

Italy-China relations and the Belt and Road Initiative. The need for a long-term vision

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Abstract

During Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit in March 2019, Italy and China signed the Memorandum of Understanding on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). As Italy was the first G7 country to formally join the BRI, the Memorandum caused alarm in the United States and Europe. The paper explains why Italy and China, apparently so distant from both a political and an economic point of view, opted for cooperation under the BRI. It concludes that, in order to seize the opportunities provided by the BRI and reduce the associated risks, Italy needs a long-term vision for the future of its relations with China, and a more structured and permanent public debate on its China policy.

1. Introduction

On 23 March 2019, during Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Rome, Italy and China signed the *Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation within the Framework of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative* (Governo della Repubblica italiana e Governo della Repubblica popolare cinese 2019). The document aimed to promote bilateral cooperation in six areas: (1) policy dialogue; (2) transport, logistics and infrastructure; (3) unimpeded trade and investment; (4) financial cooperation; (5) people-to-people connectivity and (6) green development cooperation. Although legally non-binding (as expressly stated in the text), the Memorandum was politically the most significant among the several documents signed during President Xi's visit to Italy. With the Memorandum, Italy became the first G7 country to formally join the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the pillar of China's increasingly ambitious foreign policy under its current leadership. Also, the timing of the signature was particularly sensitive, as it overlapped with a European Council that was to discuss a common approach to China by the European Union (EU) (Casarini 2019).

For these reasons, the decision to sign the Memorandum alarmed Italy's partners. In Washington, National Security Council spokesman Garrett Marquis cautioned on 9 March that the BRI is a Chinese 'infrastructure vanity project', while the Council's official account on Twitter warned that 'Italy is a major global economy and a great investment destination. Endorsing BRI lends legitimacy to China's predatory approach to investment and will bring no benefits to the Italian people' (Giuffrida 2019; US National Security Council 2019). In Strasbourg, EU Commission Vice President Jyrki Katainen issued a reminder on 12 March that BRI loans are no 'free lunches' and warned

that ‘all the member states, and also Belt and Road operators, must comply with our regulations and rules’ (von der Burchard 2019). The comments were made at the presentation of the Joint Communication on EU-China relations issued by the Commission and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (2019), which for the first time presented Beijing not just as a ‘cooperation’ and ‘negotiating partner’, but also as an ‘economic competitor’ and a ‘strategic rival’.

For both political and economic reasons, Italy and China could appear to be unlikely partners under the BRI. First, as a NATO, EU and G7 member, Italy is considered as unequivocally located within the US-centred network of Western alliances. Rome’s official support for Beijing’s foreign policy initiative seemed, then, incoherent with Italy’s traditional foreign policy alignments, especially at a time when US-China relations were rapidly deteriorating and Washington was mobilizing an increasingly assertive rhetoric against the BRI as a ‘debt trap’ reportedly used by Beijing to secure strategic advantages (Bolton 2018; Pence 2018; Brautigam 2019). Second, since the 1990s and even more so after China’s accession to the World Trade Organization in 2001, Italy has been exposed to fierce Chinese competition in the manufacturing sector. Compared to other European countries, Italy has been more exposed to such competition due to the significant similarities in the structure of the two economies, as both Italy and China rely heavily on manufacturing and specialize in the same industrial sectors (Prodi 2014; Andornino 2015a). From an economic point of view, the two countries seemed, then, destined to compete in third markets rather than to cooperate under the BRI.

The aim of this article is to explain why Italy and China, apparently so distant from both a political and an economic point of view, opted for cooperation under the BRI and signed the ad hoc Memorandum in 2019. In order to do this, we will focus on the considerations that, in each of the two countries, led to the identification of the other as a key partner and the BRI as a fruitful platform for cooperation. The article is organized in four sections. The first introduces the BRI as part of China’s foreign policy and analyses some aspects of the initiative that are particularly significant for Italy-China relations. The second and third sections investigate, respectively, Chinese views of Italy’s role in the BRI and Italy’s reactions to the Chinese initiative. Finally, the conclusions identify the lack of a long-term vision as the main challenge that Italy needs to address if it wants to seize the opportunities presented by the BRI, while reducing the associated risks.

