



Continuity and Change in Italy-China Relations: From Economic Pragmatism to Selective Followership and Back

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INTRODUCTION

Italy is generally not a conspicuous actor in world affairs. In 2019, however, the Italian government chose to sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for cooperation within the framework of China’s “Belt and Road Initiative” (BRI), thereby stepping right into the middle of what has become a defining feature of the current international system, namely the US-China strategic competition (see the Introduction to this volume; Doshi 2021). The sensitivity of Rome’s decision was made palpable by a striking move by the Trump administration: two weeks before the MoU signing ceremony in Rome, which took place on 23 March 2019 during Chinese President Xi Jinping’s State visit to Italy, the US National Security Council tweeted its objection to Italy “endorsing

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[the] BRI [because this would entail] lending legitimacy to China’s predatory approach to investment and [...] bring no benefits to the Italian people” (Dossi 2020: 1). The fact that the same tweet described Italy as a “great investment destination” was by many observers read as an oblique reference to the high stakes in this very public tug-of-war between supporters of Italy’s traditional position in the US-led liberal international order, and those who cherished her new proximity to the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

Why did the normally risk-averse political establishment in Rome choose to pursue such an unprecedented deepening of its partnership with the PRC at this particular juncture, in the face of increasing turbulence in the relations between Beijing and a number of Western countries (Medcalf 2019), as well as of intensifying autocratisation within the Chinese political system (Miller 2020)? The implications of this question extend beyond the narrow focus of Sino-Italian cooperation: they matter for EU-China relations, for the prospects of the transatlantic alliance, and more generally for the definition of the preferable balance to be struck by governments—especially in democratic countries—between economic and political incentives in an increasingly fragmented, polarised and heterogeneous international system.

THEORISING ITALY’S CHINA POLICY UNDER THE CONTE I GOVERNMENT: A CASE OF SELECTIVE FOLLOWERSHIP

This chapter focuses on Italy’s domestic politics to argue that Rome used the BRI MoU as a tool to strike a tactical entente with the PRC in an attempt to leverage Beijing’s resulting goodwill to extract the economic concessions that had long eluded Italian policy-makers. Between 2018 and 2019 Italy reacted to the budding “neutrality” vs. “taking sides” dilemma in the post-unipolar order (Breslin 2017) by moving across “sub-zones” within a China policy that remained firmly anchored in the “hedging zone” (Bloomfield 2016). In doing so, Rome bucked the trend. While even in the restrained EU parlance China’s recognition was shifting from that of a wholesale strategic partner (Casarini 2013), to the multi-layered identification with “a cooperation partner, an economic competitor and a systemic rival” (EU 2019), the Italian government abandoned an established policy of economic pragmatism in favour of what may be termed as “selective followership”.

In his very articulate theoretical taxonomy, Bloomfield (2016: 264) locates “economic pragmatism” in the “dead-centre of the balancing-bandwagoning continuum, implying enthusiastic trading and relative openness to Chinese FDI, but strict political and military neutrality”. Countries that move further along the continuum towards closer alignment with China, albeit still within the hedging zone, are considered by the author to be pursuing “binding engagement”: such policy implies a greater investment of political capital, in an attempt to “encourage [China] to participate in regional institutions”. The next policy space is that of “limited bandwagoning”, where a State would regularly align with China, across multiple issues, but stop short of playing client to Beijing’s patron (Kuik 2008). Italy’s behaviour under the first populist government led by Giuseppe Conte (“Conte I”) suggests that Bloomfield’s taxonomy would benefit from being integrated with one policy space, that of selective followership, located between binding engagement and limited bandwagoning (Table 6.1). Whereas in the case of binding engagement, as defined by Bloomfield, political agency lies in the hands of foreign (presumably Western) partners, which seek to socialise China to their choice of principles, norms and institutions, the selective followership space is that occupied by countries that lie (favourably) on the receiving end of proactive policy initiatives emanating from China herself. In a gradually developing body of IR literature on the subject, followership is defined as “supporting the goals and positions of another country which were not shared previously and/or as accepting a relative loss of status and power vis-a-vis the emerging power” (Schirm 2009: 200).

Italy’s decision to adhere to the BRI falls in this sub-category of “return-maximizing” options: it reflects deeper engagement than economic pragmatism and binding engagement on account of the powerful symbolic impact of a G7 country lending legitimacy to one of Beijing’s key agendas (Andornino 2022), but it falls short of limited bandwagoning for it does not envisage regular alignment with China on Italy’s part. Political timing, political expediency and political personnel—not any fundamental shift of the country’s strategic posture—are the factors that help explain Italy’s conduct under the first government nominally led by Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, but effectively run by the leaders of a two-party populist coalition comprising the Five Star Movement (*M5S*) and the League (*Lega*).

