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# When ideology stops at the water's edge. Italy's centre-right parties, US–China competition and Taiwan

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## ABSTRACT

Why did Italian centre-right parties moderate their stance on Taiwan after entering government in October 2022? This article argues that the shift reflects the constraints of intensifying US – China strategic competition. Positions articulated in opposition – rooted in anti-communism, nationalism and sympathy with democratic Taiwan – were recalibrated once in office as governing parties prioritised strategic realignment with Washington while managing the risks of antagonising Beijing. Drawing on interviews, parliamentary debates, public statements, and official documents, the article advances that alliance relations functioned as the strategic driver of foreign policy behaviour, while economic interdependence with China operates as a constraining tactical consideration. Taiwan policy thus emerged as a derivative outcome of this trade-off. During Italy's disengagement from the Belt and Road Initiative Memorandum of Understanding, Taiwan-related rhetoric and engagement were deliberately attenuated to avoid economic and commercial reprisals from China. Yet attenuation did not amount to abandonment. Once the tactical urgency subsided, the governing majority gradually reopened limited and adaptive channels of engagement with Taiwan. By tracing how ideological preferences are filtered through domestic and international constraints, the article contributes to debates on foreign policy change, party politics, and Europe's role in the Indo-Pacific under heightened great power rivalry.

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## Introduction

Taiwan has emerged as one of the most sensitive nodes of contemporary great power competition, situated at the intersection of strategic rivalry and disputes over sovereignty and political status (Pelaggi 2026). For European states, the issue crystallises a broader dilemma: how to reconcile growing security alignment with the United States and like-minded partners with dense economic ties to the People's Republic of China (PRC) (Lucenti, Christiansen, and Sabatovych 2025; Pugliese and Insisa 2025), namely to achieve a strategic autonomy vis-à-vis both Washington and Beijing (Irrera 2024). Italy illustrates this tension in a particularly instructive way (Pelaggi 2023). As

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a secondary power embedded in asymmetric alliances, strongly focused on its three-circles – Atlantic, European and Mediterranean – centre of gravity (Santoro 1991) and characterised by recurrent shifts in governing coalitions, Italy is exposed to structural pressures, economic interdependence with China, and competing ideological orientations in foreign policy.

This article analyses the positions of Italy's main centre-right parties – Brothers of Italy (Fdi), the League (LN), and Forza Italia (FI) – on Taiwan by comparing their stance before entering government (before October 2022) with their conduct once in office (from October 2022 onwards), when Giorgia Meloni became Prime Minister. Prior to October 2022, Taiwan featured prominently in the ideological repertoire of centre-right parties, particularly Fdi and the LN, where anti-communist narratives, sovereignty claims and references to democratic solidarity were frequently mobilised. After entering government, however, the issue was handled more pragmatically and became embedded in the broader management of Italy's relations with the PRC, particularly during Rome's delicate disengagement from the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), signed in 2019 by the Conte I government, and within the context of Italy's transatlantic commitments and national security concerns (Andornino, Dossi, and Caffarena 2025).

At a broader theoretical level, the article speaks to a long-standing debate in international relations and foreign policy analysis, often associated with Arthur Vandenberg's dictum that 'politics stops at the water's edge'. Vandenberg – a leading US Senator and key figure in the consolidation of post-war bipartisan foreign policy – famously captured the expectation that domestic political divisions should recede in the conduct of foreign affairs. This article engages with that proposition by showing that, rather than simply disappearing, ideological preferences are filtered, reprioritised and selectively reactivated as political actors move from opposition to government, especially under conditions of heightened external constraint.

The article advances a two-level argument centred on the trade-off between strategic alignment and tactical constraint. First, it argues that the pre-government discourse of Italy's centre-right parties on Taiwan – rooted in ideologically informed narratives and functioning as a low-cost expressive resource – was recalibrated once these parties entered office. The strategic imperative of maintaining close alignment with the United States, while managing economic interdependence with China, temporarily attenuated assertive rhetoric on Taiwan and subordinated visible progress in Rome – Taipei relations to broader considerations of alliance coordination and economic stability. Second, once the Meloni government completed Italy's exit from the BRI in the winter of 2023–24 without incurring Chinese reprisals (Natalizia and Termine 2025) and stabilised relations with Beijing in early 2024, limited space for expanding engagement with Taipei gradually re-emerged. In this sense, the evolution of Italy's Taiwan policy reflects a broader pattern of cautious adaptation already observed in recent analyses of Italian foreign policy under the Meloni government (Pelaggi 2025), while providing a more fine-grained account of how such adaptation unfolds across specific issue areas.

The article contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it focuses on Taiwan – an issue that is symbolically charged yet tightly constrained by the PRC's diplomatic red lines. Second, it situates the analysis within the context of intensifying great power competition, a strategic environment that narrows the room for manoeuvre of secondary powers. Third, it places Italian centre-right parties and the Meloni government at the centre of the

analysis, contributing new empirical material to the growing literature on Italian foreign policy (Diodato and Marchetti 2025; Fasola and Lucarelli 2024) and Europe's position in US – China competition (Casarini 2022; Tercovich and Meijer 2025; Simón and Klose, 2025).

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. Section II reviews the relevant conceptual frameworks, clarifying how ideology may shape foreign policy preferences and how these are conditioned by constraints once parties enter government. Section III outlines the research question, comparative design, and methodological approach based on interview research and documentary triangulation. Section IV reconstructs the pre-October 2022 phase, tracing how Taiwan featured in the discourse of Italy's centre-right parties and identifying the main ideological frames mobilised in parliamentary and public arenas. Section V examines the post-October 2022 phase, analysing how Taiwan-related positioning evolved in government and how it intersected with Italy's broader approach to the PRC. The conclusion summarises the findings and reflects on their implications for understanding alignment strategies under conditions of great power competition.

### **Ideological preferences, government-opposition divide and strategic calculations**

The contradiction, real or imagined, between ideas and interests in policy-making has long fascinated scholars of political science and international relations and has received extensive conceptual treatment, particularly within the former discipline (Williams 2004). Across the literature on international politics and foreign policy, the relationship between these two ideal-types has been conceptualised in markedly different ways.