2. The Belt and Road Initiative

As China’s first foreign policy initiative with global ambitions, the BRI is subject to intense scrutiny by policy analysts and scholars. In the West, the debate on the BRI has increasingly focused on its implications for the US-led liberal international order. On the one hand, some see the BRI as an indicator of China’s changing attitude towards the existing international order, with a shift from a reformist to a revisionist agenda (for example Nicolas 2016; Rolland 2017; Brunnermeier et al. 2018; Nordin and Weissmann 2018). On the other hand, others place the BRI within the context of China’s traditional reformist agenda and see it as a more proactive attempt by Beijing to reform the liberal international order from inside, in line with China’s long-term efforts to ‘change the world from second place’ (Breslin 2016; see also Leverett and Wu 2016; Jones 2020). While reviewing the rapidly expanding corpus of literature on the BRI is beyond the scope

of this article, this section will focus on four aspects of the BRI that are particularly relevant for Italy-China relations.

The first aspect is the timing of the initiative and its progress. The land and maritime components of the project were announced by Xi in September and October 2013, in two carefully choreographed speeches at Kazakhstan's Nazarbayev University and the Indonesian Parliament respectively (Xi 2013a, 2013b). In March 2015, the project was then detailed in the *Vision and Actions on Jointly Building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road* issued by the National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Commerce. Then presented as an 'initiative' (*changyi*, 倡议), the project identified five 'cooperation priorities': policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people ties (Guojia Fazhan Gaige Weiyuanhui et al. 2015). Two years later, in May 2017, the first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation was convened in Beijing and concluded with a final Joint Communiqué issued by 29 heads of state and government (Waijiao Bu 2019). In October the same year, the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) introduced a reference to the BRI in the General Programme of the party Constitution (Xinhua She 2017). In April 2019, the second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation was convened in Beijing, with the Leaders Roundtable attended this time by 37 heads of state and government (Waijiao Bu 2019).

The second aspect that is worth noting here is that the BRI is conceived in Beijing not just as a blueprint for economic cooperation, but as a political initiative with long-term strategic goals. In fact, the BRI was originally conceived as China's strategic response to the increasingly complicated international situation faced by the country in 2010-11, in the context of the Obama administration's 'pivot to Asia'. The intuition behind the BRI is attributed to influential IR scholar Wang Jisi, who in 2012 called for a comprehensive re-adjustment of China's strategy: "in a situation where the tectonic plates of the world's geoeconomy and geopolitics are shifting, there is a need for new reflections on a geostrategic 'rebalancing' [*diyuan zhanlie 'zai pingheng'*, 地缘战略'再平衡'] that is comprehensive and combines land and sea power" (Wang 2012). In proposing this, Wang was building on an academic debate that had been going on in China since the 1990s, with scholars discussing 'sea power' (*haiquan*, 海权) and 'land power' (*luquan*, 陆权) as two alternative paths for China's rise (Dossi 2018). Amid growing competition with the US in maritime East Asia, Wang recommended a 'March West' (*Xi Jin*, 西进) strategy integrating the two paths and reorienting China's rise toward Eurasia. This proposal provided the intellectual background for the BRI, which was then formulated by the Chinese foreign policy decision-makers as a quintessentially geopolitical initiative; that is, an initiative aimed at reshaping international space based on the preferences of a rising China. This is particularly clear in the 2015 *Vision and Actions*, which not only enumerates the principles, goals and priorities of the initiative, but also illustrates China's perspective on the reorganization of the Eurasian space in the twenty-first century. As such, the BRI is much more than an economic cooperation project: it is a 'space and order shaping' endeavour that aims to reshape international order by reshaping international space (Caffarena and Gabusi 2019).