Throughout its 14 months in power, between June 2018 and August 2019, this government—unprecedented in Italian political history, which

Table 6.1 Selective followership in a revised version of Bloomfield's hedging zone continuum

<i>Balancing zone</i>	<i>Sub-zones' in the hedging zone</i>	<i>Return-maximising options</i>			<i>Bandwagoning zone</i>
	<i>Risk contingency options</i>				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outright war • Containment • Hard balancing 	Soft balancing	Dominance denial	Economic Pragmatism	Binding engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allied alignment • Dependence • Capitulation
				Selective followership	Limited bandwagoning

since 1945 had been defined by moderate parties dominating, or at least anchoring, national institutions—chose to proactively invest political capital on a very limited number of high-profile foreign policy issues. Europe and Libya are the most prominent examples, and the easiest to explain. In the first instance, Rome broke with its traditional pro-EU approach to become one of the more critical voices within the Union: a sharp realignment away from the pre-2018 mainstream foreign policy was needed to reflect the political milieu of the two parties now in government, which leaned towards Eurosceptic “domestic sovereignty” (Vittori 2017). In the case of Libya, the deterioration of the situation on the ground in 2018, as well as compelling security and geo-economic interests, induced action, although this was not nearly as decisive as the crisis and its implications would have warranted, or the narrative emanating from the relevant Italian ministries appeared to suggest. There is, however, a third and less obvious case of far-reaching political commitment by this particular Italian government, which falls beyond Rome’s traditional foreign policy priorities, that is to say—in essence—beyond the preservation of Italy’s transatlantic commitment, the advancement of the European project, and pursuit of stability in the wider Mediterranean region. Such case is the accelerated deepening of relations with China (Pugliese 2020).

By signing a Memorandum of Understanding for cooperation in the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative during Chinese President Xi Jinping’s State visit to Italy in March 2019, Prime Minister Conte and his government saw through the most controversial China-related foreign policy move since at least 2005, when Rome joined Paris and Berlin to press for the lifting of the arms embargo imposed on Beijing in the wake of the 1989 Tian’anmen repression, only to back down in the face of intense opposition from the US. Fifteen years later, in 2019, manifest hostility from Washington did not prevent Italy from becoming the first G7 country, EU founding member and NATO ally to formally embrace China’s ambitious vision of Eurasian connectivity. Should this act be seen as the starting point of a strategic drift away from traditional allies on the part of Italy, or at least of a portion of its political system, and as the signal of an impending transition towards the China bandwagoning zone, as per Bloomfield’s taxonomy? There is little evidence to support such a claim. Neither in Parliament, nor in the business community, nor indeed across Italian society at large there appears to be appetite for any scenario involving China that goes beyond the current

tactical entente (Andornino 2015), where Rome hopes to leverage its circumspect political endorsement of Xi Jinping’s signature foreign policy proposition—the Belt and Road Initiative—to earn Beijing’s goodwill in subsequent bilateral negotiations on trade, investment, logistics and tourism.

THE BRI MEMORANDUM: A POLITICAL SHORTCUT TO ENERGISE BILATERAL RELATIONS

Three domestic politics factors help explain the rather extraordinary outcome whereby a government led by a political neophyte without foreign policy expertise and supported by two parties historically at odds with China could overcome repeated warnings by its main ally, and the deep scepticism of its most influential European partners, to sign the BRI memorandum. These are political expediency, political personnel and political timing, which shall be analysed next.

Political Expediency

The general elections held in Italy on 4 March 2018 effectively delivered a mandate for political discontinuity “no matter what”, ushering into office a coalition government supported in Parliament by two parties which had previously campaigned against each other (and did, in fact, resume their antagonism immediately after the Conte I government collapsed in August 2019). Having benefited from their vehement anti-establishment campaigns, both *M5S* and *Lega* faced a similar conundrum: how to preserve their credentials as agents of change while setting up their own power systems and avoiding international isolation. This balancing act, deemed especially important in the run-up to the subsequent European elections of May 2019, was made more complicated by the compromise reached with President of the Republic Sergio Mattarella, who leveraged his constitutional prerogatives to secure two moderate technocrats for the posts of Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of the Economy and Finance. Having relied on sharp criticism of the leadership and policies of the European Union (as well as of its main sponsors in France and Germany) as a centrepiece of their electoral message domestically, and with little prospect of traction in Trump’s erratic White House, the stakeholders of the new Italian administration came to see China

as a “new”—that is, relatively non-mainstream—heavyweight international partner which proved as well connected in Rome, as it was eager to discuss potential low-hanging political fruits of closer cooperation. Investing on the other obvious potential contender for closer engagement, Russia, would have met far stronger political headwinds, in light of the entrenched international sanctions regime against Moscow, and of deep-seated bipartisan political aversion in the US Congress.

