

The return of the Question of Taiwan

In his latest book, "Thinking the Twentieth Century", the great British historian Tony Judt reflects on the outsider force, which is essentially the lack of awe towards no consolidated results. In summary, the outsider's strength is that he has no hesitation in saying publicly and loudly that "the emperor has no clothes."

The figure of the outsider is useful to analyse the president Donald Trump first political moves, in particular towards China. The American president is in fact questioning decisions and policies that until now seemed as untouchable dogmas.

In this sense, the most important case is related to the unresolved question of Taiwan, the island that for almost forty years is shrouded by a fog of diplomatic ambiguity.

In fact, in 1979 during Carter Administration the United States, which until then had recognized the Kuomintang government in 1949 had taken refuge in Taipei, as the legitimate government of the whole China, Beijing changed course and welcome in the Security Council the United Nations, as the sole and legitimate government of all China. Hence the beginning of the One-China Policy and the idea that there is only one China and that is represented by the Beijing government.

However, while the United States politically abandoned the government in Taipei, also they took charge of its economic survival, ensuring investment, scientific and technological cooperation, and especially the opening of the American and European markets to goods from the island.

Not only. Washington was also responsible for the defence of Taiwan in order to avoid a possible invasion by mainland China, which considers the island nothing but a rebel province, whose future can only be that of the reunification with the motherland.

Incidentally, it is necessary to consider that this position was made official by Beijing with the promulgation in 2005 of the Anti-Secession Law, which requires the use of force to prevent Taipei's moves toward a declaration de facto or de jure independence.

In this regard, it is useful to recall that the United States besides the task of defending Taiwan, have intervened directly in the Taiwan issue. On the occasion of the first free and democratic elections on the island in 1996, Beijing launched a series of short-range missiles to influence the vote.

The Clinton administration responded harshly and resolutely with the largest deployment of forces in Asia after the Vietnam War by sending the Taiwan Strait two carrier battle groups, the USS Nimitz and USS Independence.

The Beijing aggression aimed at discouraging voters from voting taiwanwsi Lee Teng-hui, the leader of the Kuomintang, then elected in the presidential elections of 1996. In addition, it is useful to recall that the 1996 crisis had begun a year earlier when the US Congress had granted to Lee teng-hui to attend a conference at Cornell University, provoking the ire of Beijing.

In that crisis is the story of ups and downs in subsequent relations between Beijing and Washington on the Taiwan issue. China agrees, now almost without blinking, that the US finance the defense of the island, but they are willing to open a political crisis if a Taiwanese leader has some official contact with American politicians. On the other hand, the United States, as in 1996, they are willing to go to war with Beijing in order to defend its independence, but do not officially recognize the government in Taipei.

This is ambiguity that Trump has pointed the finger, bringing out with great skill all the contradictions related to the status quo of the island.

The case exploded last December 2 when the White House has given news of a telephone conversation between Donald Trump and President of the island Tsai Ing-wen.

To create a scandal in that case were two things, the first that Trump was referring to Tsai Ing-wen as "president" of Taiwan, which could only sound like a blasphemy in the ears of Beijing, which considers the island only its own province. The second, the direct contact between the island's political leadership and the most important politician in the United States.

In this sense, the reaction of Trump to criticisms raised by that phone call is very witty: "Interesting how the U.S. Taiwan sells billions of dollars of military equipment but I Should not accept a congratulatory call."

Trump a few days later in an interview with Fox News went even further, putting into question the principle of the "One-China". In the course of the interview Trump said: "I fully understand the one-China policy, but I do not 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".

In doing so Trump has highlighted the contradictions of a policy that so far has managed to reconcile the independence of Taipei, Beijing pride and maintain peace in the Taiwan Strait, but perhaps now might not be sufficient to ensure a balance of forces in the area, in view of the continued growth of the Chinese military and political power.

Incidentally, the same is true on the issue of North Korea, a *de facto* nuclear power and at the same time an underdeveloped country, that for their own survival depends on China.

On these pages many times in the past has been noticed a strange coincidence. When it goes international pressure on Beijing or the relationship between China and the countries of the region become strained, or the relationship between Beijing and Washington became more nervous, on time North Korea gave impetus to a crisis, or a missile test or a nuclear test.

At that point the international voltage with on Beijing is lowered. The frictions between China and the countries of the area and the United States are set aside, as only Beijing can hold off Pyongyang and avoid escalation. In this sense, it can be said that Beijing has always considered the possibility of a North Korean crisis as a safety valve, required to alleviate a crisis and thereby maintain the status quo. In fact, no one can replace a China, since for his past Japan cannot replace China in controlling North Korea.

Hence the question needed to be asked, if North Korea for its survival depends on China; if it is true that China does not want North Korea to become a nuclear power; why Beijing has not stopped the nuclear program of Pyongyang?

This is the question that implicitly President Trump raised a twitt. Trump wrote: "China Has Been taking out massive Amounts of money and wealth from the U.S. in totally one-sided trade, but will not help with North Korea. Nice! "

The reactions from the Chinese side at the Trump statements both on the Taiwan question that the issue of North Korea, are the most varied. They range from belligerent and almost offensive tone of the Global Times, which defines an ignorant, the American President, and suggests that China will side with America's enemies and punish Taiwan militarily. Moreover, according to Functional the Chinese authority, Donald Trump fell for a "little trick".