The third aspect is the flexible and pragmatic nature of the BRI. Like other Chinese policy initiatives, the BRI does not work as a detailed plan, but rather as a general

framework that leaves considerable room for manoeuvre in its implementation. From this point of view, the BRI fits perfectly into the analytical framework of ‘fragmented authoritarianism’, the theoretical model that explains policy outcomes in China as the result of the interactions between decisions made at the Centre and the ‘self-interested, short-term and parochial calculations’ of the several institutional actors involved in the implementation process (Mertha and Brødsgaard 2017, p. 3; for the classic formulation see Lieberthal and Oksenberg 1988, pp. 135-168). In the case of the BRI, while the Centre provides overall directives, provincial and local authorities, as well as state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and private companies, are encouraged to contribute by developing their own initiatives within the broader BRI framework. Each of the several actors involved in implementation pushes for its own priorities, often by reframing its pre-existing projects so that they conform to the new BRI discourse. While the initiative is strategic in its ambitions, the picture is thus much less clear when we move from the level of the general design to the level of implementation, so that it is often difficult to say whether individual BRI projects respond to the strategic directives from the Centre or to the relatively uncoordinated agendas of the several actors involved. In turn, this leads to considerable flexibility in the boundaries of the initiative, with bottom-up pressures resulting in adjustments and expansions.

Finally, a fourth element that should be taken into account is that, five years after the publication of *Vision and Actions*, the BRI seems to be currently under review in Beijing. According to Chinese scholars (author’s interviews, Beijing, November and December 2019), several BRI projects face resistance from local populations due to the ‘free riding’ attitude of China’s partners, who value the BRI as a source of investment but are not willing to mobilize their political resources in support of the projects. Also, interviewed scholars complained that many BRI projects are promoted by the Chinese government out of political considerations and without adequate assessment of their profitability, potentially resulting in huge losses for the Chinese investors, especially in the cases of projects in politically unstable countries. Finally, interviewed scholars were aware that the strategic ambitions of the initiative resulted in a backlash from the United States, eventually contributing to the deterioration of China-US bilateral relations and complicating the external environment of China’s foreign policy in East Asia and beyond. According to the interviewed scholars, these concerns have now triggered a review process of the BRI, whose implementation is going to become less ‘impressionistic’ and more focused on details, i.e. more prudent and centred on China’s own interests.

3. Chinese views of Italy in the BRI

Italy’s place in the BRI is related to the peculiar position that Beijing awards to the country as a bridge between two regional contexts of particular significance for China’s interests: Europe and the Mediterranean region. Beijing sees Italy first and foremost as a European country and, more specifically, as a member of the EU: its Italy policy is then part of the broader policy toward the EU and Europe as a whole. From an economic point of view, Brussels is a key interlocutor for Beijing, as the EU remains China’s largest trading partner (General Administration of Customs of the People’s Republic of China 2020). From a political point of view, however, China’s attitude toward the EU has changed significantly over the past two decades. In the 1990s and 2000s, Beijing had great expectations about the role

of the EU in the context of a perceived ‘multipolarization’ of the international system (Casarini 2009, pp. 82-86). Since the Eurozone crisis, however, Beijing’s confidence in the EU as a political interlocutor has declined dramatically, leading to a shift in its approach to the continent: rather than investing in political relations with the EU, Beijing has continued to look at the EU as an economic partner, but has increasingly looked either at individual European states (especially the so-called ‘big three’: France, Germany and the United Kingdom) or at regional subgroupings for the development of political ties (Casarini 2015; Feng and Huang 2015). Most notably, Beijing has consolidated its relations with Central and Eastern Europe through the 16+1 framework (17+1 since 2019, following the inclusion of Greece), which not coincidentally involves both members and non-members of the EU (Szcudlik-Tatar 2015; Vangeli 2017). As the case of the 17+1 framework shows, Beijing is increasingly leveraging on divisions between European states to advance its agenda for China-Europe relations.