Similar, if not greater, hostility as the one involving Russia would have become fully manifest in US-China relations shortly thereafter, while in 2018 the high-pressure negotiation tactics employed by the Trump administrations were still geared towards reaching some kind of comprehensive deal with Beijing. For nine months, the China dossier generated unusually little attrition between the two political partners in Rome, while a steady stream of ministerial missions to Beijing was quoted as evidence of the successful “rebooting” of Italy’s foreign policy (Follain and Mathieson 2018). In the words of one of the most senior *M5S* parliamentarians in charge of the foreign policy brief, during an interview with the author on 31 July 2018, China was now presented as “the most important ally of this government: not of the country as such, but of this particular government”. Given the proximity any Italian administration seeks with Washington, and the particular one enjoyed by the Conte I cabinet with regard to Donald Trump’s White House, such kind of statement is to be read as a call for deepening relations with China that stops short of promoting the kind of systematic behaviour that would be characterised as limited bandwagoning with Beijing.

Political Personnel

This statement, widely echoed in the Chamber of Deputies (Italy’s lower chamber of Parliament) and across newly-staffed government departments, should nonetheless appear paradoxical. Traditionally, both the *Lega* and *M5S* had maintained a caustic attitude towards Beijing. Up until 2017, when the *Lega* was still known as the “Northern League” (*Lega Nord*), China’s unfair trade practices and unsafe products were commonly stigmatised as threats to small local manufacturers and artisans struggling to remain competitive in the North of Italy, the core voting bloc of the then staunchly federalist movement also known as the “green shirts”. In the case of the original *M5S*, instead, the cleavage vis-à-vis China was eminently ideological. Gianroberto Casaleggio, co-founder of this upstart

political movement together with comedian Beppe Grillo, conceived a vision of the future in which two blocks would eventually fight for global supremacy: Western open societies where a free internet would nurture direct democracy, versus the “Orwellian dictatorships” of China, Russia and the Middle East (Casaleggio 2008).

The realignment of these two parties’ priorities with China’s desire for a more robust engagement with Italy was facilitated by the metamorphosis that each experienced in the transition from opposition to national power in 2018 (Coticchia 2021) and catalysed by the new political personnel co-opted to ensure that moderate technocrats in government would be balanced out by anti-establishment technocrats. One of the most representative figures in this second grouping was Mr Michele Geraci, formerly a contract professor of economy and finance at various Chinese universities for over a decade, and now appointed Undersecretary of State at the Ministry of Economic Development with responsibility over international trade. Despite his brief tenure, alongside the rest of the Conte I government, his impact was profound as the consequences of the ambitious China policy he helped spearhead are likely to be felt over a significant period of time.

Geraci’s technocratic profile, coupled with his amphibious political physiognomy—a *Lega* appointee with a close working relationship with Luigi Di Maio, the then leader of *M5S* and his immediate boss in government as Minister of Economic Development—ensured traction within an administration populated by a majority of neophytes with no previous experience of elected office or State-level governance. Capitalising on the political weakness of the technocrat Minister of Foreign Affairs, and on the laissez-faire attitude of a Prime Minister troubled by the competing agendas of his coalition on the domestic front, Geraci was instrumental in centralising management of Italy’s China policy within the Ministry of Economic Development, allowing for a fast-paced deepening of Italy’s relations with Beijing. Widely criticised as overly pragmatic, this approach was in fact premised on an audacious reading of the untapped potential of the “strategic partnership” formally entered in by the two countries in 2004 (Andornino 2012). First extolled in a high-profile political setting in 2017, during a meeting of intellectuals convened to help draft the *Lega* electoral manifesto, the strengths of China’s development model and its relevance for the current Italian socio-economic predicament would later be the subject of Geraci’s articulate post published on Beppe Grillo’s blog (Geraci 2018a), at the time the most authoritative signal that a certain

policy proposal enjoyed the blessing of the leadership and membership of *M5S*, soon to be the *Lega*'s coalition partner in government.

On 13 April 2018, having *M5S* won the relative majority of seats in Italy's XVIII Parliament, Geraci had penned another blog post suggesting that one of the *M5S* signature policy proposals—a universal basic “citizenship income”, which would later be instituted in January 2019—would allow Italy to counter China's insurmountable trade competitiveness by delivering its youth from income pressure and re-creating a “Renaissance-style atmosphere”, in which a cultural and artistic boom would benefit the whole of society and Italy's standing internationally (Geraci 2018b). A couple of months later, having been appointed—on the *Lega*'s recommendation—Undersecretary of State with responsibility over international trade and foreign direct investment, Geraci argued on the same platform that China's salience for the self-styled new “Government of change” stretched well beyond trade and investment matters, in that Beijing may be a model—and offer support—in a variety of critical fields such as public debt sustainability, migration, tax reform, public security and the viability of the pensions system. Based on this logic, relations with China should be considered a whole-of-government priority (Geraci 2018c).

