, in a remarkable exercise of ambiguity.

It can be concluded that the relations between the United States and Taiwan during Obama – and Ma Ying-jeou on the other side – presidencies initially merely continued those of Bush, while then taking a positive

¹⁰⁷ Reuters Staff (2019). Factbox: U.S. arms sales to Taiwan in past decade. Reuters.

¹⁰⁸ Wenzhao, T. (2017). Taiwan Policy of the Obama Administration. China Association for International Friendly Contact (CAIFC)

turn in favour of Taiwan- U.S. collaboration, but also regarding as fundamental the maintenance of status-quo in the strait and avoiding any possible escalation. Again, in recognising the One China principle while pushing for international organisations' representation of Taiwan and valuing the peaceful maintenance of cross-strait relations as of core importance while supplying Taiwan with arms and weapons, the United States maintained its strategic ambiguity in all these contradictions.

2.4 Trump's Administration

2.4.1 Introduction to Trump's Foreign Policy

Trump administration (2017-2021) is, to many observers, unique and unprecedented, both in the degree of populism he applied in the entirety of his office and the unpredictable actions and decisions he pursued. Many pundits even started to theorise a “Trump doctrine” based on unpredictability¹⁰⁹, and the president himself said, in a speech in 2016 where he outlined American foreign policy that “We have to be unpredictable. And we have to be unpredictable starting now.”¹¹⁰ If to his supporters this type of policy could have shaken up international politics for the better, detractors claimed that it would lead to chaos and, ultimately, to the disruption of the American-led liberal order. In an article published in 2021, Bentley and Lerner focused on the President's unpredictability, finally posing a central question: was *he* erratic or was it part of a grand plan, carefully theorised and applied?¹¹¹ If doubts and questions about his extravagant figure still need answers, what is evident is the several ways in which he reversed his predecessors' policies in every field of international relations and cooperation.

From the beginning of his tenure, the departure from the policies enforced by Obama was clear. Already from his inaugural address, the role of leader of the Western World America has always played was downplayed in favour of a more nationalistic approach, claiming that the U.S. has the right to put its interest first. He promoted the rebalancing burden sharing within alliances and the decrease of trade deficits. Already in his first week in office, he followed his words with facts, withdrawing from the Trans-Pacific Partnership signed by Obama. In the same week, he proceeded in the process of isolating the United States by signing an executive order limiting travel from seven countries – Iran, Libya, North Korea, Somalia, Syria, Venezuela, and Yemen – to protect the United States from terrorist threats from those countries deemed not to have a sufficient security level. It was the follow-up of a proposal made during the electoral campaign when he suggested barring all foreign Muslims from entering the country. Moreover, with the same pretext of avoiding terrorist infiltration, he sharply reduced refugee admissions, and put immigration and integration policies at the centre of his agenda. In the field of counterterrorism, his stance was often controversial as per the methods

¹⁰⁹ Fuchs, M. (2017) Donald Trump's doctrine of unpredictability has the world on edge. The Guardian.

¹¹⁰ Trump. Transcript: Donald Trump's Foreign Policy Speech. 2016.

Available on: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/28/us/politics/transcript-trump-foreign-policy.html>

¹¹¹ Bentley, M., & Lerner, A. B. (2021). Introduction: Trump and unpredictability in international relations. Cambridge Review of International Affairs, 34(3), 348-359.

to be enforced to fight it, suggesting that waterboarding, a torture technique, works perfectly and that torture is a valuable tool¹¹², also supporting the U.S. detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, which Obama's administration strongly opposed.

His administration was controversial on every issue, and even the American leadership in fields that were given for granted had to be severely questioned by the allies. On climate change, he repeatedly questioned science and scientific research, expressing doubts about whether human activity is responsible for it. In that regard, soon after taking office, he announced the withdrawal of the United States from the Paris Agreement of 2015: signed by Obama, it was a shared commitment involving 195 countries to reduce carbon emissions. He argued that the agreement was unfair, and that abiding by it would have meant a \$3 trillion in lost GDP and 6.5 million jobs lost. He shared similar concerns in other international agreements and organisations, often claiming that the United States was paying too much and that the other states needed to contribute more, enjoying all the benefits from being part of international organisations without sharing the burden of costs and responsibility. As mentioned before, after being sworn in, he immediately withdrew the United States from the TPP, ending de facto the Pivot to Asia strategy started by his predecessor. He also questioned the utility of NATO, or at least its functionality, as the United States was the biggest contributor to military expenses. Again, he threatened to withdraw from the treaty, dabbing it as obsolete and often complaining about the other members not paying the required 2% of GDP funding. However, the House of Representatives and Congress passed an act prohibiting Trump from operating in such a direction.

Another controversial stance was on the COVID-19 pandemic. Initially, Trump significantly downplayed the disease, refusing to immediately make a solid federal effort. Previously, in 2018, Trump had dismantled the National Security Council responsible to the response to the possible pandemic, instituted by Obama, to streamline the bureaucracy. Without a robust response prepared, he had to declare a national emergency after having for a long time downplayed the emergency, and having allowed Statal governors to act individually without any central federal guidance. During the crisis, Trump heavily criticised several health agencies for their pessimistic projections, and was accused of manipulating the health data by shifting the data-collection from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention to the Department of Health and Human Services, over which he had a substantial control. As many other states did, Trump applied rigid policies on border control, by using restrictions to arrivals from several countries, and other pieces of legislation to provide for paid sick leave and other financial aid and loans. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, he also cut ties with the World Health Organization, accused of misleading the world under pressure from China. At the first moment he only froze the funding to the WHO, while later he threatened the withdrawal.

In managing the crisis, Trump's lack of initiative was followed by statal measures; the governors had to enforce several pieces of legislation due to insufficient federal coordination. This led America to be among the Western countries with the worst result in the summer of 2020. After initially downplaying the pandemic risk, however, Trump's response aligned with the rest of the Western world's, as he was forced to take action

¹¹² Masters, J. (2017), Donald Trump says torture 'absolutely works' - but does it? CNN Politics.

and declare an emergency. Lastly, it has to be noted that he significantly blamed China to have suppressed the threat, and therefore lamented how the world was caught blindsided by the spreading of the disease; in that sense, it has to be pointed out that the National Security Council he dismantled actually warned the president, and that signs of a possible significant outbreak were not absent.

While the approach with China will be further analysed in the next section, Trump's involvement is crucial to frame his administration policies and fully understand his posture.

Economically wise, he vigorously pushed to deregulate the economy, as already said before, by withdrawing from the Paris Agreement, boosting the industrial and energetical sectors. Moreover, he also aimed at deregulating the financial sector, claiming that excessive regulation over the financial market would be devastating for Wall Street and the banking sector, which enjoyed an overall reduction of norms and requirements to be met.

In the field of immigration, he stood firm in pursuing extremely protectionist and nationalist measures. In particular, he has long vowed to construct a wall on the border with Mexico. He strongly opposed any migration, forcing Mexico to do the same by imposing tariffs if the measures to contain emigration were not respected. He tried to change several norms introduced by Obama to lower the number of migrants allowed in the U.S. significantly, and tried to repatriate several people already on American soil. His policies have been criticised, mainly by the Democratic Party but not exclusively, as often too harsh and inconsiderate.

His approach to the international scenario, as mentioned before, was to reduce the American leadership in many international organisations and to fight to maintain the United States' position on its own, claiming that allies cannot give for granted American help. For example, he removed ten thousand troops from Germany, claiming that Germany was not contributing enough to NATO's funding, and he cut foreign aid spending by one-third.¹¹³ On the other hand, he increased military spending significantly, reaching expenses of \$716 billion in 2019 and proposing further increases for 2020 and 2021.¹¹⁴ He also widened the research and military development scope, implementing new programs regarding outer space.

In the international scenario, despite promising a retreat from the Middle East scenario, he strongly intervened against Iran, which was often characterised as the main threat to international security. The action was mainly carried out through drones and other non-conventional means, such as sanctions and the isolation of the Arab country. In 2018, Trump withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), an agreement reached between Iran and several other countries, including the U.S. in 2015 aimed at limiting the proliferation of Iranian nuclear power in exchange for sanction relief. Trump withdrew, claiming that the agreement failed to contain Iran's missile program and did not work to balance regional influence. With this action, Trump consequently proceeded to impose heavy sanctions on the country, which, in turn, completely ignored the limitations imposed by the JCPOA. Moreover, in 2020 an air strike ordered by Trump killed

¹¹³ McBride J. (2018) How Does the U.S. Spend Its Foreign Aid? Council on Foreign Relations

¹¹⁴ U.S. Department of Defense, 2020. DOD Releases Fiscal Year 2021 Budget Proposal.

Available on: <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/2079489/dod-releases-fiscal-year-2021-budget-proposal/>

Soleimani, an Iranian top general, who was considered to be responsible for the death of millions, as Trump stated.¹¹⁵

In the region, Trump was a fierce supporter of Israel: indeed, during his term, he cherished the country as a valuable partner, even moving the embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, strongly upsetting the Palestinian and Muslim communities. During his tenure, he always significantly cooperated with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, even in creating a new Middle East peace plan, according to which Israel would gain a large portion of the West Bank. Moreover, he intensifies also talks with Saudi Arabia and Egypt, in an attempt to isolate Iran completely.

Two other international interventions crucial to understanding Trump's policy were those addressed to North Korea and Russia.

Regarding North Korea, he started direct negotiations with Kim Jong-un and was also the first American President to enter the country in a meeting in 2019. The two leaders met three times and talks to start a process of de-escalation in the region were initiated. In addition, Trump asked Kim to begin a denuclearisation process, even in exchange for sanctions relief. However, even if the talks were a considerable step forward in maintaining peace in the region, they did not turn out successfully, and Kim Jong-un resumed missile testing.

He also cultivated cordial relations with Russia, seeking closer cooperation; however, he remained constant with Obama's sanctions after the unlawful annexation of Crimea in 2014. He faced several accusations of Russian interference in his 2016 election, always claiming that he firmly believed that Putin did not intervene.

After a brief summary of the topical foreign relations issues addressed by Trump's administration and having explained his aggressive and unpredictable posture in the international geopolitical scenario, the tense, bilateral relationship with China shall be deepened in the following part.