As a ‘Southern European’ (*Nan Ou*, 南欧) country, Italy is also part of the Mediterranean region, conceived in Beijing as the intersection between Southern Europe, North Africa (*Bei Fei*, 北非) and West Asia (*Xi Ya*, 西亚) (Andornino 2015c; Fardella 2014b; 2015; 2018; Fardella and Ghiselli 2017). Traditionally far from China’s sphere of interests, the Mediterranean region has gained importance for Beijing since the beginning of the new century. As shown by ChinaMED data, Chinese imports from and exports to North Africa and the Middle East have increased since 2001. In the same period, Chinese investments in the two regions have also grown, together with the number of Chinese contract workers deployed there (ChinaMED 2020). The Mediterranean Sea has become increasingly busy as both a destination and a transit for shipping from and to China (Deandreis 2016; Panaro and Ferrara 2018). This is reflected in Chinese investments in port infrastructures in the region, with the acquisition of a majority stake in the Piraeus port authority by COSCO Shipping in 2016 as well as significant Chinese investments in other ports on the southern shores of the Mediterranean (Luo 2018). Since 2011, political instability in North Africa and the Middle East has created concerns regarding the security of Chinese investments and workers in the region. In early 2011 China had to evacuate over 35,000 Chinese nationals from Libya, with a second evacuation operation being organized in 2015 from Yemen (Dossi 2015; Ghiselli 2018). For Beijing, the region thus gained importance also from the point of view of security, resulting in the establishment of China’s first military base abroad in Djibouti in summer 2017 (Ghiselli 2017).

In their interactions with Italian counterparts, Chinese officials tend to emphasize the role that Italy plays in these two regions and the tradition of friendly relations between the Chinese and Italian peoples dating back to ancient times. As noted by the former ambassador to the People’s Republic of China (PRC) Alberto Bradanini (2018), however, such positive comments are largely rhetorical and do not reflect the real perception that Chinese officials have of Italy and its role in Europe and the Mediterranean region. A more effective way of investigating Chinese perceptions of Italy is, then, to look at what Chinese scholars write about Italy and what courses of action they recommend to the Chinese decision-makers. A particularly interesting perspective is the one provided by scholars who work at government-affiliated research institutions and write for their official journals. In this respect, a first set of indications regarding the role assigned to Italy can be inferred from purely bibliometric data. If we consider, for example,

Dangdai Shijie (当代世界, *Contemporary World*), the journal of the International Liaison Department of the CCP Central Committee, only 38 articles whose title includes the word 'Italy' (*Yidali*, 意大利) have been published since 1994, compared to the 63, 77 and 99 whose titles include the words 'England' (*Yingguo*, 英国), 'France' (*Faguo*, 法国) and 'Germany' (*Deguo*, 德国) respectively.

The perception of Italy that emerges from the limited number of articles that have been published in this and other journals is that of a country in an increasingly difficult position from both an economic and a political point of view. Chinese analysts emphasize the negative impact of the economic and financial crisis on Italy's political position in the EU (Cao 2016; Dong 2018; Shen 2017; Sun 2018; Sun 2019b; Zhong 2016). A second issue that is mentioned as a source of weakness is the migrant crisis, which is viewed at least partly as the result of a foreign policy failure, as Italy did not manage to prevent Western military intervention in Libya (Zhong 2016). Against this complicated background, Chinese analysts expressed optimistic views when Matteo Renzi's government was formed in 2014. The discontinuity that Renzi's leadership seemed to introduce in Italian domestic politics and his more vocal approach to foreign policy were seen as potentially contributing to an Italian comeback in the EU (Sun 2017; Zhong 2016). As recalled by Bradanini (2018), these positive attitudes toward the new government were common among Chinese officials, and they were reflected in the considerable attention that Renzi's visit to Beijing in June 2014 received in the Chinese media (Dossi 2014). Yet these expectations were eventually disappointed when Renzi resigned after defeat in the 2016 constitutional referendum, whose results came as a shock to Chinese analysts (Cao and Li 2017; Sun 2017).