Long advocated by the Italian community of China experts, albeit in the expectation that such strategic dossier would be handled directly by the Presidency of the Council (the Prime Minister's office), Geraci's whole-of-government approach was, however, undermined by three factors. Firstly, power fragmentation in the administration: Giovanni Tria, in particular, the moderate Minister of Economics and Finance with his own history of academic exposure to China, kept pursuing a parallel agenda in Beijing, with limited coordination with Geraci's hierarchically junior office. A second limitation was of an organisational nature: Geraci's ground-breaking decision to establish a “China Task Force”—meant to encourage information flows within the Italian community of stakeholders of Sino-Italian relations and to stimulate innovative policies—was not supported by a similarly ambitious bureaucratic infrastructure (staff, procedures, budget), relying instead for the most part on volunteer contributions. Finally, on a political level, the more proactive partner of the coalition government—the *Lega*—would not contemplate a full U-turn away from its traditional anti-China rhetoric, with inevitable repercussions on the coherence of Rome's attitude towards Beijing. The characterisation of China by Matteo Salvini, the *Lega* leader, on his official Facebook and Twitter accounts—reaching some 5 million followers—is a

reminder of why China may yet find the League a less palatable interlocutor in years to come: of the 93 posts mentioning China through to August 2019, 78.5% reflected a negative view of China as either an unfair competitor (34.4%), a source of health hazards (9.7%), or anyway a country with questionable cultural compatibility with Italy (14%). Less immediately visible, but equally as revealing, is the fact that, at the time, virtually the entire parliamentary group of the *Lega* in the Senate of the Republic—the upper chamber of Parliament—and over 1/3 of the *Lega* members of the Chamber of Deputies publicly championed—through motions, parliamentary questions and tabled legislation—positions that run counter to China’s core interests, supporting in particular Taiwan’s attempts to increase its presence in international organisations (Andornino 2022). Such apparent scepticism vis-à-vis Beijing among Italian MPs, even in the face of an unprecedented China-friendly realignment in the foreign policy priorities of their own government, is one of the most salient factors anchoring Italy to Bloomfield’s “hedging zone” within the China balancing-bandwagoning continuum.

Political Timing

Given such structural limitations, political volatility and the expectations for swift, visible change raised among an impatient electorate during the electoral cycle, speed was an obvious prerequisite for any policy agenda to have traction within the Conte I government. In the case of the new China policy, a key exogenous impetus was provided by President Xi Jinping’s impending State visit to Italy. The Italian Head of State, President Sergio Mattarella, had visited China in 2017 and his counterpart had been expected to reciprocate for some time: Italy was the only European G7 country not to have hosted Xi during his first term in office as president (2013–2018). The sequence of ministerial missions that set the stage for Xi’s March 2019 State visit—especially the two by Minister of Economic Development Di Maio to China in September and November 2018—illustrate the extent to which the unquestionably political nature of this upcoming visit was primarily interpreted by the Italian government as an opportunity to secure an immediate media boost for the narrative of the “Government of change”, while setting the stage for future deals in the economic realm. In the absence of sufficient time and political

capacity to reach deals that could effectively contribute to closing Italy's gap with her main European peers—such as France or the UK—in terms of trade and investment dynamics with China, the new administration in Rome entered a tactical entente with Beijing in the hope to leverage the expected ensuing Chinese goodwill to reap the desired rewards in subsequent negotiations.

Domestic and exogenous pressures combined to generate a political timing that produced a visibly asymmetrical effect: by signing the Belt and Road Initiative MoU in March 2019, albeit in a form carefully redacted to reflect the EU vision of Eurasian connectivity and Italy's other political concerns, the Italian government effectively bargained an *immediate*, salient tribute of political deference to China's international status as an agenda-setter and norm-maker with an expectation for greater agency in *future* discussion tackling a range of grievances that have long frustrated Italian policy-makers and officials, especially in the trade realm. Such behaviour epitomises the return-maximising nature of selective follow-ership: in this transactional approach, Italy tried to make its adherence to China's core foreign policy initiative contingent upon the encapsulation of Italy's interests in other, often unrelated, policy decisions on Beijing's part. When Prime Minister Conte took to the floor in the parliamentary debate preceding the signing of the BRI MoU on 19 March 2019 to reassure members of Parliament and the wider public about the eminently economic logic underpinning the agreement, his words captured the dynamic at play well. However, while the motivating factor for the Italian side might have been economic, the political relevance of Rome's conduct emerges as the focus shifts on the reasons why China sought to reach this outcome. The first, impromptu words pronounced by Xi Jinping as part of his remarks during the State luncheon following the MoU signature clarify the political target that was being proactively pursued by the Chinese leadership: "I came to Italy to strengthen *political* relations between our two countries; I have succeeded".¹

¹ Working notes of the author, present at the State luncheon as a signatory to one of the institutional agreements exchanged during the Chinese president's State visit; italics added.

AN AFFORDABLE PARTNER WITH UNTAPPED POTENTIAL: ITALY IN THE EYES OF BEIJING

Both domestic and international precedents corroborate the Italian government's logic whereby Xi's visit—and the contextual signing of the BRI MoU—could be leveraged as a political shortcut to energise bilateral relations. In 1991, in the aftermath of the Tian'anmen repression, then President of the Council Giulio Andreotti was among the first Western leaders to dismantle the *cordon sanitaire* isolating China, in the name of realpolitik and economic interests (Fardella 2017). Though in that case the American ally quietly supported the move, the political gesture resonated powerfully with the Chinese leadership for years, and its business implication would have been significant, had the entire Italian political system not been engulfed by the 1992 corruption scandals which led to the demise of the so-called First Republic (1948–1992).