Realist accounts, both structural and neoclassical, have traditionally echoed Arthur Vandenberg's famous maxim that 'politics stops at the water's edge', claiming that party preferences, institutional factionalism, leadership traits, public opinion, and interest-group pressures ultimately give way to a unitary conception of national interest and a coherent foreign policy. To varying degrees – with neoclassical realists allowing domestic politics to operate as an intervening variable (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016) – realist approaches converge on the idea that national interest functions as the final leveller of domestic disagreement and that foreign policy remains fundamentally the realm of bipartisanship.

Neoclassical realism allows for the partial incorporation of ideas into foreign policy explanations, particularly when beliefs combine with norms and assumptions to form strategic culture, which may embed dominant ideologies. Yet these ideational elements are conceived as collective and relatively stable, shaping state behaviour at the macro level rather than reflecting partisan contestation or individual preferences (Schweller 2009; Wohlforth 1993). Within this framework, ideational variables matter insofar as they condition elite perceptions of relative power, threat, and opportunity, influencing how systemic signals are translated into policy responses (Rose 1998). Crucially, neoclassical realism maintains a hierarchy among explanatory variables. Even when domestic ideas or strategic culture are acknowledged, they remain subordinate to material constraints and are expected to lose explanatory leverage under conditions of heightened external pressure. Restrictive strategic environments, intensified alliance dependence, or rising exposure to economic and security interdependence narrow states' room for

manoeuvre and raise the costs of ideologically driven positions (Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016; Rose 1998). In this sense, systemic pressures exert a disciplining effect, particularly on states embedded in asymmetric alliances (Simón 2017).

Against the 'water's edge' argument, a consolidated strand of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) treats party ideology as a structured set of interpretive priors and programmatic commitments shaping how political actors define national interests, evaluate external threats, and select policy instruments. In the classic two-level game (Putnam 1988), ideological orientations inform foreign policy preferences by providing cognitive and normative lenses through which international environments are interpreted (Carlsnaes 1992). In this perspective, ideology operates not merely as rhetoric but as a dispositional layer mediating between structural constraints and political action, influencing both the framing of foreign policy problems and the repertoire of legitimate responses available to decision-makers.

Classic and contemporary FPA scholarship emphasises that foreign policy outcomes result from multi-level interactions between material constraints, institutional settings, and ideational factors operating at the level of actors and groups (Alden, Aran, and Alves 2016; Hudson 2005). From this standpoint, ideology shapes foreign policy not only by orienting preferences but also by structuring perceptions, identities, and expectations regarding appropriate international roles and behaviour. In contrast to realist accounts, FPA approaches reject the assumption of a unitary state and instead highlight how competing partisan worldviews coexist within domestic political systems and translate into distinct foreign policy orientations, particularly in democratic contexts (Palmer et al. 2004). A substantial body of scholarship shows that party ideology systematically affects foreign policy attitudes and behaviour across issue areas including military intervention, international institutions, foreign aid, trade, and arms exports (Rathbun 2004; Raunio and Wagner 2020; Thérien and Noël 2000).

More ideational and constructivist strands of FPA refine this argument by stressing the role of identity, discourse, and role conceptions in mediating the relationship between ideology and foreign policy behaviour. Party ideologies shape how political actors construct representations of Self and Other, define national roles, and delineate the boundaries of legitimate foreign policy action (Cantir and Kaarbo 2012; Harnisch 2011; Kaarbo 2015). Ideological commitments thus operate not only at the level of preferences but also at the level of meaning-making, influencing how foreign policy issues are narrated, justified, and contested within domestic arenas.

FPA scholars also emphasise that ideological effects are neither uniform nor unconditional. First, their impact varies across issue areas, with partisan divides more pronounced in some domains – such as development aid or military deployments – than in others (Raunio and Wagner 2020; Thérien and Noël 2000). Second, ideological orientations interact with strategic calculations and institutional constraints, producing different outcomes depending on political position. Parties in government face constraints – including alliance commitments, reputational costs, path dependency, and bureaucratic routines – that tend to moderate or recalibrate ideologically driven positions (Coticchia and Davidson 2018; Kreps 2010). This dynamic has been observed also in the behaviour of radical and populist actors once in office, where the transition from opposition to government exposes them to systemic and alliance-related pressures that discipline foreign policy choices and reduce the scope for ideologically

expressive or confrontational stances. However, variance in office does not disappear. For instance, Coticchia and Vignoli (2020) show that a strongly populist party such as the Italian Five Star Movement, once in government, adopted a predominantly pacifist and humanitarian approach to foreign and defence policy, approximating a 'left-libertarian populist party' ideal-type.

By contrast, opposition parties enjoy greater latitude to articulate ideologically expressive or symbolically charged positions, using foreign policy debates to signal differentiation, mobilise identity-based narratives, or appeal to specific constituencies without bearing the costs of international responsibility (Otjes, van der Veer, and Wagner 2023; Schultz 2001). In this sense, ideology may function as a low-cost expressive resource in opposition, while becoming subject to processes of selection, prioritisation and constraint once parties assume executive responsibilities.

## Research design, method and framework

The analysis is organised around a temporal comparison structured along the opposition – government divide. The pre-government phase covers the period from 2013 – the first year in which the three major parties currently composing the Italian centre-right camp (Fdl, LN and FI) were simultaneously represented in Parliament – to the formation of the Meloni government in October 2022. The government phase extends from October 2022 onwards.