2.4.2 Trump's Bilateral Relations with China

Trump's bilateral relationship with China was unpredictable and ambiguous, like many other sides of his tenure. Even before officially taking office, Trump's policy towards China followed a clear pattern of ambiguity, that would have remained for the entirety of his office. Elected in November 2016, he swore in on January 20, 2017. In the meantime, on December 2, he accepted a phone call from Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen. It was the first contact between a – soon-to-be – American president and his Taiwanese counterpart, and it irritated Beijing, provoking a diplomatic response. Trump reacted by stating, on December 11, in a “Fox News Sunday”, “I fully understand the ‘one China’ policy, but I don't know why we have to be bound by a ‘one China’ policy unless we make a deal with China having to do with other things, including trade”,

¹¹⁵ Gan, N. (2020) Who was Qasem Soleimani, the Iranian commander killed by a US airstrike? CNN.

moreover, he added “I don't want China dictating to me.”¹¹⁶ He also stressed that he did not make the call, but merely received it, and therefore Chinese remonstrations were redirected towards Taipei. However, even if the Obama administration, which was still in office, reassured China that the American position had not changed, China's remarks continued, accusing Trump of having interfered in domestic affairs and saying that Beijing would not bargain over its national sovereignty. The phone call and the Chinese response, followed by the Trump statement on Fox News, all happened in December. In February, after the official beginning of his presidency, he had another phone call, this time with Chinese leader Xi Jinping, and in the aftermath of the call Trump changed American strategy, continuing the long-lasting, forty years old, recognition of One-China. From this moment onwards, both countries expected a normalisation of the relationship, in a framework of cooperation and mutual benefit. Since 2017, however, Trump has viewed and conceived China mainly as a competitor rather than a partner, and many claimed that Beijing shared this view. Trump's policy choices were, as in every other first, dictated by the America First motto, and this led to the previously mentioned abandonment of many international programs such as the TPP, considered the crown jewel in Obama's Pivot to Asia, and in the Paris Agreement on climate change. These two withdrawals left a void in the international scenario, and paved the way to Chinese dominance in the regional free trade (due to the void left in the TPP) and in the international shared efforts to fight climate change. As China significantly increased its power in the international scenario filling the vacuums left by the American nationalistic approach, the competition reached the next level in the so-called trade-war between the two countries. Starting from 2018, the two countries entered a war on tariffs, constantly raising the importation and exportation costs of products from the other countries. The war started way before Trump's election to the presidency, as already in the 1980s he advocated for a more protectionist policy, as he claimed that the trade deficit was a burden and the United States were significantly losing in term of GDP as they were constantly “ripped off” by its trading partners. As China's economy was growing and becoming increasingly important, Trump, even before his term, strongly advocated and often accused China of unfair and unlawful economic practices, ranging from manipulating the currency to intellectual property thefts. As he was elected president, he remained consistent with his previous remarks and ordered several reports to sustain his thesis. Several Chinese practices were investigated, resulting in the issuing of tariffs, starting in 2018, when Trump initially announced tariffs on solar panels and washing machines. In March, he announced steel and aluminium tariffs. These first tariffs did not officially target any country in particular and were conceived to affect the entirety of the American trade partners, even if with some exceptions. However, despite China being a major exporter in these fields, the response was immediate, and soon a real trade war was limited to the countries started. In July, Trump imposed 25% tariffs on \$34 billion worth of Chinese goods; the same day, China retaliated with the same measure, imposing 25% tariffs on \$34 billion worth of U.S. products. The war continued on the same pattern for two years, with constant raises followed by China's retaliation.¹¹⁷ The trade war was not exclusively fought through tariffs, but also

¹¹⁶ Trump. Exclusive: Donald Trump on Cabinet picks, transition process. December 11, 2016.

Available on: <https://www.foxnews.com/transcript/exclusive-donald-trump-on-cabinet-picks-transition-process>

¹¹⁷ Liu, Y., Adhikari, S., Liu, J., & Escalante, C. L. (2022) Timeline of the United States–China Trade Dispute. University of Georgia.

through several statements and allegations, pointing at illegal Chinese economic practices, such as intellectual property theft and corporate espionage. He limited the scope of Chinese investments in the United States and enforced restrictions on major technology firms operating in the United States, including Huawei, in a measure of retaliation and of fear of the Chinese control over the firm for espionage, calling it a direct threat to national security. After years of economic sanctions and a trade war, the two countries reached an agreement in 2020, when Trump signed with Liu He, the Chinese Vice Premier, the Phase One trade deal, to regulate every aspect of the commercial relations between the two countries. The deal, officially named “Economic and Trade Agreement between the United States of America and the People’s Republic of China”, was comprehensive of every major field of commercial interaction between the two countries.¹¹⁸ The agreement aimed to stop the tariff war and increase future collaboration through major investments and commerce. The trade war significantly harmed both states’ economies, by decreasing the level of production because of lower exportations level; several observers widely noticed that the ones who had to cope with the aftermaths of the trade war were mainly the consumers, as the prices of both domestically produced goods and imported goods increased, and companies, who had to purchase goods abroad to maintain the supply chain operative despite the tariffs imposed by the government.

The Sino-American relationship in Trump’s era had several other controversies. Trump used the term “genocide” to talk about China’s repression of the Uyghurs in 2021, after meeting an Uyghur representative in the Oval Office, among other victims of religious persecution. In 2020 he strongly Trump’s administration condemned Chinese actions in Xinjiang through the emanation of the Uyghur Human Rights Policy Act of 2020, which imposes sanctions¹¹⁹. Moreover, different views were also expressed on the containment of North Korea. Despite both leaders agreed in an informal summit, held in 2017 in Mar-a-Lago at Trump’s residence, to work together to wind down the threat of the North Korean nuclear program, Trump often pronounced himself as non-content for the Chinese efforts.

Another major issue to be addressed is the COVID-19 pandemic, an occasion in which Trump repeatedly accused China in many ways. He accused the World Health Organisation of being controlled and lacking independence from China and directly blamed the Chinese government for the pandemic outbreak. His accusations to the WHO were mainly focused on the initial allegedly ignoring of the threat by the organisation and on the lack of independence from China, which has been accused of being too close to the organisation, jeopardising its neutrality. The direct attacks on China from Trump and his entourage are less prepared and, on the contrary, quite aggressive, considering his initial policy of downplaying the emergency, comparing it to seasonal flu. In that regard, in his presidential campaign for re-election in 2021, he claimed that “It’s China’s fault, it should never have happened”, and then he referred to the virus as the “China

¹¹⁸ Economic and Trade Agreement between the United States of America and the People’s Republic of China, 2020.

Available on: https://ustr.gov/sites/default/files/files/agreements/phase%20one%20agreement/Economic_And_Trade_Agreement_Between_The_United_States_And_China_Text.pdf

¹¹⁹ Uyghurs Human Rights Policy Act of 2020. Congress of the United States. 2020. Available on: <https://www.congress.gov/116/plaws/publ145/PLAW-116publ145.pdf>

plague”¹²⁰. His strong and fierce position in accusing China of the pandemic outbreak significantly further deteriorated U.S.- China policy at the end of Trump’s re-election.

Having analysed the significant fields of controversy and tension during the Trump administration, it can be stated that both countries engaged in immense power struggles in this period. It is clear that for both states, the dialogue with the other has become fundamental, if not even the most important, trait of the foreign policy decision, as the bilateral exchange between the two superpowers has shaped and is still shaping the world. Trump addressed this focal issue by pursuing an overall ambiguity and unpredictability, which, if in many ways could be considered a tool, it could also be considered more as a lack of a general policy line. However, as his predecessor, Trump was well aware of the risks of an escalation, and therefore he often softened his policy after major shifts that disfavored the negotiation process. This pattern has been evident since before the beginning of Trump’s presidency, with the declaration on One China policy, soon retreated. As the confrontation between Beijing and Washington concerns an increasing number of fields -economic, commercial, financial, military, and diplomatic – it is fundamental for both countries to maintain stable relations. The confrontation, however, is not only on specific issues, such as trade and limited geopolitical scenarios such as the South-China Sea, but, after Trump’s presidency, is a competition over the role of global hegemon.¹²¹

2.4.2 *Trump’s Bilateral Relations with Taiwan*

Trump’s bilateral relations with Taiwan followed the same pattern of unpredictability already discussed in the unfolding of the ties with China, even if they were always maintained on a much more friendly tune, even if by many the island was valued by the U.S. administration merely as a bargaining chip or as a tool to promote and achieve its objectives in regards of mainland China.

As previously mentioned, the relations started with the best premises after the call made by Tsai Ing-wen and accepted by Trump on December 2, before the American President entered the Oval Office. The call was intended to congratulate the President on his election, and it was reportedly quite quick and surely non-decisive. In the call, the economic, political, and cultural ties between the two countries have been remarked on by both presidents. However, the subjects of the call did not represent its uniqueness: it was the first time that the U.S. – then elected- President and the Taiwanese President talked, and it could have represented a major shift in American recognition and perception of cross-strait relations. However, as mentioned before, the situation rapidly changed, and Trump said he did not want America to be bound by a One-China policy unless in exchange for a deal. In his interview mentioned before, he implied that the future of Taiwan could be exchanged in an agreement favourable to the United States. However, after the decisive response from the Chinese diplomatic bodies, the One China policy was seen as non-negotiable. Trump had to reverse himself,

¹²⁰ Griffiths, J. (2020) Trump has repeatedly blamed China for a virus that now threatens his health. This will make Beijing nervous. CNN World.

¹²¹ Vinodan, C. & Kurian, A. L. (2021). *US–China Relations in the 21st Century* (1st ed.). New York: Taylor and Francis.

honouring the long-standing One China policy, leaving Taiwan more isolated than ever.¹²² Trump's shift was, however mainly out of convenience, also because honouring the previous One China Policy did not mean abandoning Taiwan, but rather continuing peaceful talks and negotiations to maintain the status quo, by also affirming American presence in the region and by significantly arming the Taiwanese army. A clear pattern in Taiwan – United States relations is the close link with Sino-American relations: when the latter are positive, the former are usually less profitable, and vice-versa. Trump's administration did not represent an exception. Indeed, as China's relationship deteriorated, the one with Taiwan was improving. During his term, Trump was able to “win hearts and minds in Taiwan”¹²³ thanks to an increase of diplomatic and high-ranked encounters, starting from the unprecedented phone call, and by further helping the military to several military packages, more consistent than Obama's one in terms of value and of regularity. Indeed, among the key events that increased Trump's popularity among the Taiwanese, he provided massive military aid to the island's army. According to the Taiwanese Institute for National Policy Research, the Trump military rebalanced the Taiwan Strait through ten arms sales to Taiwan. The Institute claims that in four years, he surpassed any previous administrations, both quantitatively and qualitatively.¹²⁴ The biggest one was surely in 2019, when the administration approved an \$8 billion sale of F-16 fighter jets.