Internationally, and more recently, another vivid example of a transactional foreign policy choice premised on China's quest for legitimacy is represented by UK Chancellor George Osborne's visit to Xinjiang in September 2015, a first for a senior British minister in a province under scrutiny even then for suspected human rights violations. A month later, a new "golden era" in Sino-British relations was hailed during Xi Jinping's visit to London (Brown 2019). The UK had also been the first major European power to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in March 2015, in open defiance of US pressure. The City's stakes in China's financial outreach led London to support the most ambitious instance of institutional entrepreneurship by Beijing to date: while the AIIB leadership has since denied playing a direct role in the promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative, its very founding is a clear case of parallel order-building on China's part, shifting the landscape of global finance for development as it was conceived in Bretton Woods in 1944 (Chen 2016).

Italy's move to sign the BRI Memorandum in March 2019, therefore, ought to be assessed within the domestic and international context as it was being read by the new anti-establishment political forces in power in Rome. The far-reaching inter-governmental involution experienced by the European Union since the mid-2000s has fundamentally increased the salience of Member States' national foreign policy calculus, a condition generally appreciated within the wider Italian foreign policy community (Aresu and Gori 2018), and all the more fitting for the political mindset

of populist parties. The austerity policies which had inspired the European Commission since 2009, the dramatic showdown during the Greek crisis starting in 2010, the French-led intervention in Libya in 2011 (perceived to damage Italian interests), the Nord Stream *querelle* with Germany, and the aforementioned British moves in China were seen as suggestive of a severe deterioration of solidarity within the Union, motivated by the prioritisation of either national interests or domestic party politics, generally to the disadvantage of Rome's priorities.

This helps explain why the two parties supporting the Conte I government would consider it entirely legitimate to act unilaterally in defining Italy's relations with the world's second-largest economy. Economic data and the domestic political background contributed to the ultimate decision to finalise the BRI MoU. Despite having an export-oriented economy, Italy lags well behind its European peers in terms of exposure to China: according to UN Comtrade data the share of its exports heading for China has more than trebled in the 2000–2020 period (from 0.85% to just short of 3%), but it remains far from Germany's 8%, Britain's 4.7% or France's 4%. It is also insufficient to prevent an enduring, large trade deficit with China (some 21 billion USD in 2019, the most recent data point before the COVID-19 pandemic). The reasons for this lacklustre performance are not strictly political for the most part, and essentially depend on long-standing structural constraints of the Italian economy: among others, the small-medium size of its companies, their sectorial specialisation often overlapping with that of Chinese manufacturers, a cultural bias that does not facilitate internationalisation to China. There are, however, obstacles of an administrative nature that further complicate trade relations to the disadvantage of Italian players. It is on this latter cluster of factors that the signing of the BRI MoU was supposed to have an impact. In other words, hard pressed by the domestic political cycle and by the high expectations generated by their own aggressive political campaigns, the two parties supporting the Conte I government went for the low-hanging fruit that could bring the greatest impression of "change", albeit through results deferred in time, rather than choosing to tackle long-term structural problems (which, moreover, had been a stated priority of their much-criticised predecessors in government).

The benefits to be gained by supporting the Belt and Road Initiative, especially with its corollary of investment in infrastructure, had not escaped the two previous Italian administrations led by Prime Ministers Matteo Renzi (2014–2016) and Paolo Gentiloni (2016–2018). Not only

had Italy already joined the AIIB and Gentiloni taken part in the 2017 Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation before Conte came to power: under the watch of centre-left leaders, China had also significantly enhanced its investment footprint in Italian equity. In 2014, as Italy struggled to emerge from the consequences of the 2007 global financial crisis, a sudden acquisition of stakes of just over 2% in a number of strategic Italian companies effectively amounted to a powerful public endorsement of the perceived resilience of the Italian economy on part of China. In Italy, 2% is the statutory threshold activating a public notice of equity shareholding: Beijing had meant its vote of confidence to be seen.