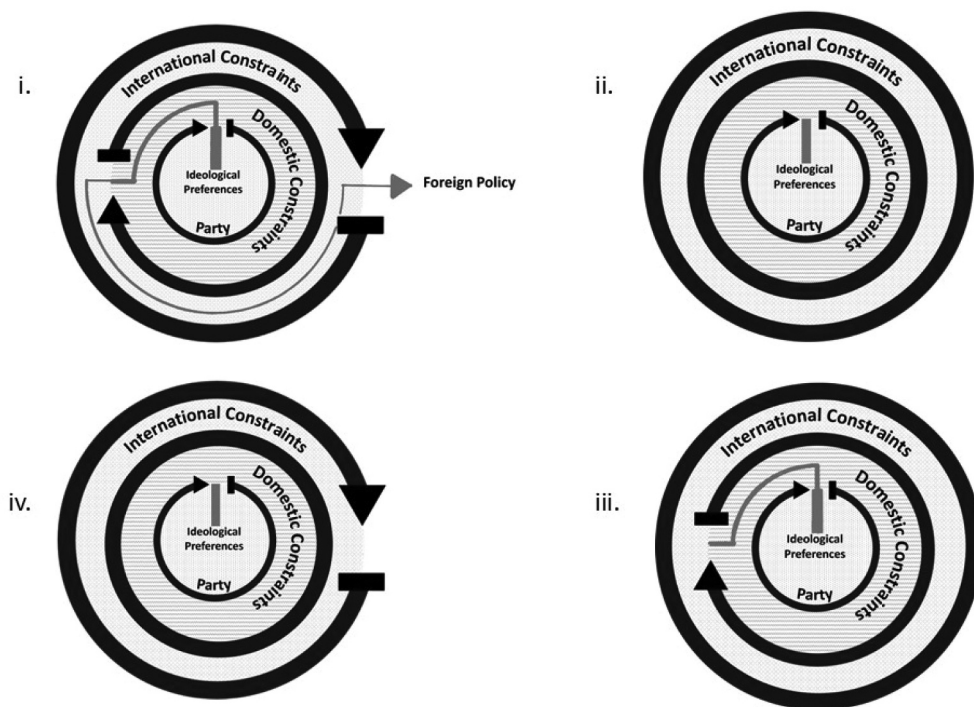
The article adopts a multi-method research strategy drawing on multiple sources. It is primarily based on qualitative interview research complemented by systematic documentary analysis, while secondary sources – mainly newspaper reporting – are used to contextualise events and refine the empirical reconstruction. The anonymised interview dataset consists of 18 semi-structured interviews conducted with members of the political and institutional elite, with particular attention to representatives of Italian centre-right parties involved in foreign policy debates and parliamentary activity, as well as interlocutors within government, diplomacy and the armed forces. Of these, 14 interviews are directly mobilised in the empirical analysis, as they most clearly engage with the article's hypotheses by providing evidence that supports or challenges the proposed interpretation. The remaining interviews, especially those conducted at an earlier stage of the research, ... primarily serve a contextual function, helping to map the policy environment, identify key actors and refine the analytical focus through a process of 'soaking and poking' (George and Bennett 2005; see also Mosley 2013).

To triangulate interview evidence and reduce reliance on retrospective narratives, the article systematically analyses a wide range of public sources, including parliamentary records (plenary and committee debates, interrogations, motions and committee hearings), official statements, speeches and interviews by key political figures, government communications, and newspaper coverage situating these events within the broader political debate. Across this material, the analysis focuses on expressions of position related to: (i) Taiwan's political status and references to identity and sovereignty, particularly in response to China's coercive actions or shows of force; (ii) Taiwan's participation or representation in international organisations and multilateral forums; (iii) Italy's bilateral engagement with Taiwan, including parliamentary diplomacy; and (iv) the explicit or implicit linkage between Taiwan-related positioning and Italy's broader China policy.

Interview data are thus used to uncover perceptions, decision-making logics and informal constraints, while documentary sources provide traceable evidence of public positioning and allow for cross-validation of claims emerging from interviews.

The objective is to reconstruct how Italian centre-right parties interpreted the Taiwan issue, how they assessed the boundaries of feasible action, and how these assessments evolved as they moved from opposition to government within a context increasingly shaped by US – China strategic competition and intensified alliance alignment. The article's theoretical framework is illustrated in [Figure 1](#). Ideological preferences originate within political parties but, once parties enter government, they encounter a first layer of constraints in the form of domestic institutional and political limitations. Should ideological preferences pass this first filter, they face a second layer represented by international constraints. Only when ideology crosses both layers can it directly shape foreign policy outcomes (scenario I).

In scenario II, domestic constraints prevent party ideology from reaching the second layer. In scenario III, domestic constraints allow ideological preferences to emerge but they are subsequently blocked by international constraints. In scenario IV, domestic barriers inhibit ideological expression even when international constraints are comparatively permissive. The framework embeds a neoclassical realist distinction whereby the international status quo functions as either a permissive or restrictive environment and ultimately determines whether ideological preferences can translate into foreign policy influence. At the same time, consistent with Foreign Policy Analysis, the article assumes



**Figure 1.** A framework of ideology and foreign policy under constraints. Author's own elaboration.

that ideological preferences do not disappear under systemic pressure but rather remain latent until political or strategic conditions allow them to re-emerge.

The comparative design is within-case and diachronic, broadly inspired by a most similar systems design, and leads to the following main hypothesis:

MH: The Meloni government maintained the previous executive's imperative of realigning Italian foreign policy with the United States. This strategic priority translated into the non-renewal of the BRI Memorandum of Understanding with China and into military and security initiatives in the Indo-Pacific. At the same time, intense diplomatic activity aimed at avoiding the antagonisation of the PRC created tactical incentives to downplay previous affinities with Taiwan and temporarily suspend visible engagement with Taipei.

Based on this framework, a secondary hypothesis follows:

SH: The Meloni government's cautious approach towards China persisted until early and mid-2024, when the BRI MoU expired and the Prime Minister's visit to China symbolically marked the stabilisation of bilateral relations. Following this juncture, constraints on engagement with Taiwan are expected to have eased, allowing for a limited and adaptive resumption of interaction. Given the relatively recent nature of this phase and the still limited availability of observable evidence, this expectation should be interpreted as suggestive rather than conclusively established.

A final caveat concerns the treatment of ideology in the analysis. While the article distinguishes analytically between ideologically driven positions expressed in opposition and the more constrained behaviour observed in government, it does not assume that party ideology is internally homogeneous or unidimensional. Ideological repertoires are understood as composite and potentially containing multiple, and at times competing, orientations. In this respect, Atlanticism itself constitutes not only a strategic imperative linked to alliance structures, but also a historically embedded ideological trait within Italian centre-right parties, at least for FdI (Argenta 2022) and FI (Diodato and Niglia 2018). This implies that the attenuation of pro-Taiwan rhetoric after October 2022 should not be interpreted as a straightforward retreat of ideology. Rather, it may reflect a rebalancing among different ideological components, whose relative salience varies depending on institutional position and exposure to external constraints. Acknowledging this complexity helps qualify the interpretation of the findings and sharpens the article's focus on how ideological preferences are filtered, prioritised and translated into policy under conditions of constraint.