Not only did Trump rebalance, even if only slightly, the military equilibrium in the Strait by providing weapons to Taiwan, but also by increasing American presence in the area. Indeed, while during Obama's administration the U.S. Navy sailed in the strait only one to three times a year, during Trump's one, it sailed through the strait thirteen times in only 2020.

Another major provision that surely increased Trump's popularity in the strait was the founding 2018 of the new American Institute in Taiwan office complex, which cost the American administration \$255 million. However, the most important measures adopted by Trump were surely regarding high-ranked officials' encounters. Indeed, during his administration, he strongly encouraged the meeting of American and Taiwanese officials and diplomats, pushing for direct talks and peaceful cooperation. As Taiwan became a significant trade partner and a fundamental geopolitical factor, both for its geographical position and importance in the semiconductors market, Trump advocated for several meetings, eventually providing new guidelines to regulate the U.S. government interactions with Taiwan's counterparts. Specifically, on the Department of State website, it is stated that the government encourages interaction with Taiwanese counterparts and that “These new guidelines liberalise guidance on contacts with Taiwan, consistent with our unofficial relations”¹²⁵ In the light of these new guidelines, several meetings and visits occur, even before the official liberalisation of contacts. Indeed, the U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary, Alex Azar, visited Taiwan in 2020 and met

¹²² Rigger, S. (2017). Donald Trump is no friend of Taiwan. Foreign Policy Research Institute, 3, 16.

¹²³ Ruwitch, J. (2020) How Trump Is Winning Hearts And Minds In Taiwan — Risking China's Wrath. NPR.

¹²⁴ Institute for National Policy Research. Trump's Ten Arms Sales to Taiwan, Military Rebalance in the Taiwan Strait. Available on: <http://inpr.org.tw/m/405-1728-8533,c111.php?Lang=en#:~:text=Besides%20the%20upgraded%20quality%20of,2019%2C%20and%20five%20in%202020.>

¹²⁵ U.S. Department of State. 2021. New Guidelines for U.S. Government Interactions with Taiwan Counterparts. Available on: <https://www.state.gov/new-guidelines-for-u-s-government-interactions-with-taiwan-counterparts/>

with Tsai Ing-wen, in a historical meeting, since it was the first one between an American official since 1979. In the same year, another American official, the Under Secretary for Economic Growth, Energy and the Environment, Keith J. Krach attended the memorial service for Lee Teng-hui. These two meetings were followed by several others that significantly increased the diplomatic ties between the two countries, which reached their peak with the encounter, even if not in person because of the COVID-19 pandemic, of the U.S. Ambassador to the UN and Tsai Ing-wen in 2021. Among these, several other minor meetings occurred, completely institutionalising the practice, without considering China's remonstrations as a real obstacle to the pursuit of active and continuous relations.

Many Taiwanese saw Trump as a reassurance in the context of increasing pressures and threats from mainland China. Taipei largely applauded Trump's "tough on China" stance, as it fully aligned with Tsai Ing-wen's policy discussed before.¹²⁶ It has been argued that the positive approach towards Taiwan was used merely as leverage against China, and many, even in the DDP, feared that Trump could use the relationship with Taiwan as a bargaining chip with the mainland. However, if a major analysis made during the presidency agreed on not giving for granted Trump's political stance¹²⁷ because of the unpredictability that characterised his administration, as it is now over it can be claimed that, despite the relation were not always constant and the risk of a reverse in his policy – as the one done after the phone call – was real and known to the entirety of the academic community; eventually his policy line was in large part clear and, overall, the relationship between the two actors significantly improved.

¹²⁶ Grothusen, H. (2021) How Biden is Building on Trump's Legacy in Taiwan. Center for Strategic and International Strategy. n

¹²⁷ Copper, J. F. (2019). Taiwan (7th ed.). New York: Taylor and Francis.

Chapter 3

Introduction

In the following chapter, the analysis of some relevant theories of international relations will be used to understand Obama and Trump's foreign relations policies. After this introduction, the chapter will focus mainly on realism (3.1). After a brief introduction to the Realist approach (3.1.1), some aspects and streams of this theory will be explicitly discussed. In the following section (3.1.2), Schelling's strategic realism will be considered. The last realist theory that will be analysed is the Mearsheimer concepts of hegemony and stability (3.1.3); the approach will be unfolded not only per-se but also by comparing what Mearsheimer called defensive realism – a theory developed by Waltz and the cornerstone of the Realist understanding – and offensive realism. The choice of realism as the theoretical framework for the analysis This choice is motivated by the belligerent and confrontational side of Sino-American relations. As it will be further discussed, realism poses paramount importance on the security side of International Relations, and in that sense has to be understood the Chinese building up, the American effort to provide Taiwan with credible defence and the American presence in the area. Moreover, as the concept of hegemony is crucial in the doctrine, it can be helpful to understand the American engagement and commitment to the area and the consequent Chinese responses, as it represents a threat to its role. As China is significantly improving its status and it is now undoubtedly a rising power, economically and militarily, it can be argued that it poses a significant threat to stability; to fully understand it, the concept of hegemonic stability and balance of power, that will be addressed in the course of the chapter, is fundamental. In addition, the thesis maintains the position that Taiwan must be conceived not only as an independent actor but also, and probably mainly, as a pawn in the, broader, chessboard of Sino-American relations: in that sense, realism advocates that the truly important relations are those between great-power, while minor states have to adapt and adjust their policies accordingly. It is what has happened and what is happening with Taiwan, where the foreign policy line has always been fully appreciable in the light of the support – or the absence of support – of the United States. Finally, the significant use of threat in the frame of international bargaining, as discussed by Schelling, is a core point in the understanding of bilateral relations, and in many occasions – such as the three Strait Crises- it is through the possibility of a war that the status quo has been preserved.

Despite other theories, such as Liberalism, which may be used to describe the development of relation, realism is the one that, as the thesis sustains, better explains China's rise to power as a balance to the United States' otherwise undisputed supremacy. The following chapter discusses the risk of war more as the intent of pursuing the respective national interest. Accordingly has to be interpreted Taiwanese position: the American endorsement cannot be confused with a-priori support of Taipei's values, but rather under the lens of the pursuit of American interest. For that reason, a Liberal view, despite many having claimed that it has guided Obama in his presidency, does not fully describe the security, hegemonic and power relations between the two great-powers and, consequently, between the two powers and Taiwan.

The subsequent part (3.2) will focus on the examination of four main approaches to American foreign policy, identified by Walter Russel Mead in his book “Special Providence. American Foreign Policy and How it Changed the World” in 2001. Again, the section will be first introduced (3.2.1), in which all four approaches – Hamiltonian, Wilsonian, Jeffersonian and Jacksonian - will be briefly introduced. Subsequently, Obama and Trump policies will be observed under the lens of these approaches and contextualised in one, or more, schools of thought (3.2.2).

Finally, the last part will unfold the risk of falling in the so-called “Thucydides Trap” (3.3). To that end, the book “Destined for War: can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap”, published by Graham Allison in 2017, will be used as the basis for the analysis (3.3.1)

3.1 Realism

3.1.1 Introduction to Realism

Realism is one of the main theoretical approach applicable to international relations. Realism underlines the competitive and conflictual side of international relations. The central assumptions of realism, as listed in Jackson, Møller and Sørensen's “Introduction to International Relations”¹²⁸ are 1) a pessimistic view of human nature; 2) the conflictual nature of International Relations that ultimately lead to resolving conflicts through the use of force; 3) the importance of national security and state survival; and 4) international relations development cannot be compared with internal domestic affairs. From the realist perspective, each state fights for its survival and for power, which is the ultimate goal of every country. Indeed, classic realist thinkers do not conceive any other political actors as important as the nation-state, therefore, non-governmental associations, international organisations, and every other possible actor in the world of politics and foreign relations are far less significant than the sovereign country. According to realists, the core issue has always been the national interest, and the pursuit of the national interest is the focus of every government. It is how every state decides to pursue this interest to shape the foreign policy line of that given government; however, the goal is always the protection of the territory and the population. As the pursuit of national interest is the only thing that matters, it follows that no state can be completely reliable in the international community, therefore every agreement or treaty is considered valid only as long as it is aligned with the national interest of the countries involved. Consequently, the world is not governable, and no global governance can exist, as each country only strives for its survival and to establish itself as the dominant power. In that sense, the system conceived by the realist thinkers can be described as anarchy, where despite some ties and some relationships between multiple countries, those are merely instrumental for each national interest and cannot be considered long-standing. In that anarchy, every single state is in a struggle to achieve hegemony over the entire world:

¹²⁸ Jackson, R., Sørensen, G., Møller, J. (2019) Introduction to International Relations theories and approaches. Seventh edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

however, only great powers can compete for it, while other, smaller, or weaker states can only adjust their policies accordingly with the great powers' expectation or request.

According to realism, states conduct their policies rationally to pursue national interest. Not only are leaders considered to be rational actors, but states are also considered as a unity: the domestic struggles for power do not change the ultimate, international, fight for achieving hegemony. In this sense, it can be claimed that the internal political orientation of the ruling party, or even the form of government, matters relatively in the international scenario.

Realist thinkers emphasise the importance of the army, and, in general, the capability of defending the national territory and its population. In that sense, it is clear that in an anarchic system, every other country could be a threat to national security, as there are no other superior institutions that could stop any aggression, therefore, the importance of defending the national interest is of paramount importance. Indeed, the factors that contribute to assessing power are, according to many r

realist thinkers, the size of the army – as the larger the army and the military sector is, the easier it is to assert the country's national interest in the international struggle for power – the size of the population, the geographical location of the country and consequently its – a country like the United States, for example, will face fewer threats, as it is naturally defended by two oceans –, the natural resources and the industrial capacity – again, the concept is linked with the capability of intervene, offensively or defensively, in the fight for the hegemonic position in the world.

Those are realism's main core ideas, developed throughout the centuries. Even if the academic and scholastic study of international relations, with an in-depth analysis of the structures that regulate them, developed only in the 20th century, with the vantage point of our era, it is possible to find several analogies in ancient thinkers or philosophers. Among the most critical thinkers who can be associated, either consciously or not, with realist thought, the first one is undoubtedly Thucydides, who developed in the context of ancient Greek city-states many of the postulates that - realists believe – regulate international relations. He is one of the fathers of this stream of thought, along with Machiavelli and Hobbes. All of them realised the importance of security in a context where every national entity wanted to prevail. They saw the clashes among these various entities as a struggle for political survival. Moreover, it can be claimed that the pessimistic understanding of human nature was already deeply rooted in these early thinkers. Specifically, these can be observed in Hobbes, who argued that in the so-called “state of nature”, i.e. the pre-civil condition before the establishment of any sovereign state, the struggle for survival is constant, as everybody endangers every man. Therefore, he sees the state as the only entity to protect individuals from this, otherwise, unescapable constant fight. However, the very creation of a sovereign state poses another, different in terms of actors but similar in terms of outcomes, struggle for power, among the various states themselves. Hobbes's theory is known as the “security dilemma”, as it describes a condition in which every sovereign state -or individual in the state of nature- is constantly endangered by the other states and has, therefore, as the priority that of providing for its security. Machiavelli developed another theory that can be applied to the realist understanding of the world.