Even though most key investments were pursued by the Chinese State directly or through State-Owned Enterprises, in some instances these centre-left Italian governments were open to surrendering minority ownership of state-controlled Italian assets of strategic nature too, such as in the case of CDP Reti, a company controlling Italy's energy grids (Otero-Iglesias and Weissenegger 2020). These moves, arguably far more consequential than the signature of the legally non-binding BRI Memorandum of Understanding, elicited little criticism by the press and in Parliament during the XVII legislature (2013–2018). In this sense, the Conte government later proceeded far more in continuity with the previous administrations than is generally acknowledged. While Minister of Foreign Affairs Enzo Moavero Milanesi himself kept the lowest possible profile on the issue, Italy's diplomatic machinery—well aware of the fact that the increasing tendency towards the bilateralisation of foreign policy in Europe entails inevitable risks and therefore requires capitalising on opportunities—moved to reduce the level of political toxicity of the text of the 2019 BRI MoU. The re-drafting process, which modified the original Chinese blueprint, was meant to ensure that Rome's signature—while indicating a shift away from the established policy of economic pragmatism—would not lead to an expectation that this one-off fulfilment of Beijing's quest for status would imply Italy's regular alignment with China in the political realm. It is in this sense that the Conte government's conduct can be seen as eschewing limited bandwagoning in favour of what may be more aptly termed as selective followership.

The Belt and Road Initiative is one of Xi Jinping's core contributions to China's foreign policy (Leverett and Wu 2017). Its breadth, ambition and vast temporal horizon are well symbolised by its insertion into the statute of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) at its 19th national congress in 2017. Coupled with Xi's own centrality in China's

political and institutional system—unprecedented since the end of Mao Zedong’s reign—and especially following the constitutional amendment of March 2018 that removed the term limit for the President of the People’s Republic of China (no formal limits exist for Xi’s other two more consequential posts as General Secretary of the CCP and head of the Party-State’s armed forces), the elevated stature of the BRI suggests that foreign powers endorsing this vision invest on a long-term proposition by China (Liu et al. 2018).

Conversely, Italy’s decision to sign the MoU was a political coup on many levels for Chinese diplomats: it meant ensuring that a G7 country, NATO member and the third-largest economy in a post-Brexit EU lends its legitimacy to a project that Xi himself was just about to acknowledge needing some recalibration after widespread international criticism. His speech at the second Belt and Road Summit in April 2019 made it clear that the leadership in Beijing is acutely aware of the risks of push-back, especially in the context of a rapidly deteriorating relationship with the US (Xi 2019). In drafting the non-binding MoU, Italian diplomats qualified Rome’s endorsement of the BRI: the text recalls the expected synergies with the EU-China Connectivity Platform, the importance of open, transparent and non-discriminatory procurement procedures, the necessary respect of domestic regulations (which in Italy’s case include the whole *acquis communautaire*) and international obligations, the prospect of cooperation with the multilateral Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to promote connectivity, and the choice to opt for amicable settlement of BRI-related controversies, with no mention of the newly-established China International Commercial Courts.

Though Italy was not the first European, Western European, or Mediterranean country to sign a BRI MoU—these were, respectively, Hungary (2015), Portugal (2018) and Greece (2018)—and even though the professed ambition of becoming China’s “main economic and political partner in Europe” falls in the realm of official rhetoric, it is true that the MoU version signed in Rome could function as a blueprint for other Western European countries. Switzerland signed its own BRI MoU one month later, in April 2019, mentioning many of the same principles contained in the one negotiated by Italy, which also includes the involvement of private capital, emphasis on the social, environmental and economic viability of BRI projects, transparency and coherence with UN Sustainable Development Goals.

As much as the Italian government defended the political soundness of their decision, the evaluation of this particular policy choice cannot be accurate unless the dimensions of trade, investment and logistical cooperation are factored in. Rome did not commit to the MoU as a strategic move: it sent China a coveted symbolic signal in exchange for the future unlocking of economic potential. A host of agreements sealed on 23 March 2019, immediately after the signing of the MoU, were estimated to be worth EUR 2.5 billion (ANSA 2019). This amount is not fully verifiable and would anyway be insufficient in and of itself to justify the political cost produced by the backlash coming from Washington and European partners. Italian officials involved in the negotiation argued that this signature will maximise opportunities in the medium term. In other words, far from being a symptom of geopolitical realignment, the Conte government's course of action amounted to a tactical gamble: with a narrow window of opportunity to hand China a non-binding political win before other European partners might do so, and lacking the time to negotiate a sizeable economic deal as an immediate return—such as the oft-touted sale of the struggling national air carrier Alitalia—Rome pinned all hopes on an enduring goodwill generated across the Chinese government and bureaucracy by its top leader's political satisfaction with Italy's endorsement of his own foreign policy vision.

From the trade perspective, the expectation was that a number of dossiers regarding Made in Italy products, including their sale on digital platforms, would be tackled to reduce the attrition of Chinese non-tariff barriers on Italian exports. Italy's main business association calculates that only 10% of the Italian companies operating in foreign markets have direct exposure to China (Confindustria 2019), an insufficient share if Italy is to fully benefit from the growth of the Chinese middle class. In terms of investments, Bank of Italy estimates cited in a report by the Parliamentary Committee for the Security of the Republic put the total value of Chinese FDI inflow into Italy at EUR 4.9 billion in 2018, up from EUR 573 million in 2015, with some 400 PRC companies operating in Italy and 760 Italian enterprises invested by corporate entities from China, including Hong Kong (COPASIR 2020). The government hoped the MoU would stimulate an inflow of greenfield, non-predatory" investments, though such dynamic seems to have materialised only partially in the telecom field through players such as Huawei and ZTE, themselves under scrutiny internationally on security grounds. Other than these instances, most Chinese investments have so far been of M&A nature,

and appear to be inspired by the Made in China 2025 strategy, which aims to make Chinese firms competitive in high value-added industries.