Finally, the article acknowledges a number of structural limitations inherent to the case study. First, Taiwan does not constitute a primary dossier in Italian foreign policy, which limits both the frequency and the visibility of political positioning. Second, a significant portion of Italy – Taiwan relations unfolds through informal or low-visibility channels, reducing the amount of observable public data. Third, the analysis focuses on a relatively short time span and on a single government, which constrains the extent to which findings can be generalised. Fourth, the presence of the PRC as a central economic partner introduces a disincentive for overt political signalling, further compressing the empirical record. These limitations, however, do not undermine the analytical leverage of the study. On the contrary, the within-case comparative design across the opposition – government divide allows variation to emerge clearly, while qualitative interview research is

particularly well suited to uncovering perceptions, constraints and decision-making dynamics in contexts where observable behaviour is partially constrained or strategically muted.

### **The Italian centre-right parties' Taiwan stance before office**

In the Chamber of Deputies plenary debate,<sup>1</sup> Fdl consistently embeds Taiwan within a narrative that fuses democratic solidarity, appreciation of Taiwanese innovation and geopolitical alert. Augusta Montaruli's speech in July 2020 exemplifies this framing. Speaking of the protests in Hong Kong, Montaruli declares: 'with this opposition between matter and spirit we find ourselves confronted in many parts of the world'. China 'now a global economic superpower' shows the 'arrogance of materialism, the arrogance of presumption, set against sensitivity, against freedom, against, precisely, the spirit' which the then ruling center-left coalition – Montaruli accuses – has 'courted on many occasions'. Italy should 'insist that every relationship it maintains with China should take place only if China guarantees freedom the territories that are satellites of China itself, over which China seeks to exercise its maximum control. This applies to Hong Kong, it applies to Tibet, it applies to Taiwan, it applies to all those regions that are regions of freedom – regions where people wish to breathe a wind of liberty'.<sup>2</sup> Concerns was expressed on 9 November 2021 by Federico Mollicone and in June 2022 by Meloni herself who described China as becoming 'increasingly threatening towards Taiwan', portraying the island as a frontline theatre in a wider pattern of assertiveness.

Interview evidence corroborates this picture. According to policymakers from Fdl (Interview #15; #18), the party's position has 'always' favoured the 'autonomy' of Taiwan's government. This support was framed less as a formal endorsement of independence than as part of a broader anti-communist and nationalist critique of China. Interviewee #15 traces this sympathetic posture back to earlier ideological traditions within the Italian right, particularly its anti-communist lineage, suggesting continuity with positions already present in the Movimento Sociale Italiano and later Alleanza Nazionale. Taiwan is described as a democratic polity deserving autonomy vis-à-vis what is characterised as an authoritarian, even totalitarian, regime in Beijing. Interview #15 also identifies specific party figures – including Andrea Delmastro Delle Vedove and Carlo Fianza – as particularly active on Taiwan prior to October 2022, with Delmastro, then responsible for foreign affairs within the party, playing a prominent role.

Del Mastro indeed expressed strong rhetoric on Taiwan in the Chamber's Committee for Foreign Affairs. In March 2019, commenting on the signature of the BRI MoU, the deputy stated that 'Taiwan status had always been safeguarded by Italy for its respect of rule of law and human rights', but that the yellow-green government was 'severely condoning' China's 'leap forward in annexation policy' towards the island.<sup>3</sup> Later, Del Mastro returned to similar themes when he expressed concerns over 'Chinese aggressive declarations on Taiwan' and invited the Italian government to 'consolidate transatlantic relations' and 'mend fences with Washington'.<sup>4</sup> Senator Adolfo Urso, now Minister for Business and Made in Italy, reiterated and strengthened a similar argument in the Senate: 'the new global conflict [...] is between those who trample these rights – China – and those who refuse to give them up – the West. The difference from the past is the rights we must uphold in China and elsewhere. China, in fact, an authoritarian and totalitarian

power where rights are not recognized, can today, unlike in the past, become the world's greatest power. Never before, not even during the Soviet Union, had such a real threat existed. Today, this threat exists, and that is why we are deeply concerned about the rights of the peoples of Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the Uyghurs'.<sup>5</sup>

In plenary debate, the League developed a parallel, similar narrative. On 9 January 2020, Paolo Formentini mentioned rights violations 'from Tibet to Hong Kong' and Beijing's 'expansionist aims towards Taiwan',<sup>6</sup> constructing a continuous arc of coercion later echoed by Alex Bazzaro – 'today it is Hong Kong, tomorrow it could be Taiwan' – in May. On 4 June 2020, Formentini again described Taiwan as an 'island of freedom',<sup>7</sup> while in December 2021, Bianchi characterised Taiwan as a democratic 'Western outpost' whose defence should concern the 'free and anti-communist world',<sup>8</sup> linking the island to an ideological reading of systemic rivalry and to the need for a united transatlantic front. On several occasions, senators from the League pressed the government on Taiwan's participation in the World Health Organization (WHO), invoking the universal right to health and criticising what they described as politically motivated ostracism. Interrogations such as 4–00060 and 4–03405 emphasised that only Taiwan's democratically elected government could legitimately represent its 23.5 million citizens in matters of public health and called for coordinated action with European partners to secure observer status within the WHO. In 2020, Toni Iwobi referred to reports of potential PLA exercises targeting the Pratas Islands and asked what initiatives Italy would undertake to prevent military escalation. Candura suggested that, following the Doha agreement with the Taliban, Western resources might be reallocated towards the protection of Taiwan and other East Asian partners. Malan repeatedly linked repression in Hong Kong to potential pressure on Taiwan, portraying the erosion of the 'one country, two systems' model as a warning signal.