Indeed, he argues that every state has to seek advantages and provide for its security. In that context, Machiavelli argues that pursuing national interest has to be done not following Christian principles, but only according to what is best for the country. In other words, the leader who will act according to Christian moral principles will not only fail politically wise, but will also severely risk the integrity of his state and, consequentially, the life of his people.

Although several other thinkers had concurred in elaborating the realist theory, this thesis will proceed in analysing those more beneficial to unfolding the international scenario under scrutiny. The next part will focus on Schelling's contribution, contextualising it in the issue under examination.

3.1.2 Schelling's Strategic Realism

Thomas Crombie Schelling was an economist active in the second half of the 20th century. Because of his background, the mathematical and more systemic apport to realism is inevitable. His core theory, laid out in 1960 in "The Strategy of Conflict"¹²⁹, combines the study of international relations with a pragmatic approach. The approach employed by Schelling combines the application of "game theory" to international relations and, more specifically, to bargaining among countries. He seeks to provide statesmen with a tool to gain an advantageous position in any bargain that constantly occurs in the international scenario. The normative side of realism, despite not absent, is secondary in his analysis, as the focus is mainly on providing some actual tool to the people in charge for the conduction of bargaining; indeed, unlike Machiavelli or other classical realists, he does not necessarily claim that the set of values must be abandoned entirely in the conduction of the international relations, he instead ignores it, giving for granted that ultimate goal for a state must be its survival and the maintaining of the security. As he was working during the Cold War, however, the implied goal was to avoid a nuclear escalation, that would have been possibly destructive not only for the United States – which was, in his objective, the primary recipient of his theory – but also for the entire civilisation. Schelling stressed broadly the importance of acting rationally to pursue the national interest. In this sense, he argues that whenever any problem is offered to a statesman, it is fundamental to assess the objective interests behind the problem and then analyse it extensively.

As said, he sees the field of international relations as the process of bargaining. The bargaining is intended to get the adversary to do what is desired or not to do what is feared. For that to happen, it is fundamental that the interests of the two sides are not completely opposites, as at least some points in common have to be founded to carry out the bargaining process successfully. Moreover, in order to achieve the principal goal of asserting power – and therefore make the adversary do what is desired or force him to avoid doing what is feared – the importance of threat is fundamental. Indeed, he stresses how the use of force can be a useful tool, whose outcomes are, however, not sure. Therefore, even if it can be a necessary remedy on many occasions, the threat of the use of force has to be vastly employed. He argues that the threat cannot be absolute:

¹²⁹ Schelling, T. C. (1960) *The Strategy of Conflict*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

the adversary has to have some other options available to start a bargaining process where it is possible to coerce the other side to act in a given manner without actually fighting a war. In Schelling's opinion, the threat has to be clear, meaning that the other side must understand the possible outcomes in case of not compelling, and the potential benefits in case of a positive result of the bargaining process.

Although his studies focused on the threat of a possible nuclear war in the Cold War period, the approach can be applied to Sino-American relations. Indeed, not only since 1979, the relationship between the two countries has always been based on a bargaining process, but also because the threat of the use of force has been a fundamental tool for the United States in the three Strait crises. As the United States threatened China with a possible military intervention, every crisis was quickly solved. In an analysis of the Obama and Trump presidencies, it can be stated that the former had always acted reasonably towards China, expressing clearly that the objective, as it was the best option for the national interest, was to improve the relations with both China and Taiwan while maintaining the status quo in the strait. Considering that China has a less efficient military apparatus, and in a direct war with the United States, the outcome would favour the latter, the threat of a possible military intervention in case of a unilateral annexation from China has always been enough to maintain the status quo. However, as Trump started the doctrine of unpredictability, the "costs and benefits" of preserving the status quo became less clear for China. The common basis for beginning the bargaining process – for example, the long-standing One China policy, or the economic and commercial ties between the two countries – became slighter. Moreover, as the Chinese army is becoming more and more technologically advanced, the lack of a strategic decision-making process in Trump's administration can indeed represent a threat to international stability, and, consequently, to the pursuit of the national interest, the maintaining of the status quo in the strait as well as economic and commercial positive relations with both sides of the strait.

3.1.3 Hegemony and Stability for Mearsheimer: "The inevitable rivalry"

This section will be focused on Mearsheimer's theory of hegemony and stability. However, in order to thoroughly discuss his approach, it is fundamental first to analyse Waltz's neorealism, as many of Mearsheimer's core concepts are derived or built upon Waltz's theory. According to Waltz, the leading neorealist thinker, states are the main actors of the international structure. Being a realist, he takes some elements of classical realism: indeed, he argues that states operate in a system of anarchy, where it is impossible to establish global governance or any superior control. As many classical realists, he believes that in this anarchy, only a limited number of states can acquire the needed prowess to fully protect their national interest, hence, the relations that matter in the international scenario are those between great powers. Therefore, as the countries have different capabilities and the possibility to extend their power – due to geographical position, the availability of natural resources and the population size – there can be either a multipolar world order, or a bipolar one. According to Waltz, as each great power strives for hegemony, the relations between those are fundamental, and he calls the situation where only two great powers are able to emerge bipolarity. In comparison, if more than three great powers are able to fight, more or less with equal means, the international

outcomes would be multipolarity. In 1993, in the article “The Emerging Structure of International Politics”, he analyses the possible aftermaths of the end of the Cold War, and the emergence of an international order where multiple actors could be able to express their power and assert themselves as hegemon in specific regions of the world. In the paper, he claims that the Cold War also ended the bipolarity system, which was constant since the end of World War.¹³⁰ Waltz’s view on the two possible systems is that a bipolar system is stabler; thus, he advocates that the epoch of the Cold War, where two great powers, equally armed and with similar capabilities, fought for hegemony, was a safe period, in which peace was assured by the fact that both the United States and the Soviet Union were unwilling to bear the risk on a possible war. Moreover, in his opinion, bipolarity is stabler because the limited number of great powers reduces the possibility of a conflict, and because it is easier to operate a functional deterrence system.

Mearsheimer builds on this theory, acknowledging and agreeing with the superiority of a bipolar system in achieving stability. However, he dubbed Waltz’s approach as “Defensive Realism”. Mearsheimer contested the theory of Waltz, who valued excessive power as counterproductive. Defensive realism is built upon the concept that power has to be conceived for the state’s survival and security, and exceeding in the pursuit of power will provoke other states to balance it, either by increasing the military section or the alliance system. Conversely, Mearsheimer refers to his theory as “Offensive Realism”, as every state will do everything in its power to gain an advantage over its adversary, with the final goal of hegemony.¹³¹ In that sense, Mearsheimer theorises that every country was, is and will be struggling with other countries for power. However, a substantial claim he made is that a state cannot gain enough power to be considered a global hegemon, because of the natural barriers, such as oceans, and the natural process of balancing power. Assuming that states are constantly competing for the role of hegemon and that no state has the necessary power to impose itself globally, it follows that a state can become a hegemon only in a given region. This is how he intended the concept of regional hegemon: countries like the United States are undoubtedly hegemon in their region, and no other actors or states can challenge this status. However, if he acknowledges that more than one hegemon can exist, as there are more regions, it is also essential to understand that one regional hegemon can be more potent than every other regional hegemon. It is, therefore, of primary importance, for the most powerful regional hegemon, to avoid the emergence of a peer, as to say, another regional hegemon able to challenge the status quo.

It can be claimed that, if the United States is the undiscussed regional hegemon of the Western World, China has posed itself as the regional hegemon in Asia, surpassing Japan and exploiting the dismantlement of the Soviet Union. The balance of power between the two main hegemonies can be seen through the lens of offensive and defensive realism, and many American attempts to interfere in the region – for example, by creating strong ties with Taiwan – can be interpreted as an attempt to contain the emergence of a peer competitor.

¹³⁰ Waltz, K. N. (2000). Structural realism after the Cold War. *International security*, 25(1), 5-41.

¹³¹ Mearsheimer, J. (2001) *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: W.W. Norton.

During his career, Mearsheimer witnessed and analysed the rise of China as a potential threat to American superiority, foreseeing it in several papers¹³², and wrote an article in 2019 where he investigated the rise of China from the American perspective. In the article “The inevitable rivalry: America, China, and the tragedy of great powers”, the author unfolds the historical and theoretical reasons that brought China to be considered a serious contender in the struggle for hegemony. Specifically, the article, written accordingly to the abovementioned theories, focuses on the conflict between American and China, highlighting the differences between this conflict and the Cold War. The article is based upon the realist theories and proceeds on the analysis assuming the basis of realism. For instance, it stresses the importance of the structural forces driving competition, rejecting the idea that the internal organisation of power can somehow play a role in the ultimate struggle for hegemony. “*All great powers, be they democracies or not, have little choice but to compete for power in what is at root a zero-sum game. This imperative motivated both superpowers during the Cold War. It motivates China today and would motivate its leaders even if it were a democracy. And it motivates American leaders, too, making them determined to contain China.*”¹³³ It first rejects the liberalist view that the internal organisation of power plays a role in the international scenario, focusing instead on the structural and implied fight for power. The article claims that China is pursuing the same goals as the United States, operating with the same realist objectives of the final conquer of power: China is aiming at ending the unipolarity system that has characterised the world since the end of the Cold War, and it does so understandingly, having it the means to extend its power. Mearsheimer finds the culprits in the Chinese rise, or at least poses some responsibility in not having contained it successfully, on the American administrations that ignored the realist theories and opted instead for a liberal set of policies. Mearsheimer argues that, since the 1990s, the United States should have adopted policies to contain or at least slow the foreseeable rise of China, exploiting the absolute superiority in the economic and military fields. However, not only were prudent policies not taken, but China was even granted the status of “most favored nation”, and the volume of commercial and economic ties increased exponentially, with China enjoying the best conditions possible. Additionally, the author suggests that the United States should have also limited the accessibility to advanced technology, in order to slow economic development and technological research.