In addition to these verbal reactions must be added more concrete reactions: China flew a nuclear-capable bomber outside its borders in a show of force or the seizure of a naval drone of the US Navy or Unmanned Underwater Vehicle (UUV) by Chinese Coast Guard in South China Sea, then returned a few days later.

In particular, it is worth highlighting a line of interpretation that is emerging in some of China's political and economic circles, namely the idea that the Trump moves on Taiwan and North Korea are part of a negotiation process.

According to Shen Dingli, the Institute of International Studies of Fudan University: "Trump was a pragmatic businessman, and is adept in the exchange of interests. The One China policy Concerns China's sovereignty. "Make America Great Again," meanwhile, is where US core interests lie. Therefore, Trump is attempting to use the Taiwan question as a bargaining chip to win blackberries economic interests from China for his "Make America Great Again" ambition. From Trump's perspective, if Beijing takes a tough stance on trade and the economy, he will have no grounds to accept Beijing's sovereignty claims. He is pressuring China to make economic concessions ".

Concorde in the analysis, although more pessimistic about the chances of success, he is Niu Xinchun of the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, according to which "Trump's provocative remarks have seriously challenged the Sino-US relationship. The One China policy is a cornerstone and pillar of the relationship between Beijing and Washington since diplomatic ties were established in 1979. However, Trump's attempts to use the One China principle as a bargaining chip will subvert the overall relationship. While trade and the economy are negotiable, the One China policy has no room for negotiation ".

However, the reality may be totally different. It is clear that such a perspective, (an America that raises the tone to cover up their own economic weaknesses) is a pretty comforting idea for China, and is part of the cultural climate that wants the United States is on the verge of an imminent general crisis.

Hence the greater Chinese assertiveness and the new Grand China Strategy, namely, to take advantage of American weakness, conquer positions in Asia, utilizing a tactic "facts on the ground (such as the militarization of the South China Sea), in order to shape an order international to Chinese interests functional.

But it is important to be cautious. The phases in which the United States were affected by a "declinism syndrome" are almost cyclical; As this syndrome is less there are, in US history, stages where you have a new and stronger political, economic momentum, such as the transition from the Carter presidency to Reagan in the early eighties. In addition, the United States continues to be the technological innovation and scientific research globally source and in all likelihood will be the next frontier of scientific revolution. Moreover, the Chinese economy continues to decline and the transition of its economy sluggish; while, as has been reported in the past months, the market autonomy and civil society is steadily shrinking.

This could mean that the Beijing strategic calculation is based on very shaky foundations (there is no American decline). Moreover, it could also be the totally wrong interpretation of the Trump's moves. The new American president is in fact not at the head of an economic power in decline, which raises his voice to gain concessions from the dominant economic power.

Things might be different and, once again, in order to imagine the future might be useful some reference to the past.

It is significant in this sense the return of Henry Kissinger, the architect of the thaw in relations between Nixon wanted by the United States and China, as adviser of Donald Trump.

In the two volumes of memoirs of Kissinger "The years in the White House", the former State Secretary explained that there were two strategic goals that Nixon was pursuing with its China policy in the '70s. On the one hand, to use China against Russia, the other with Chinese aid, by means of Zhou Enlai, the pacification of the Indochinese peninsula.

Today that pattern could be repeated, although in the opposite direction. The opening of Trump toward Putin's Russia could be finalized to play Russia against China, avoiding the weld of that axis of autocracies, which in the past was emerging, and at the same time get Russian aid in the Middle East peace.

Same pattern: an alliance with the weak (in the seventies was China, today's Russia) to weaken the strong (in the seventies was Russia, now is China). Same short-term goal: the pacification of the Indochinese peninsula then, the Middle East now.

The same long-term goal: the maintenance of American hegemony in Asia.

There is one final point to make. But first a clarification. As we said earlier in the Global Times there were harsh stances against Trump.

The international observers believe that the Global Times expresses what a part of the Chinese leadership really thinks, but cannot openly say. That said, a position has arisen in recent days on the Global Times pages. It is the position of those who insist that China began a massive rearmament program in order to counter the American aggression.

On 8 December, the CCP newspaper promised a harsh response from the Chinese side to the words of Trump: "It should use the money to build blackberries strategic nuclear arms and accelerate the deployment of the DF-41 intercontinental ballistic missile. China's military spending in 2017 should be significantly augmented. We need to get better prepared militarily Regarding the Taiwan question To ensure that Those who advocate Taiwan's independence will be punished, and take precautions in case of US provocations in the South China Sea. "

This further acceleration of the arms race is reminiscent of what happened in the years of the Reagan administration, when the United States forced the Soviet Union to react to the missile defense policy, thus bringing to the extreme the Soviet economy.

Today Trump, is isolating China, as Nixon had isolated the USSR, and at the same time is laying the conditions to weaken the Chinese economy, requiring it to act truly as a great power.

A challenge that Beijing may not be able to support, as well as the Soviet Union had not been able to sustain the race to space shield that would have totally altered the logic of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), which had governed the years of Cold War.