Forza Italia did not differentiate much. Senator Lucio Malan, president of the Italy – Taiwan Interparliamentary Friendship Group and later member of FdI, used some of the strongest language on Taiwan, describing the island as 'a genuine and functioning democracy, [...] a sovereign and independent state, with its own freely elected government and parliament, where the human, civil, political, religious, social, and trade union rights of its 23.5 million citizens are constantly promoted'.<sup>9</sup> A FI – League joint interrogation (4–06126) echoed similar considerations: the 'Taiwanese have found their democratic nature to be the element that distinguishes them from mainland China' and 'despite its complex history, Taiwan remains one of the freest, most prosperous, and vibrant democracies in Asia'. Annamaria Bernini, later Minister of University in the Meloni government, cautioned against the return of 'imperialism' after it had been defeated during the Cold War. The 'West cannot accept a period of global turmoil that places all democracies under potential siege' and 'China's own example regarding Taiwan demonstrates how close the symptom of this disease is, how here, how now'.<sup>10</sup>

During Legislature 17, parliamentary debate shows that several of these frames were already present well before the centre-right entered government. Data for FdI are limited given the party's small parliamentary presence at the time, with only nine seats in the Chamber and none in the Senate. It was mainly FI (then *Il Popolo della Libertà*) and the League that raised the issue of Taiwan, frequently in relation to its participation in international organisations and the development of bilateral economic relations. Senators often condemned politically motivated pressures from

Beijing to exclude Taipei from global cooperation (e.g. Motion 1–00705). Particular attention was paid to the Italy – Taiwan Economic, Industrial and Financial Cooperation Forum, established in 2010 as a permanent platform for dialogue on trade and industrial relations.<sup>11</sup> Parliamentary interventions stressed the importance of maintaining this forum as a mechanism for resolving trade disputes and promoting economic cooperation. Ideological language again surfaced in these debates: in 2017 Senator Arrigoni (League) openly condemned ‘Chinese government demands’ that blocked Taiwan’s participation in the WHO as an observer. Taiwan, whose government ‘was democratically elected the previous year’, was thus ‘betrayed’ to ‘serve the Chinese communists’.<sup>12</sup> Later that year, conservative Benedetto Fucci complained about Taiwan’s absence from the WHO, which he considered ‘very serious’ and ‘due exclusively to pressure from the People’s Republic of China, which imposed Taiwan’s exclusion for political reasons [...] of aversion and opposition to the current Taiwanese government, democratically elected in 2016’.<sup>13</sup>

Centre-right ideological framing continued into the 2022 electoral campaign, when Fdl and its leader, soon-to-be prime minister Giorgia Meloni, adopted an even more vocal stance on Taiwan. During the annual CPAC meeting in Florida in February 2022,<sup>14</sup> she argued that the West was showing signs of weakness following the withdrawal from Afghanistan – weakness that, in her view, emboldened challengers such as Russia to ‘siege Kiev’ and could lead to a scenario in which ‘nobody would be ready to see Taiwan occupied tomorrow’. In September 2022,<sup>15</sup> former foreign minister Giulio Terzi di Sant’Agata – a candidate for Fdl and widely considered a potential choice for the Farnesina, Italy’s MFA – framed Taiwan within a broader ideological confrontation between liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes. Drawing a parallel with the war in Ukraine, Terzi argued that the West needed to learn from Russia’s aggression and ensure that ‘Beijing cannot do the same with Taiwan’. The strongly pro-Taiwan and China-critical Inter-Parliamentary Alliance on China, established during Covid-19 and the repression in Hong Kong in 2020, counts only six Italian members, four of whom belonged to the right (three Fdl and one League) and two to the centre. Eventually it was Meloni herself who reinforced this framing in a written interview granted shortly before the election to Taiwan’s Central News Agency<sup>16</sup> – a rare instance of a major Italian political leader addressing Taiwanese media directly. In that interview, she described Taiwan as a ‘strategic trade partner for Italy and the European Union’ and warned that a military conflict in the Taiwan Strait would have direct repercussions for Europe. She further stated that Fdl stood alongside the democratic countries of the ‘free world’ in condemning China’s military threats against the island and argued that the European Union should deploy all available diplomatic and political instruments to prevent escalation. Looking ahead to a possible centre-right government, Meloni suggested that Taiwan would represent ‘an important concern for Italy’. At the same time, she linked the Taiwan issue to her broader criticism of the 2019 Belt and Road memorandum signed by the Conte government, suggesting that under evolving geopolitical conditions she saw little political basis for renewing the agreement.<sup>17</sup> These remarks followed Meloni’s meeting with Taiwan’s representative in Italy, Andrea Sing-Ying Lee, where she reiterated Fdl’s support for ‘everybody believing in the values of freedom and democracy’.<sup>18</sup>

## The Meloni government and the strategic-tactical interplay over Taiwan

When the Meloni government took office on 22 October 2022, a combination of factors inherited from the recent past shaped Rome's Taiwan policy, in line with the strategic – tactical interplay outlined above.

First, China remained central to Italy's position in global trade. The PRC is Italy's second-largest source of imports after Germany. Rome receives more than 10% of its total imports from Beijing, a share that grew by 17.2% in 2025 compared with 2024 (German imports increased by 2.4%). Conversely, China is only the tenth destination for Italian exports, which shrank by 8% in 2025 compared with the previous year. As a result, the PRC maintains a trade surplus with Italy of about €46.29 billion between January and November 2025.<sup>19</sup> Rome has always been eager to capture economic benefits from relations with China and often regarded 'US pressures over China as excessive' (Interview #2; #6) and 'mostly unreasonable' (Interview #7). As a result, Rome continued seeking to deepen trade and financial relations with Beijing even after 2020 (Wu 2026), despite since then a 'greater share of caution' vis-à-vis China has marked Italian foreign policy (Interview #2; #3; #6; #7).

Second, US pressure on allies regarding China reached a peak during the final years of the Trump administration and throughout the Biden presidency. Washington sought to rally allies and partners in building a common front against China's growing global influence, including its military, economic and technological rise. Allied coordination centred on several major dossiers: stronger public condemnation of Chinese coercive behaviour; greater allied engagement in Indo-Pacific security and deterrence; and tighter controls over Chinese access to national economies and sensitive technological flows, particularly dual-use technologies. In Italy's case, a specific request concerned the termination of the BRI MoU (Andornino, Dossi, and Caffarena 2025; Natalizia and Termine 2025).

Interview evidence (Interview #4; #15; #18) confirms what the scholarly literature has also observed (Hanau Santini and Baldaro 2025): the overarching foreign policy framework of the new centre-right government centred on signalling Italy's renewed alignment with the United States. This orientation had already been initiated by the Draghi government and was confirmed by the new executive (Interview #3; #4). The government prioritised 'the preservation of allied political cohesion in NATO, G7 and the EU – US relationship' as the most pressing strategic objective. The implications for Italy's China policy were clear: 'exiting the BRI MoU' and 'strengthening golden power privileges' in the face of Chinese investments in Italy (Interview #4; #8). This, complemented by the 'strongest attention to wrap any unfriendly move under the guise of maximum diplomacy' (Interview #4).