In Mearsheimer's opinion, even the Pivot to Asia enhanced by Obama's presidency was not directed towards the correct means. Indeed, despite one may argue that it was a way to establish an American presence in the region to challenge the undisputed Chinese hegemony, Mearsheimer highlights how “Clinton was a committed engager, and her Foreign Policy article making the case for the pivot was filled with liberal rhetoric about the virtues of open markets”¹³⁴. He stresses the importance of shifting from engagement to containment, and he criticises Obama for his openness to China, aligned with his predecessors. The author argues that the policy of engagement, which allowed China to gain power in international organisations and in the economic field, de facto created a peer competitor in the struggle for hegemony. As engagement failed in the containment

¹³² Mearsheimer, J. J. (2014). Taiwan's dire straits. *The National Interest*, (130), 29-39.

¹³³ Mearsheimer, J. J. (2021). The inevitable rivalry: America, China, and the tragedy of great-power politics. *Foreign Aff.*, 100, 48.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

of China, it was however strictly maintained until 2017, when Trump drastically shifted it from engagement to containment. The author sees the trade war in that sense: as a way to protect American technological dominance by undermining Huawei and other Chinese corporations. In the same view is also considered the improvement of Taiwan – U.S. relations.

Lastly, the author compares the rivalry between the U.S. and the Soviet Union and between the U.S. and China. China is closer to the United States in capabilities and latent power than the Soviet Union ever was. Economically and militarily wise, China poses a serious threat to the United States, as the economy is far more developed than the Soviet Union's one, and the military is constantly being technologically renewed through massive investments. The projections for the Chinese economy are extremely optimistic, and as it continues to grow, it will be more prone to engage in a war to protect its national interest. The author emphasises that the premises for war are more present in the current scenario than in the Cold War, also because of the expansionist agenda of China and the constraints that are being placed by the two last American administration – Trump and Biden, who, accordingly to the author, proceeded in the containment policy rather than re-starting the previous engagement approach. It is also important to notice that both countries are equipped with nuclear weapons and, despite an escalation is against the will of both nations, they can be used as a last resort. To conclude, "Not only is a great power more likely in the new cold war, but so is nuclear use".¹³⁵

3.2 Mead's Approaches to American Foreign Policy

3.2.1 *The Four Main Approaches: Hamiltonian, Wilsonian, Jeffersonian and Jacksonian*

Walter Russell Mead is an American academic, expert in American foreign policy. This section will briefly analyse four approaches to American foreign policy, which Mead identifies in his 2002 book "Special Providence. American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World".¹³⁶ In his book, he determines four main archetypes of American foreign policy, each referred to a President or a notable person he considers to be the initiator of the specific approach. A brief explanation of every model he outlines will be carried out in this section, following the same order chosen by Mead, while in the following one Obama and Trump's foreign policies will be categorised accordingly.

The first approach the author analyses is that of the Hamiltonians, whose name comes from Alexander Hamilton. Despite never being President of the United States, he was among the closest advisors of Washington, the first secretary of the Treasury and one of the nation's founding fathers. He was a fundamental figure in shaping the financial system of the United States, and many consider him among the founders of American economic prowess. According to Mead, Hamiltonians come from an American elite close to their European counterpart, with similar backgrounds and interests. This approach is based on the importance of trade and commerce, and international relations are based on economic ties between countries. For that reason,

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Mead, W. R. (2002) *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World*. New York: Routledge.

peace and stability are consequences of business relations, which may be considered as the ultimate goal. Therefore, for Hamiltonians, economic activity in the international scenario is what foreign policies are about. Indeed, the approach recognises the importance of the military, but always secondarily to that of trade and commerce. Indeed, the author argues that while security and war diplomacy is usually a zero-sum game, commerce and trade can lead to win-win situations, where every country involved is wealthier and better off, thus avoiding the risk of unnecessary conflicts and preserving stability. In that sense, Hamiltonians can be considered overall optimists about the possibility and results of trade and commerce. Hamiltonians are, however, conservative and pessimistic about human nature: as Mead claims, the Hamiltonian approach does not have “illusions about the frailties of human nature”¹³⁷

The second approach discussed by Mead is that of Wilsonianism. The name comes from Woodrow Wilson, the 28th American President (1913-1921). The Wilsonian approach can be considered more idealist and morally involved than the Hamiltonian one, even if Mead himself rejects the idealist connotation of the theory. However, according to this approach, the destiny of the United States is linked with the spread of an ideology, i.e., democracy. Mead associates the Wilsonian approach with a missionary culture, not only relegated to religion but in every field. According to this approach, world and international relations can be saved and improved by spreading democracy, the highest social virtue. The United States must act as the bulwark of democracy and must be committed to its spreading in order to maintain peace and stability worldwide, serving both a vague international interest and the national interest. Despite being called after Wilson, this ideological framework was not originally from the president, who brought it to the highest level in his attempt to make the world “safe from democracy” and established the League of Nations. It can be stated that, according to the Wilsonian, there is a moral duty to the spread of democracy as the highest social virtue. The Wilsonian approach may be summarised by saying that democracy is the highest social virtue, and therefore having ties and connections with democracies is more desirable for the United States, which, to preserve its national interest must spread democracy worldwide as a core duty. Another international duty of the United States is preventing war, which is considered easier between democracies. The maintenance of peace and stability and the spread of democracies are the pillars of Wilsonianism.

The third doctrine analysed by Mead is that of the Jeffersonian approach, whose name refers to Thomas Jefferson, the 3rd American President. This school arose roughly at the same time as the Hamiltonian one, and in opposition to it. Indeed, if Hamiltonians advocated for the opening up of the world through commerce and trade, the Jeffersonians valued democracy as the highest virtue, and feared that a connected and interdependent world would finally corrupt it. To avoid this, the Jeffersonian approach advocates for protecting democracy within the national borders. If both Hamilton and Jefferson agreed that the United States is a democratic and capitalist republic desired by both, they disagreed on which of the two elements is the most important. For Jeffersonians, the economy cannot grow unless the society is flourishing and democratic, and therefore the commitment to maintain and develop society in the form of democracy should be superior to the economic

¹³⁷ Ibid.

one. Democracy must be defended, as it is not something to be given for granted. However, it is essential to notice the differences between Wilsonians and Jeffersonians in the defence of democracy. While the former believe that democracy should be exported, the latter are already content with maintaining democracy in the national borders, and, on the contrary, believe that possible exportation could lead to its corruption. It is a more isolationist, or nationalist, approach, but still based on the value of democracy.

Last, the Jacksonian doctrine. This theory is called after Andrew Jackson, the 7th U.S. President, who served between 1829 and 1837. In his presidency, he sought to act as the direct representative of the common man, and it is because of this feature that Mead identifies the Jacksonian as a populist approach. Similarly to the Jeffersonians, Jacksonians value the maintenance of domestic democracy as the core objective of the United States. However, the foreign policy approach is far more belligerent and energetic. The assertion of American interest is paramount, and the means to achieve it comprehend massive spending on the military sector and the consequent deployment of the army, even leading to wars. At the centre of the set of values is honour, which is still fundamental for millions of middle-class Americans; moreover, self-reliance is valued as essential, therefore relying on other states or connections for the flourishing of America is considered wrong. Finally, the security of the economic and political interest and the people's wealth, should be the primary concern for statesmen. Considered by many the most militant of the four schools, it can be summed up as a belligerent nationalism, where the pursuit of national interest and the vigorous defence of the American set of values are the sole concern for statesmen.

Having briefly described Mead's four schools of thought, the next section of this thesis will collocate Obama and Trump in one or more of them.

3.2.2 Obama and Trump under the Lens of the Four Approaches

Labelling a set of policies into a single approach is often impossible and simplistic, as during his tenure, a president has to reach compromises that will usually soften his core principle and ideas and mitigate his natural approach to international relations. However, it is possible to roughly categorise every president to one of the approaches defined by Mead, as they are wide enough to allow for such compromises and shifts to be taken into account without drastically changing the understanding of the given president's approach. The analysis cannot be omni-comprehensive and cannot produce a unique and undebatable result, nor it is the aim of it. The thesis will first attempt to classify Obama's foreign policies, a task made difficult by the vastity of international issues he had to tackle during his presidency. It will then proceed in unfolding Trump's foreign approach, which is less uncertain as he fits quite entirely the Jacksonian archetype.

Obama's approach is considered by many, including Mead himself¹³⁸, as that of a modern Jeffersonian. However, Wilsonian tendencies are undoubtedly present, and a veiled Jacksonian approach cannot be excluded.

¹³⁸ Mead, W. R. (2010). *The Carter Syndrome*. *Foreign Policy*, (177), 58-64.

The main trait is, however, the Jeffersonian one. Obama sought to build a better and more democratic America domestically, that will then lead the world through example rather than through economic ties or wars. Among the measures that help in his labelling, The focus on domestic policy significantly espoused the quintessential of Jeffersonianism, with several measures intended to improve the social conditions and to strengthen democratic values. In that sense, the Affordable Care Act is explicative; the act, colloquially known as Obamacare, halved the uninsured population and ensured primary and essential health care for all people. Improving the condition of the homosexual community, passing the ending of the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”¹³⁹ policy and allowing gay marriage were other measures that can be understood entirely in the Jeffersonian archetype. All these policies were meant to harmonise society and to be a model for other countries to look at in terms of democratic development and freedom. Accordingly, the withdrawal, or at least the sensible diminution, of the army in the Middle East granted him more funds to focus on nation-building at home, which was a priority in the aftermath of the economic crisis. In the entirety of his political career, Obama tried to lead the Western world through example, both in freedom and democracy. However, because of the international scenario he faced, a dose of Hamiltonianism must be present during his presidency. The interconnection between different countries, the incredible volume of goods exported and imported by the U.S. and the hegemonic role of the American economy forced Obama to be committed to the international trade market and the overall liberal policies in foreign policy. In that light, the Pivot to Asia and the international involvement in various institutions should be understood. The Jacksonian side of his tenure can be observed mainly in coping with the bin Laden issue. Indeed, as many observers have reported, his unilateral approach in that sense was even more vigorous than Bush’s.¹⁴⁰

It can be stated that, despite the main political approaches that guided Obama during his term being the Jeffersonian one, because of the highly complex situation and the evolution of that situation in eight years of presidency, Obama had to use and apply different approaches accordingly. In the words of Jack Holland, “Obama is a modern Jeffersonian: an internationalist president, by necessity, acting with notable caution, in a world where the United States stands as the defender and promoter of electoral and economic freedoms. He is a Jeffersonian by background, inclination and belief. He is a modern Jeffersonian by virtue of the pressures exerted on him”¹⁴¹.