Coupled with a commitment by China to buy Italian bonds even in a situation of turbulence in international markets, enhanced trade opportunities, greenfield investments in the stagnating Italian economy, joint infrastructure projects and an increase in tourism form the core of the economic potential to be unlocked following the signing of the BRI MoU. China has good reasons to be open for negotiations: Beijing continues to see Italy as an interesting partner that is relatively predictable, politically more relevant in a post-Brexit Europe, comparatively porous to its influence (Codarin et al. 2021), endowed with strategic assets that are worth investing in, and geopolitically salient in the critical West Asia—Northern Africa quadrant. Besides, it is home to the largest community of PRC passport holders in the European space, a community of over 3,00,000 individuals (Italian Ministry of Labour 2021).

For Italy, however, any outcomes flowing from the BRI MoU will need to be extracted over time applying steady pressure on a vast plethora of bureaucratic and corporate interlocutors in China, a task that is in itself herculean for the numerically limited Italian diplomatic and corporate presence in China. Unless political efforts are made, and accompanied by sustained follow-up among Italian companies, the politically non-binding—but costly—gesture of the Conte I government will remain symbolic. While symbolism was precisely what Beijing sought and obtained, Rome remains in need to instigate consequential actions on China’s part to justify the far-sightedness of its move. With the collapse of the League-M5S government mere months after the MoU signature, and the subsequent sealing off of China on account of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is unsure whether the tactical entente built up in 2019 will in fact deliver.

The second Conte government (“Conte II”), supported by *M5S* and the centre-left Democratic Party (*PD*) between September 2019 and February 2021, showed markedly less enthusiasm for the MoU, let alone for any further deepening of ties with China. Influential ministers went on the record faulting their predecessors over the signing of the 2019 agreement and critical voices gaining traction in public discourse (Soldi 2020), especially in the aftermath of the assimilationist policies pursued by China’s central government in Hong Kong, which eviscerated the “One Country Two System” framework set out in the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration, as explained in Chapter 8 of this volume. As for many other

likeminded countries analysed in this volume, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, and Beijing's benevolent neutrality vis-à-vis Moscow's flagrant violation of basic international legality, led to an escalation in the realignment of Italy's foreign policy posture, widening the distance from China while reinvigorating the transatlantic alliance.

However, it would be wrong to overlook the fact that Chinese authorities did offer their Italian counterparts some particularly timely support in the early weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy. In this particular instance, officials and analysts from both sides maintain that the special partnership ushered in by the signing of the BRI MoU delivered results that made a fundamental difference for countless people's lives.² The same observers, however, concede that few critical dossiers have advanced, and certainly not enough to justify, *ex post*, the political investment made by the Conte I government. Precisely this may be the most enduring legacy of the ambitious China policy pursued by the *M5S-Lega* coalition: a sense of unmet expectations, or even broken promises, which may in the medium term come to burden Sino-Italian relations, paradoxically leaving them in a more problematic position than prior to 2019. The China policy pursued by the Draghi government since 2021 is likely to make such a scenario even more probable, as are the mentioned geopolitical shifts generated by Russia's war against Ukraine and the ensuing changes to the security architecture of the European continent.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: THE VOLATILE FOUNDATIONS OF ITALY-CHINA RELATIONS

At the time of writing, the XVIII Italian Parliament has been dissolved, half-way into the last year of its 5-year term. A third coalition government, led by the former President of the European Central Bank—technocrat Mario Draghi—had been voted in office in February 2021. From the onset of his premiership, the new Prime Minister signalled a markedly firmer attitude towards China. While Giuseppe Conte had envisaged for Italy the role of a “bridge” between the US and other “core global actors” (Conte 2021), Draghi mentioned China in his maiden speech in Parliament only to express “concern for the growing tensions in Asia

² Interviews with the author carried out in Rome (in person) and Beijing (online) between November 2019 and December 2021, involving a total of 23 senior Italian diplomats and policy-makers and 12 Chinese diplomats and analysts.

around China” (Draghi 2021). Shortly thereafter, during the June 2021 G7 meeting in Cornwall, the Prime Minister engaged with the issue of the 2019 MoU indicating his intention to “carefully review” the agreement, in the light of China being “an autocracy that does not adhere to multilateral rules and does not share the same world view as democracies” (Adnkronos 2021). Decisive actions followed, with the government vetoing multiple corporate takeovers by Chinese enterprises in Italy (Fonte and Cao 2021) and preventing other commercial deals on national security grounds.