According to a senior diplomat, the Meloni government's China policy can be clearly 'periodised into two major phases, the first spanning from October 2022 to July 2024, the second starting in July 2024 onwards' (Interview #16). Both diplomats and policy-makers identify the turning point in Giorgia Meloni's visit to China on July 28–31, 2024 (Interview #16; #18), when the prime minister met President Xi Jinping for the first time after Rome's definitive withdrawal (March 2024) from the BRI in March 2024 – following an official prenotification sent in late 2023. The visit effectively sanctioned the success of a new, more relaxed phase in Italy – China relations. These two phases correspond to different constraints on engagement with Taiwan and broadly confirm the theoretical expectations outlined in the first section.

### *The first phase, October 2022 – March/July 2024*

During the first months, Rome devised a China, Indo-Pacific and Taiwan policy of careful balance (cfr. Gallelli and Zappa 2025). The largest sword hanging over the Meloni government's head was of course BRI. The withdrawal was made possible by 'hundreds of bilateral meetings and documents reaffirming the fundamentally friendly relationship' between Italy and China (Interview #5).

In the meantime, under US encouragement, Rome engaged in an unprecedented Indo-Pacific tilt (Termine and Natalizia 2025). Although new in Italy's security policy, this represented a 'watered down political signal compared to those countries asserting freedom of navigation in a more muscular way'. For Rome, 'just being there was clear enough a message' (Interview #4). Similarly, when Italy assumed the G7 presidency in January 2024, amid US and Japanese pressure for tougher wording on China and during the delicate exit from the BRI MoU, it encouraged partners not to send openly hostile messages to Beijing. As a result, Rome pushed for a softer paragraph on the Indo-Pacific, ultimately getting its way and labelling the region as 'inclusive' alongside 'free and open', despite US opposition (Interview #5), while also turning down Japanese requests to 'cross off references to the One China Policy' (Interview #7; similar theme in #9). Conversely, Rome did not oppose the inclusion of references to Taiwan, a sine qua non for Washington, and accepted US encouragement to invite the Philippines and Indonesia to the Fiuggi meeting (Interview #7.). Similarly, Italian participation in military drills, manoeuvres and naval diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific under the Meloni government had clear thresholds not to be crossed: 'passages in the Taiwan Strait would have sounded too provoking'. Given the 'traditional Italian unfamiliarity with the Indo-Pacific dossier, great caution' was needed 'not to irritate China too much' (Interview #3). A senior diplomat also reveals that the US recommended labelling Indo-Pacific naval passages as 'FONOPs' and sailing through the Taiwan Strait, but Italy refrained (Interview #5). Italy's China policy was indeed to 'never collide with China, but to largely accommodate Indo-Pacific countries rivalling China' (Interview #7).

Facing Chinese growing investment and M&A projection, the main tool by the government remained the rather discreet golden power, already used under the late Conte II and Draghi governments. Building on earlier interventions, authorities closely monitored cases such as Pirelli, where conditions were imposed on governance arrangements linked to Sinochem's stake in order to safeguard control over critical technologies. Similar scrutiny characterised the broader policy environment surrounding earlier cases such as LPE, a semiconductor equipment producer targeted by a Chinese acquisition attempt, Verisem in the agri-biotech sector, and the shipbuilding group Ferretti (Brugnatelli and Poli 2026). During this first phase, it is interesting that "despite the heated international scenario" very little is 'the amount of legislative bills concerning national security concerns regarding China' (FBLab 2024, 9). During this period, FdI and FI MPs 'maintained a plural thematic standing with very little roughness' on China, 'likely due to the role of guidance and balancing in the ruling coalition' the former, 'to the office [of Minister of Foreign Affairs] of its leader' the latter (pp.11). Still, behind the curtain

Amid these China-related developments, the Meloni government's Taiwan policy had little space to develop. During the first phase, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs preferred not to convene the yearly Italy – Taiwan Economic, Industrial and Financial

Cooperation Forum ‘specifically because of the required caution vis-à-vis Beijing’ (Interview #16), after it had last been held in Taipei in December 2022. On this matter, the Taiwan office in Rome – the de facto embassy – expressed its willingness to hold the meeting as soon as possible (Interview #12). The pragmatic decision of the Draghi government to ‘expand the staff of the Italian Trade Agency office in Taipei from one to two top officers, related to Italian interest in the semiconductor industry, was reversed’, and the office returned to having only one director (Interview #17).

Given the informal nature of the Rome – Taipei bilateral relationship, parliamentary diplomacy has historically been a major channel of political contacts between the two countries. This had been the norm before 2019 and the signing of the BRI MoU, when visits suddenly stopped. When the Meloni government took office, many commentators expected renewed momentum for parliamentary diplomacy. This did not immediately occur. On the contrary, a long-awaited parliamentary mission to Taiwan scheduled for 11 April 2023, was cancelled at the very last minute for ‘safety reasons’ due to Chinese military drills around the island, which in fairness had ended the day before.<sup>20</sup> Discouragements came from two distinct sources: on one side, the MFA cautioned MPs against travelling at a moment of ‘international tensions’;<sup>21</sup> according to one interviewee, however, the call to cancel the visit did not come from non-partisan state authorities such as the MFA, the presidency of the Republic, intelligence services or the military leadership, but from FdI’s own political leadership, in particular Giovanni Donzelli, the party’s national head of organisation (Interview #15). At the very same time, FI undersecretary for foreign affairs Maria Tripodi attended the Hainan International Consumer Products Expo in Hainan, China.

In 2024, another revealing episode illustrated the executive’s cautious management of Taiwan-related engagement. According to press reports, a Taiwanese delegation led by the Vice-President of Taiwan’s Legislative Yuan was scheduled to visit Milan and Rome between late July and early August – precisely when Giorgia Meloni was travelling to China – but was prevented from holding meetings inside the Italian Senate. The Vice-President was therefore left outside the building and eventually met a senator from the League in a nearby café.<sup>22</sup> A senior diplomat recalls that during the months preceding the trip the Farnesina exercised a form of ‘moral suasion’ on the Prime Minister through her diplomatic advisor and indirectly on Parliament – ‘a very hard channel of communication to handle’ – recommending ‘caution due to the bilateral moment and coherence with the longstanding One China Policy’ (Interview #16).