On the other side, Trump’s presidency is easier to classify, and less eclectic than Obama’s one. Many agreed to identify him as a Jacksonian. Despite not representing the average American man as Jackson did, his populist push is undeniable, and aligned with the Jacksonian approach. Starting from his electoral campaign, his main points were protecting Americans from immigration and the perils of a more intertwined international system. During his first year in office, many have started fully understanding his domestic and foreign policies as Jacksonian, analysing the consequences for the world order. In Jacksonian fashion, he kept up with the

¹³⁹ The official policy enforced in the army regarding non-heterosexual people from 1994 to 2011. The act prohibited any non-heterosexual person to reveal their orientation or to speak about homosexuality while serving in the U.S. force.

¹⁴⁰ George, A. (2013) *The Historical Roots of Obama’s Foreign Policy*. OXPOL.

¹⁴¹ Holland, J. & Bentley, M. (2016). *Obama as modern Jeffersonian. The Obama doctrine: A legacy of continuity in US foreign policy*. New York: Routledge.

expectations, and placed the salvation of American values, threatened by immigration, at the centre of his political discourse. Islamophobia and xenophobia fueled his electoral campaign and the entirety of his tenure. They were often justified by the idea that America must come first. Any interference was not only unwelcomed but was also avoided by any means possible. The Jacksonian approach was present in internal speech and international relations, where the confrontational approach and isolationist nationalism were always core components. In every aspect of his “America First” policy, the objective was to abandon liberal internationalism, which was the main approach before his presidency; in doing so, the main reforms to reorient the American foreign policy consisted in re-bargaining on more favourable grounds several treaties and agreements, and leaving the ones where it could not be done. Second, while other approaches have a moral underpinning them, Trump’s approach to the international scenario was always completely value-free, and based only on what he considered better for the national interest. A vivid example is his complete disinterest in promoting democracy, or in being a model for other countries to follow, in dealing with non-democratic countries and in changing the position often: it is what he has done in just the first couple of months in the relation with China and Taiwan. Lastly, he significantly increased the military spending, which was cut considerably during Obama’s administration.¹⁴² Trump sought to deliver the concept of an American presidency concerned mainly with its vital interests, with little application in making the world a better place by spreading democracies or by allowing its partners to enjoy free rides in international organisations such as the U.N. and NATO. The unilateralism that characterised many of the central foreign policies and an increase in military spending were crucial to assert America’s intent to regain the status of sole hegemon through nationalistic stances imbued with populism¹⁴³. Moreover, his colourful and non-diplomatic language and the means used to deliver it – social media such as Twitter¹⁴⁴ – represents another critical element of the modern interpretation of Jacksonianism. Indeed, targeting specific ethnic and religious groups, leaving agreements, and reducing foreign aid spending, and blaming so openly China for the outbreak of COVID-19 conveyed a message of American’s undisputed superiority and targeted at the hearts of electors promising policies to “Make America Great Again”.

3.3 Thucydides’s Trap

3.3.1 Allison’s Analysis of Sino-American Relations

“It was the rise of Athens and the fear that this instilled in Sparta that made war inevitable.” Thucydides.

Whether or not the crash between the United States and China will eventually result in a war is a question that many scholastics, pundits, and observers have attempted to answer. If just two decades ago the

¹⁴² Spatafora G. (2018) The Jacksonian Foundations of Trump’s Foreign Policy. OXPOL.

¹⁴³ Löffmann, G. (2022). ‘Enemies of the people’: Donald Trump and the security imaginary of America First. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 24(3), 543-560.

¹⁴⁴ Lacatus, C. (2021). Populism and President Trump’s approach to foreign policy: An analysis of tweets and rally speeches. *Politics*, 41(1), 31-47.

answer could have been a straight-forward “no” – because of the enormous military and economic American advantage – as China is growing and is sure of its status of regional hegemon, the answer may be more uncertain. On that question, Graham Allison based his book “Destined for War. Can America and China Escape the Thucydides’s Trap?”¹⁴⁵, published in 2017. In the following chapter, Allison’s best-seller will be used as a basis to analyse the possibility of a hegemonic war between the United States and China. As he published his book in 2017, he thoroughly discussed Obama’s administration, while the book only covers the first, short, period of Trump’s one, which has been, however, in many other articles and papers by the author. The book does not seek to foresee the future, but rather to give examples and tools to statesmen on how to avoid a war. Through historical examples and the analysis of the present situation, the author analyses the situation, giving reasoned opinions about the possible outcomes of a fight.

Another clarification before starting the unfolding of Thucydides’s Trap is that Allison wrote about the possible risk of it in 2015, in an article published for the Atlantic. Therefore, initially, Trump was not considered into the equation. In his book from 2017, however, Trump is already considered a variable, primarily because of his disruptive policy line and his already discussed stances in foreign policies, specifically regarding Sino-American relations.

“Thucydides’s Trap” refers to the tendency towards war between an emerging and an existing great power, when the former threatens the regional or international hegemony of the latter. The theory is based upon several historical examples, starting from the one that gives its name to it. Thucydides explained the Peloponnesian war by saying that it arose from Sparta's growing power, threatening Athens’s hegemony. As the one rose, the other started to fear for its dominant position, and therefore a war seemed “inevitable”, as Thucydides wrote. Sticking to this theory, it can be inferred that when a similar situation is present, war is also inevitable; however, Allison claims that Thucydides used the word inevitable as a hyperbole, and that, through the right adjustments, war can be avoided, even if the changing in the international system will surely bring conflicts in some form. Obama and Xi, when they met in 2015, have discussed the possibility of a similar clash at length, and they agreed on a peaceful management of disagreements, however acknowledging the risk of such a trap in case of miscalculation.

Allison’s investigation describes the Chinese growth over the last thirty years. As mentioned in this thesis, when Deng Xiaoping got to power, a process of economic growth, social improvements and opening up started, which led China to be the second most important economy in 2009, with the projection of eventually surpassing America in the foreseeable future. This is the leading cause of a possible war under the lens of the trap. Needless to say, if China did not develop so rapidly, seriously threatening American hegemony in the Asian region, the possibility of war would be null, as it was during Mao’s tenure.

From the analysis of sixteen precedents throughout history of similar situations, i.e., when a ruling country was threatened in its role by an emerging power, the author has noted how in twelve cases the situation escalated into a war, while in four of them the risk of an armed conflict has been averted. The author aims to

¹⁴⁵ Allison, G. (2017). *Destined For War: Can America and China escape Thucydides’s trap?* New York: HarperCollins.

define a comprehensive set of cases, where the major shift in the ruling-rise stability in the last five hundred years is considered. Besides the two World Wars, that the author includes in the case file, the other two cases are recent: the cold war, and the role of regional hegemon in Europe, where Germany threatened the United Kingdom and France. These two did not result in war.

Many observers have noted a pattern in the case file: whenever there is a concrete territorial expansion, war may follow. Indeed, as pointed out by Sullivan in a paper regarding Allison's findings, in eleven of the twelve cases that resulted in war, the rising power – or both powers – had expanded in the territory through the use of force, while in the four cases that did not result in war, territorial expansion did not occur or was not among the leading causes of the conflict.¹⁴⁶

We can conclude that Allison's work does not seek to provide an answer to the question but, on the contrary, it explains the reasons why the question is appropriate, providing the historical context and classifying America as the global hegemon, which has undoubtedly been since the end of the Cold War, and China as the rising power, unfolding its incredible growth in the last fifty years. Now that China and the United States are practically peers, and as the situation already can be identified as a clash between a ruling hegemony and a rising challenger, the outcome will be determined rather by the possibility of miscalculation and the possible peaks of tensions in specific issues. In that regard, the Sino-American relations during Obama and Trump's presidencies can be regarded from a particular vantage point. Indeed, while during Obama's presidency the risk of an escalation was significantly reduced by the significant collaboration between the two countries, Trump had completely shifted the focus, and from collaboration and engagement, he opted for a policy of containment. On the one hand, Obama had pursued American national interest not necessarily in contrast with the Chinese one, even applauding the rise of China as a potential partner; on the other Trump saw the conflict as inevitable, even provoking China on several occasions, such as the trade wars or the controversial stance on One China Policy. Meanwhile, China has risen even more than expected, challenging the role of America as the leading power and the entire Western set of values. As a result, the conflict became significantly more plausible during Trump's era: as stated by Allison, both Xi Jinping and Trump see the other nation has the main obstacle to their dream. However, the armed conflict has been averted during both presidencies, and Trump's unpredictability, despite having significantly harmed the relations between the two countries, did not bring as the outcome a conflict.

In this context, Taiwan may be one of the main reasons for an escalation. If in the past, even during the three Strait Crises, the difference between China and the United States was significant enough to avoid an escalation, today this is not the case anymore, and an eventual fourth Strait Crisis may be fatal for maintaining the status quo. In his book, Allison envisioned the possibility of an outbreak of hostility caused by an increase in Taiwanese willingness for independence. He claims that, if that would be the case, despite probably maintaining some ambiguity, the United States should intervene if China opposes militarily the independence project. As the situation is evolving, with Tsai-Ing Wen's presidency and the economic and diplomatic ties

¹⁴⁶ Sullivan, D. (2018) *Destined for Competition: An Analysis of Graham Allison's Thucydides Trap*. The Strategy Bridge.

between the United States and China, combined with the deteriorated Sino-American relations, a strong movement toward independence could be a potential shock that would cause the status quo to precipitate into war.

Conclusion

If, in the decades that followed World War Two the main issue that pundits and commentators had to address was the tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union, a new, fundamental topic has become central after the beginning of the new century. The increasing tension between the United States and China is of increasing interest, not only from a scholastic perspective, but also because a similar clash of civilisations could potentially alter the international order as we know it, shifting the balance eastward. This thesis has analysed how China has acquired more international relevance, modifying its system to become a solid economic power, shaping the regional scenario and trying to expand its sphere of influence even further, with the extremely ambitious Belt and Road Initiative. It is in that sense that cross-strait relations have to be evaluated. Taiwan is a flourishing and striving democracy whose de facto independence represents a threat to Chinese credibility on the one hand, and an important resource as a bulwark of the Western interest for the United States on the other. China's rise has posed a threat not only to American regional hegemony in Asia but has also questioned the otherwise undisputed role of the United States as the only superpower, a position that Washington had firmly held since the end of the Cold War. In the chapter about the historical background, it can be observed as both China and Taiwan had incredible growth rates, and while the former managed to become an opponent to the United States, the latter, in the course of the last decades, has affirmed itself as a tactical ally for the United States and a fundamental trading partner, as it is the largest exporter of semiconductors, a highly valuable and strategic good fundamental for every technological or electronic production.