The steady decline in the commitment to deeper relations with China across the three governments since the 2019 signing of the BRI MoU is mirrored by a shift in sentiment in the XVIII Italian Parliament. This is natural, as in a parliamentary democracy (such as Italy) Parliament attitudes do constrain the government’s policy space, despite the considerable leeway afforded to the Executive in the realm of foreign policy (Coticchia and Davidson 2019).

In particular, a diachronic examination of the sentiment of the five main Italian parties, as manifested by their China-related stances in salient non-legislative acts of parliamentary policy-setting and oversight, suggests a steady deterioration in the perception of China as a viable partner by Italian MPs (Andornino 2022). After an initial phase of more positive attitudes during the Conte I government, a sharp reduction in positive stances can be noticed during the Conte II government, and none at all features since the beginning of the Draghi government through to the Spring of 2022. Especially, right-wing and right-of-centre parties consistently show a strongly negative sentiment, a trait exacerbated by the need on the part of the *Lega*’s leadership to rectify its briefly-held pro-BRI position during the Conte I government.

Four issues appear to have determined the shift in sentiment across parties in the Italian Parliament between late 2019 and 2022: the situation in Hong Kong after Beijing’s decision to impose draconian new national security legislation in the Special Administrative Region; China’s responsibilities vis-a-vis the COVID-19 pandemic; the repression of the Uighur minority in Xinjiang; and the China’s reluctance to condemn Russia’s invasion of a sovereign state, Ukraine. Each of the four issues relates to basic standards of appropriateness universally upheld by the West. The 2020 Hong Kong crisis, quite apart from the political demands voiced by part of the local citizenry, entails China’s breaching of an international treaty: the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration, which stipulated

that the economic, social, governing and legal systems of the would-be Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (under PRC sovereignty since 1997) should remain basically unchanged at least until 2047. The COVID-19 emergency calls into question basic principles of transparency on China's part in the face of extraordinary risks for global health. The situation in Xinjiang has been seen spiralling into the realm of crimes against humanity as US Secretary of State Pompeo declared the PRC to be responsible for "ongoing genocide" (Pompeo 2021), followed by a damning assessment of human rights concerns in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region by the UN Human Rights Office (2022). The consequences of the fourth issue, that is Russia's war in Ukraine and Beijing's straddling policy of supporting Russia's "legitimate security concerns" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the People's Republic of China 2022) without providing material support to bypass Western sanctions, have yet to play out in full. The dynamics of China's current domestic political cycle, culminating in the pivotal 20th national congress of the Chinese Communist Party scheduled to begin on 16 October 2022, make it difficult to predict what China's stance in future will be, although it seems likely that Beijing will continue with its balancing act, especially in the likely event of Xi Jinping's permanence in power as General Secretary of the CCP for an unprecedented third term. China's conduct in these four cases has evidently been perceived by Italian MPs as crossing critical normative thresholds.

The attitude of elected officials appears to align with the consistently negative view of China held by a significant portion of the Italian public. A number of polls conducted over the last decade—including but not limited to the Global Attitudes Project run by the Pew Research Center—show that the Italian public has traditionally had one of the most unfavourable perceptions of China among all major European countries. Looking specifically at data from the Pew Research Center, it is remarkable that, since polling began, the percentage of Italian respondents saying they hold a negative view of China has never fallen below the 50% threshold (Silver et al. 2020). By contrast, even though the level of trust in the US President collapsed under Trump, more than half of polled Italians have been consistently reporting a favourable view of the US. Cosmopolitan and China-savvy younger generations are not immune from this general attitude: a 2017 survey conducted among high school students learning Chinese (an estimated 17,500 individuals) shows that while 70% of respondents predict that China's influence over

Italy will grow in the future, 57% perceive China as an increasingly close society (Fondazione Intercultura 2017). Heavy restrictions imposed by Beijing on international students mobility to and from China following the COVID-19 pandemic, currently with no end in sight, are bound to exacerbate this perception.

This persistent fragility of the societal foundations underpinning Sino-Italian relations, now reflected in the attitude of the main political parties, is likely to come more sharply into focus as the right-wing coalition that emerged victorious from the September 2022 general election forms a new administration in Rome and begins to shape Italy's international posture for the years to come. With two junior parties in the coalition traditionally close to Russia, and the dominating Fratelli d'Italia party linked to Trumpian Republicans, China policy may well be the realm where there is less attrition among the unanimously China-sceptic stakeholders in the new government, and thus where it can most closely align itself with key preferences of President Biden's White House. Nor does this positioning appear susceptible to reversals anytime soon: after the short-lived experience of selective followership under the Conte I government, parties from across the constitutional spectrum have been intent on burnishing their Atlanticist credentials in their approach towards China. So far Rome has veered back to a policy defined by very low-key economic pragmatism. Beijing's conduct after the 20th national congress of the CCP, the US posture following the 2022 mid-term elections and the evolution of the war in Ukraine and of China's position in this regard, will determine whether Italy might in fact swing even further under its new government, heading for Bloomfield's "Risk Contingency Options" quadrant.

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