This first phase of the Meloni government’s foreign policy was marked by prudence also in diplomatic language. In this sense, the government’s early Taiwan policy was characterised not only by what it did, but also by what it deliberately chose not to say. Despite the historical rhetorical affinity with Taiwan, the Meloni government and parliamentary majority refrained from issuing any communiqué of concern – let alone condemnation – regarding Chinese manoeuvres around the island in April 20 August 2023<sup>23</sup> and the ‘Joint Sword–2024A’ exercises in May 2024. The government also remained silent following the earthquake that caused almost 20 deaths in April 2024, as well as during the inauguration of William Lai’s presidency in May 2024.

It goes without saying that Rome’s Indo-Pacific tilt never came close to the Taiwan Strait. This issue was raised by the US side during Multinational Strategy and Operations Group meetings focused on ‘promoting interoperability’ between Euro-Atlantic and Indo-

Pacific partners. The Italian Defence Staff received the recommendation and passed it to the Tavolo Esteri Difesa (Foreign and Defence Policy Coordination Table), 'leaving the final decision on the opportunity to the diplomats' (Interview #8). The Farnesina ultimately ruled it out.

### ***The second phase, March/July 2024– early 2026***

Between March and July 2024, the Meloni government settled the most pressing dossier in Italy – China relations, namely the withdrawal from the BRI, and met Xi Jinping in Beijing, placing bilateral relations on a new footing of sustainable cooperation. The diplomatic sleight of hand relied on the 20th anniversary of the bilateral strategic partnership, which provided the opportunity to celebrate the relationship through the launch of a new action plan (Interview #2).<sup>23</sup> This long process culminated in the July 2024 visit, which was deemed a complete success (Interview #9): Rome managed to exit the BRI in March 2024 without suffering reprisals from China or setbacks in the bilateral relationship. The new friendly momentum opened the way for further high-level meetings, including visits to China by the Italian Minister of the Interior (October 2024), the President of the Republic (November 2024), and the Minister of Transportation (July 2025). These encounters paved the way for Foreign Minister Wang Yi's presence in Rome for the 12th session of the Italy – China Intergovernmental Committee in October 2025, aimed at implementing the bilateral plan.

This new cooperative climate, with the BRI episode behind, created a narrow space for Rome – Taipei relations to deepen. The first signs were business-related. In May 2024, Fincantieri's VARD signed a contract for the design and construction of two Commissioning Service Operation Vessels for a major Taiwanese company, later expanded in 2025 and 2026 to three vessels plus a subsea vessel.

Parliamentary diplomacy soon resumed and gradually expanded. In January 2025, a delegation from the Italian Chamber of Deputies led by Marco Osnato (Fdl) visited Taipei, accompanied by Augusta Montaruli, Giangiacomo Calovini, Salvatore Caiata (all Fdl), Paola De Micheli (Democratic Party, PD), and Mauro Del Barba (Italia Viva). The delegation met Taiwanese officials, including the Deputy Minister of the Mainland Affairs Council, to discuss Indo-Pacific stability, democratic supply chains and parliamentary cooperation. Political support was further demonstrated in April 2025, when the Italy – Taiwan Interparliamentary Friendship Group issued a statement condemning Chinese military exercises around Taiwan and reaffirming support for maintaining the status quo in the Taiwan Strait – the first communiqué of its kind despite Chinese drills having occurred for three consecutive years. The note, together with a letter addressed to Taiwan's representative in Italy Vincent Tsai, was signed by Senators Lucio Malan (Fdl) and Adriano Paroli (FI) and Deputy Silvana Andreina Comaroli (League).

Later that year, on 4 September 2025, another cross-party parliamentary delegation led by Paroli (FI) travelled to Taiwan together with Senators Gianpietro Maffoni and Cinzia Pellegrino (Fdl), Alberto Losacco (PD), as well as Senator Dario Damiani and Deputies Andrea Orsini, Luca Squeri and Raffaele Nevi (all FI). The group met senior Taiwanese officials and attended SEMICON Taiwan to deepen cooperation in technology and the semiconductor sector. Engagement continued with a further large and politically diverse delegation that travelled to Taiwan from 8 to 12 January 2026, led by Deputy Alessandro

Cattaneo (FI) and including Roberto Traversi (Five Star Movement), Vanessa Cattoi (Lega), Fabrizio Benzoni (Azione), Emanuele Loperfido and Gerolamo Cangiano (both FdI), together with Senator Simona Flavia Malpezzi (PD). During the visit, the delegation met government representatives including the Foreign Minister and toured research centres and the Hsinchu Science Park, exploring opportunities for cooperation in advanced technologies, trade and academic exchanges while reaffirming the Italian Parliament's interest in peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait.

Visits were not one-way, however. An unprecedented visit by a Taiwanese authority took place in October 2025 – just days before the Italy – China Committee – when the Taiwanese Minister of Foreign Affairs joined the Taiwanese Representative in Italy to inaugurate the newly renovated office in Rome. Several Italian politicians attended the event. Representing the Senate were Lucio Malan, Adriano Paroli, Gian Marco Centinaio, Maurizio Gasparri, Cinzia Pellegrino, Mario Alessandro Borghese, Gianpietro Maffoni, Alberto Losacco and Dario Damiani. The Chamber of Deputies was represented by Marco Osnato, Alessandro Giglio Vigna, Paolo Formentini, Isabella De Monte, Alessandro Cattaneo, Luca Squeri, Mauro Del Barba, Andrea Orsini and Raffaele Nevi, while Federico Rocca attended on behalf of the Municipality of Rome. Their participation constituted a significant institutional presence at an event deliberately kept low-profile to avoid diplomatic tensions with China, for a visit that had not occurred 'in decades'.<sup>24</sup> Senior diplomats – Italian and Taiwanese – noted that the Farnesina 'could do little to physically stop a private citizen from Taiwan from entering the country but mounted no resistance, despite some embarrassment' (Interview #16; cfr. #12). Eventually, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Taipei Office in Rome reached a *modus vivendi*: the Taiwanese side kept communication off ahead of the visit and released press statements only after the minister had left Italy (Interview #16).