The Chinese claims on Taiwan have always been present, and Taipei is not recognised by China, nor by -almost- the entirety of the international community; however, Taiwan enjoys several unofficial relations, and it is gaining more support from international organisations. While China considers it a province, Taiwanese stances toward formal independence are growing, especially during the current presidency of Tsai Ing-wen. On the other side of the strait, Xi Jinping has adopted an aggressive and belligerent posture; despite in the past diplomatic crisis has already occurred in the strait, the possibility of an escalation is now more vivid than ever.

As the research question of this thesis regards the changes that occurred during Obama and Trump presidencies, the third chapter it is outlined how, while the former was a president keener on engagement, who welcomed China's economic and pacific growth, the latter had as main objective to constraint Chinese expansion, willing to avoid the rise of a peer competitor. In this thesis, the theoretical framework taken into consideration is realism. It is in that sense that American relations with Taiwan and with the People's Republic of China has to be conceived. From a realist perspective, both Obama and Trump realised how the rise of China represented a problem for the social, political, and economic primacy of the United States. It has been claimed by many that Obama conducted his foreign policies in a Liberal fashion: however, even if this assumption is accepted, measures such Pivot to Asia were, also, intended to limit Chinese expansion. Trump adopted contrary measures, and rather than limit its expansion through engagement, he opted for a more nationalistic policy, provoking Beijing through aggressive declarations and an increased military presence in

the strait. The populist aspect of Trump's policies has been highlighted in this thesis, using the differences archetype identified by Mead. According to those, it can be claimed that the belligerent approach of Trump fits perfectly into a specific tradition in United States foreign policy, the Jacksonian one. Combining the realist approach with Mead classification, it can be claimed that the American policies regarding Taiwan and China between 2009 and 2017 can surely be grasped as aimed at pursuing the national interest, through expanding American influence and – especially during Trump's presidency – constraining Chinese rise. However, now that the Chinese rise has peaked, it is too late to limit it, and the issue must be addressed considering Beijing as a peer competitor. The differences in the political system – the fact that China is not a democracy – shall not imply a Western superiority: from the realist perspective, the State is to be conceived as a unicum, and the internal organisation does not change the ultimate goal that every state pursue: its national interest. Obama and Trump, as well as Chinese and Taiwanese leaders, always pursued their country's national interest. If, as of today, the American interest in the strait is that of maintaining the status quo, avoiding a unilateral Chinese annexation of Taiwan, there is also an unavoidable necessity to avert the outbreak of an armed conflict that, because of the substantial parity in military means between the two superpowers, could lead to a destructive war, whose outcomes remain unknown and unpredictable.

The final section of the thesis, regarding Thucydides's Trap, intends to understand the real possibility of a war, explaining the historical precedents in which a ruling hegemon saw its status challenged by an emerging power. However, it can be claimed that, currently, China cannot be considered a rising power anymore, as it is solidly the second economy in the world and it is expected to surpass the United States in the next decades. Therefore, it can be concluded that, even if it may be too soon to draw any conclusion, the risk of a major armed conflict has been, at least for now, averted. Tensions are, however, mounting. This thesis did not discuss the current American administration of Biden, however, he did not change Trump's line, and he brought Taiwan-U.S. economic and diplomatic ties to the next level, with the historic visit of Nancy Pelosi – congresswoman and speaker of the House of Representatives – to Taiwan, in 2022. Despite Biden did not abandon the "One China Policy", as Trump threatened to do, the worsening of the relations with China, and the improvement of those with Taiwan, can be perceived by Beijing as a serious interference in its sphere of influence and, even more drastically, in its domestic administration, as Taiwan is not considered an independent state.

To conclude, this thesis has analysed the historical, social, and economic factors that concurred with the rise of China as an opponent to American hegemony. Taiwan's growth has been analysed as well; however, from a realist vantage point, it can be claimed that the relations that are shaping the world are those among great powers, and therefore Taipei can merely adjust its policy in the hope that the United States remains consistent with their endorsement even in the case of an armed conflict. In the comparison between Obama and Trump, the thesis aimed to emphasise the different approaches they had, advocating, however, that despite the discrepancies in communication and strategic approach, the ultimate goal, for both of them, was to maintain the situation as it was and is, without altering the status quo and without crossing a line that would mean war.

In other words, as long as the status quo will suit, or at least will be accepted, by China and the United States, the possibility of an escalation is contained despite the rising tension. However, a conflict would be probable if the status quo ceases to be advantageous to one of the two great powers. Even in this scenario, however, it cannot be precisely foreseen how the United States would react, and to what extent Taiwan could rely on an active, American, military help – even if it has to be cited Biden’s renovated commitment to defend Taiwan.

Through periods of distress and other of mounting tensions, the two presidencies analysed did not provide a significant outcome on Sino-American relations. The developments between 2009 and 2021, however, are fundamental to giving reasoned opinions regarding the bilateral international order and the possibility of falling into the Thucydides’s trap.

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Summary in Italian

Le relazioni tra Cina, Stati Uniti e Taiwan sono di centrale importanza per comprendere lo scenario geopolitico internazionale. L'obiettivo di questo scritto è di analizzare gli sviluppi e i principali avvenimenti durante il corso delle presidenze statunitensi di Obama (2009-2017) e di Trump (2017-2021), proponendo una comparazione tra le politiche estere attuate dai due presidenti e analizzando i risvolti che queste hanno avuto. L'obiettivo della tesi è quello di contestualizzare le due amministrazioni all'interno della dottrina delle relazioni internazionali, analizzando le principali scelte di Obama e di Trump e collocandole all'interno di una visione storica più ampia, che mira a spiegare come si è giunti a un potenziale conflitto tra la super potenza americana e la Cina, che sta sempre più assurgendo al rango di concorrente parigrado.

Nel primo capitolo dell'elaborato si presenta l'evoluzione dei tre attori principali, spiegando in che modo essi hanno contribuito alla creazione dello scenario internazionale attuale. La prima sezione del capitolo si propone di spiegare come Taiwan sia diventato, a partire dal 1949, una fiorente democrazia, altamente industrializzata, e leader nell'esportazione di semiconduttori, componenti fondamentali nella produzione di qualsiasi prodotto tecnologico. Taiwan, fino al termine della Seconda guerra mondiale, è stato amministrato dal Giappone, che ne aveva incoraggiato il progresso economico ed industriale, rendendolo una colonia modello. Al termine del conflitto mondiale, l'isola di Taiwan e gli arcipelaghi circostanti sono tornati sotto al dominio cinese. Ciononostante, nel 1949, in seguito alla guerra civile cinese, la fazione nazionalista guidata da Chang Kai-shek, sconfitta dai Comunisti di Mao Zedong, è riparata sull'isola, con lo scopo iniziale di preparare una controffensiva. La possibilità di riappropriarsi dei territori nella Cina continentale, dopo un breve periodo, svanì, e la fazione nazionalista del Kuomintang, assunse il controllo dell'isola. Nella seconda sezione del capitolo, si spiega come, invece, Mao Zedong abbia instaurato un regime di stampo comunista in Cina in seguito alla vittoria della guerra civile, e di come questo regime sia evoluto alla morte di Mao, aprendo i propri orizzonti all'occidente e industrializzandosi sempre più, fino a diventare la seconda potenza economica. Se a Taiwan vi è stata una progressiva democratizzazione, in Cina il potere è saldamente nelle mani del Partito Comunista e del suo leader. La centralizzazione del potere non ha tuttavia impedito al paese di prosperare economicamente, a discapito, tuttavia, di povere condizioni sociali e di abusi dei diritti umani. Nella terza sezione si è invece analizzata la crescente influenza degli Stati Uniti della creazione di un ordine mondiale con Washington al centro, a partire dalla fine della Seconda guerra mondiale. Infatti, in seguito alla vittoria nel conflitto mondiale gli Stati Uniti hanno aumentato la propria sfera d'influenza, attraverso un ruolo attivo nelle Nazioni Unite e la creazione della NATO. Se durante la Guerra fredda l'influenza degli Stati Uniti è stata limitata dalla potenza dell'Unione Sovietica, con la caduta di quest'ultima Washington si è ritrovata ad occupare il ruolo di sola potenza mondiale. La quarta e ultima sezione del primo capitolo ha come obiettivo quello di spiegare da un lato la situazione e le posizioni formalmente mantenute dai tre attori, attraverso la spiegazione delle relazioni bilaterali e multilaterali tra gli stessi, dall'altro è fondamentale per capire i concetti di "Politica di Una Cina" e "One China Principle", così come quello della ambiguità strategica degli Stati Uniti. Per quanto riguarda le relazioni bilaterali e multilaterali, è importante sottolineare come inizialmente il

governo di Taipei fosse riconosciuto dalla comunità internazionale come legittimo, occupando, conseguentemente, il posto nelle Nazioni Unite. Questo status è cambiato nel 1971, quando è stato riconosciuto a Pechino il diritto di rappresentare la Cina nel contesto delle Nazioni Unite. A questo fondamentale passo nel riconoscimento del governo di Pechino come legittimo è seguito, nel 1979, il riconoscimento da parte degli Stati Uniti, che hanno dato il via alle relazioni diplomatiche Sino-Americane, interrompendo conseguentemente, quelle con Taiwan. Ciononostante, gli Stati Uniti hanno sempre mantenuto forti legami con Taiwan, per quanto non ufficiali. Essi sono regolati dal Taiwan Relations Act, promulgato dal Congresso Statunitense nel 1979, e sono poi stati riaffermati nel 1982 con le Six Assurances del 1982. Con questi due documenti unilaterali, Washington si impegnavo a mantenere rapporti economici e commerciali con Taipei, fornendo anche armi e materiali bellici. Fondamentale è anche sottolineare il concetto di One China: fino al 1992 Taipei e Pechino hanno entrambi identificato una sola entità geografica che rispondeva al nome di Cina, rappresentata dall'unione della Cina continentale e di Taiwan. In seguito al 1992 Consensus, le due parti hanno convenuto di mantenere la stessa concezione di un'unica entità, decidendo di mantenere ambiguo quale fosse il governo legittimo. Se questo è il "One China Principle", il termine "One China Policy" si riferisce invece all'insieme di politiche intraprese dagli altri attori internazionali in questo senso. Nello specifico durante il corso della tesi sono state analizzate l'insieme di politiche incrementate dagli Stati Uniti, che dal 1979 hanno sposato la tesi della Cina Continentale, riconoscendo Pechino come governo legittimo, mantenendo però legami con Taiwan, e spesso dichiarandosi anche pronti a intervenire militarmente in caso di annessione unilaterale. In questo senso si può definire l'approccio statunitense come ambiguità strategica, in quanto se da un lato viene riconosciuta la legittimità di Pechino e la presenza di una sola Cina, dall'altro Washington si è sempre riservata il diritto di intervenire in difesa di Taiwan, interferendo in quelli che, ufficialmente, sono affari domestici.