In this context, the long-delayed Italy – Taiwan Cooperation Forum had still not been convened as of March 2026. However, Italian diplomats interviewed stressed that 'there are no political issues now blocking the Forum' (#9), 'differently from the recent past' (#14). Both cited mere 'logistics problems', particularly on the Taiwanese side, as the main obstacle (Interview #4; #9). To confirm a more proactive Italian stance on Taiwan within G7 discussions, an interviewee revealed that Rome 'encouraged declarations on Taiwan and the Chinese military drills around the island in December 2025 and again in early 2026', although the Canadian presidency in 2025 and the French presidency in 2026 ultimately avoided such wording.

This renewed momentum in Italy – Taiwan relations was further enhanced by a - €300 million investment in Novara by the Taiwanese company GlobalWafers, the world's third-largest producer of silicon wafers. The first 300 mm wafer samples were produced at the Novara facility in June 2025, and the factory was officially inaugurated in October of the same year.

## Conclusion

This article has examined the evolution of Italian centre-right parties' Taiwan policy within the broader context of Italy's recalibration of relations with China and its growing engagement in the Indo-Pacific. The analysis shows that the Italian centre-right's historical rhetorical sympathy for Taiwan did not automatically translate into a confrontational or

highly proactive policy once in government. Instead, Rome pursued a strategy characterised by caution, sequencing and diplomatic balancing.

During the first phase of the Meloni government, the overriding priority was the management of Italy's exit from the BRI and the stabilisation of bilateral relations with Beijing. This objective imposed significant constraints on Rome's room for manoeuvre regarding Taiwan. According to one interviewee (#18), the Meloni government had to 'kowtow to China'. As a result, executive and party authorities discouraged high-profile parliamentary initiatives, limited political signalling and maintained a particularly prudent diplomatic language even during moments of heightened cross-Strait tensions. Taiwan thus remained largely subordinate to the broader strategic goal of recalibrating Italy – China relations while avoiding retaliation from Beijing. At the same time, Italy's Indo-Pacific repositioning also avoided the most confrontational forms of signalling adopted by other Western actors.

Once the BRI withdrawal was completed and a new cooperative framework with Beijing had been established in mid-2024, a limited but noticeable opening emerged for the expansion of Italy – Taiwan relations. Parliamentary diplomacy resumed, cross-party delegations travelled to Taipei and new forms of economic and technological cooperation developed, particularly in the semiconductor sector. These developments were accompanied by more explicit parliamentary statements supporting the status quo in the Taiwan Strait and by an increased Italian willingness to include references to Taiwan in multilateral diplomatic contexts such as the G7. While these developments are consistent with the expectation that constraints on Taiwan-related engagement may have eased after 2024, the relatively recent nature of this phase suggests caution in drawing definitive conclusions about the durability and scope of this shift.

Taken together, these findings suggest that Italy's Taiwan policy under the Meloni government reflects a broader pattern of foreign policy pragmatism shaped by the interaction between ideological preferences and external constraints. Rather than signalling a simple ideological reversal, the moderation of the centre-right's Taiwan stance can be understood as the outcome of a structured process of adaptation to a restrictive strategic environment marked by intensified US – China competition, alliance expectations and economic interdependence. Taiwan therefore emerged not as an autonomous pillar of Italian foreign policy, but as an issue embedded within a wider strategic calculus, in which alignment with the United States constituted the primary driver, while the management of relations with China imposed significant tactical constraints.

More broadly, the article contributes to the literature by showing how the transition from opposition to government reshapes the role of ideology in foreign policy. In opposition, Taiwan functioned as a low-cost expressive resource, mobilised within identity-based and anti-communist narratives. In government, these preferences did not disappear, but were filtered, prioritised and selectively downplayed in light of institutional responsibilities and external pressures. In this sense, the findings speak to wider debates in Foreign Policy Analysis and neoclassical realism by illustrating how ideological orientations persist under constraint, even when they do not translate directly into observable policy outputs.

Finally, the Italian case highlights the challenges faced by secondary powers operating within asymmetric alliances under conditions of great power competition. As external constraints intensify, the scope for ideologically driven or symbolically expressive foreign

policy positions narrows, and governments are compelled to engage in trade-offs between strategic alignment, economic interests and political signalling. Future research could build on these findings by extending the temporal scope of the analysis, comparing Italy with other European cases, or further exploring how different ideological components interact and are prioritised under conditions of constraint.

## Notes

1. The article employs the useful ItaParlCorpus dataset (Cova 2024).
2. Session 383.
3. Interrogation 5–01775.
4. Interrogation 5–06734.
5. Session 328.
6. Session 285.
7. Session 351.
8. Session 615.
9. Session 422.
10. Session 409.
11. e.g. Senator Ceroni in Session 227 or several centre-right senators in Session 426.
12. Session 826.
13. Interrogation 5– 11,424.
14. Full speech here: <https://shorturl.at/EHPIH>.
15. Full interview here: <https://shorturl.at/TvDBQ>.
16. Full interview here: <https://shorturl.at/x535a>.
17. See <https://share.google/hzOtg6yMmJDR6gNF9>.
18. Tweet by Giorgia Meloni here: <https://shorturl.at/8Dwu2>.
19. Osservatorio Economico – Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale. For a deeper analysis of Italy's trade record vis-à-vis China and Indo-Pacific countries see Vesprini and Piasentini (2025).
20. See more here: <https://share.google/wu4OEGY0FI4bSKRpG>.
21. See <https://share.google/YLOUsklf8HU9Z0Ues>.
22. See <https://share.google/cXq1ABVrZcnA1VA2V>.
23. Full text here: <https://share.google/mCFIdA5pDWJ776Xon>. Interestingly, the text reads 'Italy and China intend to maintain the momentum of their bilateral relations, also in the spirit of the ancient Silk Road'.
24. See <https://tinyurl.com/4v4pn627>.

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- Interview #4. 2025. *Interview with Senior Diplomat*. 1 October 2025.
- Interview #5. 2025. *Interview With Senior Diplomat*. 3 October 2025.
- Interview #6. 2025. *Interview with Senior Military Officer*. 22 October 2025.
- Interview #7. 2025. *Interview with Senior Diplomat*. 24 October 2025.
- Interview #8. 2025. *Interview with Senior Military Officer*. 28 October 2025.
- Interview #9. 2025. *Interview with Senior Diplomat*. 12 November 2025.
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