Nel secondo capitolo della tesi si esaminano più approfonditamente le politiche estere applicate dagli Stati Uniti durante le due amministrazioni Obama e Trump, tenendo conto nelle prime sezioni del capitolo delle presidenze taiwanesi di Ma Ying-jeou e di Tsai Ing-wen, e in seguito della presidenza cinese di Xi Jinping. Di Ma Ying-jeou, presidente dal 2008 al 2016 viene sottolineato in particolare il tentativo di apertura verso la Cina, nonostante la volontà di mantenere il grado di indipendenza ed autonomia ottenuto: in sostanza, l'obiettivo della presidenza di Ma Ying-jeou è stato da un lato il mantenimento dello status-quo, dall'altro la crescita economica di Taiwan. Tsai Ing-wen, presidente di Taiwan dal 2016, al contrario, sin dall'inizio ha mostrato tendenze più ostili nei confronti di Pechino, rifiutando di aderire al 1992 Consensus e raggiungendo un livello di tensione storico nelle relazioni con la Cina. Nel continente, invece, il potere è saldamente nelle mani di Xi Jinping, che a partire dal 2012 ha progressivamente accentrato il potere nelle proprie mani, assicurandosi di emendare la Costituzione per poter sfiorare il limite di mandati e decidendo in toto la linea politica cinese. Per quanto riguarda la politica estera, durante l'amministrazione di Xi Jinping la Cina si è definitivamente collocata come seconda potenza mondiale, mantenendo un approccio particolarmente aggressivo e sviluppando un settore bellico credibile.

Le due seguenti sezioni della tesi sono strutturate simmetricamente: nella terza viene analizzata l'amministrazione di Obama, nella quarta quella di Trump. In entrambe vi è un'introduzione che mira a spiegare in generale l'approccio estero della presidenza in analisi, seguita da un'analisi specifica delle relazioni bilaterali con la Cina e con Taiwan. Per quanto riguarda Obama, in ambito di politica estera ha dovuto gestire le due guerre in Afghanistan e in Iraq, lasciate dalla precedente amministrazione Bush. Obama ha significativamente diminuito l'impegno militare in Medio Oriente, spostando l'attenzione verso la Cina. In tal senso è da intendersi il progetto del cosiddetto Pivot to Asia, una misura che, attraverso la partecipazione in organizzazioni regionali e l'aumento della presenza americana nel sud-est asiatico, si proponeva da un lato di aumentare i rapporti con la Cina, dall'altro di affermare l'importanza e l'influenza di Washington. Nei confronti di Pechino, Obama ha mantenuto rapporti di continuo scambio, minimizzando le tensioni e mantenendo salda la "One China Policy" americana. Ciononostante, è rimasto costante anche il supporto a Taiwan, destinatario di diverse vendite di materiale bellico e importante partner commerciale. Trump, al contrario, ha completamente cambiato l'approccio statunitense nei confronti della Cina, preferendo a una cooperazione una netta politica di contenimento dell'emergente influenza cinese. A partire dalla messa in questione della "One China Policy", l'approccio di Trump è stato sempre ostile, fino a raggiungere la guerra dei dazi. Mentre le relazioni con la Cina si inasprivano sensibilmente, quelle con Taiwan subivano un costante miglioramento. La presenza della marina militare americana nello stretto è sensibilmente aumentata in questo periodo, così come i pacchetti di armamenti venduti a Taiwan, aumentati sia dal punto di vista quantitativo che qualitativo. Inoltre, durante la presidenza di Trump è cambiata la politica riguardante gli incontri tra alti rappresentanti del governo degli Stati Uniti e di Taiwan: se prima gli incontri erano ufficiosi, Trump ha sdoganato l'incontro tra rappresentanti statunitensi eletti con le loro controparti americane, suscitando, ovviamente, il malcontento nell'amministrazione di Pechino.

Il terzo capitolo racchiude invece l'analisi di quanto scritto in precedenza sotto il punto di vista della dottrina delle relazioni internazionali. Innanzitutto, è importante giustificare la scelta della dottrina del realismo per spiegare le relazioni tra questi tre attori. Il realismo è stato infatti scelto in quanto si è voluto sottolineare il lato più competitivo delle relazioni bilaterali tra Cina e Stati Uniti; inoltre, tra i concetti fondamentali del realismo vi è quello secondo il quale sono i grandi poteri a definire lo scenario internazionale, mentre attori minori sono, invece, costretti ad adattare la loro linea politica a quella scelta dalle super potenze. In questo senso sono state lette le scelte di Taiwan, spinta ad agire in funzione delle relazioni Sino-americane. Un altro motivo che giustifica questa scelta è la concezione secondo cui gli stati sono attori unitari, il cui fine ultimo è la preservazione del proprio interesse nazionale in un contesto globale caratterizzato da una costante lotta per il potere. In questa visione, i fattori interni sono considerati meno importanti di quelli esterni, e l'ordinamento politico di uno stato è secondario, in quanto ogni attore ha come unico fine quello del mantenimento della propria sicurezza e del miglioramento delle condizioni di vita dei propri cittadini, a prescindere dal grado di democratizzazione o dall'orientamento del partito in quel momento al potere. Della dottrina realista si sono scelti in particolare due aspetti: il realismo strategico di Schelling e le teorie di

Mearsheimer, costruite sulle basi di quelle di Waltz. Nella sezione dedicata al realismo strategico si sottolinea l'importanza del processo di contrattazione tra Cina e Stati Uniti, costante sia durante l'amministrazione Obama che durante l'amministrazione Trump. In questo processo è indispensabile che gli interessi delle due parti non siano completamente opposti; inoltre, altro aspetto fondamentale è quello della minaccia di un'escalation. La sezione seguente analizza invece il pensiero di Mearsheimer, basato su quello neorealista di Waltz. Mearsheimer sostiene che ogni stato sia in costante ricerca del potere, e contesta a Waltz la teoria secondo cui l'accumulo di troppo potere risulterebbe controproducente. Infatti, Waltz sostiene che se uno stato riesce ad ottenere troppo potere, dal punto di vista militare o di influenza, altri attori tenderanno di bilanciare lo scenario internazionale, o incrementando essi stessi la spesa militare, o attraverso l'infittimento della rete di alleanze. Mearsheimer è però concorde con Waltz sul ritenere un sistema internazionale con due sole grandi potenze come il più stabile. Per quanto riguarda l'analisi del concetto di egemonia, Mearsheimer sostiene che ogni stato è costantemente impegnato nella ricerca dell'egemonia globale; ciononostante, a causa delle barriere geografiche e del sistema anarchico che caratterizza l'ordine globale, questo è un obiettivo impossibile da raggiungere. Conseguentemente si vengono a creare degli egemoni regionali, che sono in grado di esercitare la propria influenza solo in un determinato contesto territoriale delimitato.

La successiva sezione del capitolo si concentra invece sull'opera di Mead, che all'interno del suo libro *"Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World."*, pubblicato nel 2002, identifica quattro idealtipi nella conduzione della politica estera americana. I quattro idealtipi sono: politica estera hamiltoniana, wilsoniana, jeffersoniana e jacksoniana. La politica estera hamiltoniana enfatizza principalmente il ruolo del commercio e degli scambi economici, quella wilsoniana sostiene che gli Stati Uniti hanno un obbligo morale nella diffusione della democrazia nel mondo, quella jeffersoniana si oppone a quest'ultima sostenendo che la democrazia va protetta all'interno dei confini nazionali, implementando piuttosto politiche isolazioniste e, infine, quella jacksoniana si basa su un carattere populista e più aggressivo rispetto alle altre. Le politiche estere dei due presidenti oggetto della tesi vengono lette sotto la lente di detti idealtipi. La politica di Obama non è facilmente inquadrabile, non essendo guidata da un singolo approccio: se Mead stesso lo definisce come un moderno jeffersoniano, è altresì vero che certi aspetti della sua politica estera possano essere ricondotti piuttosto a un idealtipo wilsoniano e perfino jacksoniano. Definire l'approccio di Trump è, al contrario, più semplice: egli rispecchia alla perfezione l'idealtipo jacksoniano descritto da Mead.

L'ultima sezione si propone invece di introdurre il libro scritto da Allison nel 2017, *"Destined For War: Can America and China escape Thucydides's trap?"*, in cui l'autore, attraverso l'analisi di precedenti storici, spiega il possibile risvolto sulle relazioni internazionali che l'emergere di una nuova super potenza in grado di minacciare lo status di una potenza già presente. Questo fenomeno, denominato appunto Trappola di Tucidide, non è inedito alle relazioni internazionali, e, nel corso di questa sezione, viene spiegato ed analizzato il pensiero di Allison e le possibili conseguenze di un conflitto, inserendo anche la variabile di Taiwan nell'equazione potenza emergente – potenza dominante. Per quanto l'analisi di Allison sia esaustiva, essa non

può certamente rispondere alla domanda relativa ad una possibile escalation: fornisce però elementi per avere un'idea sostenuta da esempi storici e da analisi geopolitiche pertinenti.

In conclusione, la tesi mira ad esaminare le differenze nelle politiche estere di Obama e Trump nell'ambito delle relazioni sino-americane, prendendo come principale elemento di analisi l'approccio che i due presidenti hanno avuto nei confronti di Taiwan. Nel farlo, si fornisce il necessario contesto storico, che ha portato allo status quo; senza tralasciare l'esame degli altri attori presenti sullo scacchiere, analisi questa di fondamentale importanza, in quanto gli Stati Uniti devono fronteggiare un avversario, la Cina, sempre più influente, che costituisce il principale ostacolo al ritorno allo status esclusivo di super potenza. Una contestualizzazione teorica delle due presidenze è inserita nel terzo capitolo, e mira a spiegare come esse si inseriscano e possano essere esaminate attraverso la dottrina delle relazioni internazionali. Il contributo della letteratura in merito risulta poi utile per contestualizzare in un primo momento le due presidenze, in una opera di semplificazione che è alla base del concetto di teoria stessa, e in seguito analizzando le relazioni sino-americane attraverso l'uso di appropriati esempi storici, a intendere che, per quanto lo scontro tra le due nazioni più potenti al mondo rappresenti sicuramente un punto di svolta per la storia e sia destinato a definire i rapporti di forza per gli anni a venire, esso non sia in alcun modo inedito.