Since the 2016 referendum, Chinese analysts have mostly looked at Italian politics through the lenses of 'populism' (*mincuizhuyi*, 民粹主义) (Cao 2018; Dong 2018; Li 2018; Shen 2017; Wang 2017). The 2018 general election was seen as the triumph of 'anti-system and extremist parties' (*fanjianzhi zhengdang he jiduan zhengdang*, 反建制政党和极端政党) (Sun 2018, p. 42; see also Dong 2018). According to Sun Yanhong, associate researcher at the Institute of European Studies of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and secretary of the Chinese Association of Italian Studies, the rise of the Five Star Movement and of the League was due to four main reasons: the persisting economic difficulties of the country, the ongoing migrant crisis, the growing Euroscepticism of Italian public opinion, and the innovative use of social media by the two parties. The performance of the Conte I government was assessed negatively by Sun, as the new government failed to achieve its two main goals in the EU, i.e. the end of austerity and a shift in migration policies (Sun 2019a). These negative views of the Italian political situation were amplified by the 2019 government crisis, seen in China as a further demonstration of the traditional political instability of the country (Cao 2019). Instability reportedly continues to characterize Italian politics under the Conte II government formed in September 2019, as the new majority is seen as extremely weak and the League is expected to make a comeback at the next general elections if not earlier (*ibid.*; Sun 2019d).

Despite this grim picture of Italy's political and economic conditions, Chinese analysts tend to be more positive when it comes to Italy's place in the BRI. On the one hand, Rome has much to gain from its participation in the BRI. First, Italy enjoys the

‘geographic advantage’ (*diyuan youshi*, 地缘优势) of its location at the centre of the Mediterranean Sea, where it plays the role of a natural ‘hub connecting mainland Europe, North Africa and West Asia’ (Zhao and Zhang 2019, p. 27; see also Liu 2018). As such, Italy is ideally located to become the Western terminal of the BRI: despite China’s investments in the Piraeus port, the fact that the ports of Northern Italy are much closer to continental Europe makes them a natural destination for Chinese investments in infrastructures under the BRI (Sun 2019b; 2019c). Second, Italy has a sizeable economic presence in Central and Eastern Europe, North Africa and Central Asia, regions where China has growing interests too. This creates the conditions for fruitful cooperation in third countries: for example, Italian banks Unicredit and Intesa Sanpaolo are expected to be involved in the financing of Chinese infrastructure projects in the region (Sun 2019b). On the other hand, Italy has much to offer to the BRI and to Chinese companies willing to invest in the country. As the second manufacturing power in the EU and an ‘industrial and technological power’ (ibid.), Italy is an interesting destination for Chinese investments. At the same time, due to its difficult economic situation, the huge size of its public debt, and the challenges posed to its exports by US protectionist policies, Italy is better disposed toward Chinese investments than other EU countries. As noted by Zhao Xianjin and Zhang Xiaoting (2019) from Shanghai University, foreign investors are not exposed to any specific restrictions, and benefit from the same treatment as local companies. From this point of view, what makes Italy particularly attractive for China in the context of the BRI is its peculiar mix of strengths and weaknesses. As a developed country, Italy has an industrial base and technological know-how that most of China’s BRI partners do not possess; as a country in endemic economic crisis, on the other hand, Italy is better disposed toward Chinese investments than the European ‘big three’.

At the same time, however, Zhao and Zhang also warn of the ‘risks’ (*fengxian*, 风险) that Chinese investors face in Italy. First, one of the main problems is limited access to credit by financial institutions: Chinese companies investing in Italy need to know that they will have to rely on their own capitals. Second, Italy’s labour law creates significant restrictions in the management of personnel: ‘particularly in some areas, Italian labour policies offer excessive protection [*quodu de baohu*, 过度的保护] [sic] to workers’ (ibid., p. 28). Third, as an EU member state, Italy is exposed to the changing climate toward Chinese investments that is now occurring at the European level, with the introduction of more stringent mechanisms to screen foreign investments in strategic areas. Fourth, rather than being complementary, the Chinese and Italian economies are largely in competition: Chinese companies investing in the country or exporting there should, then, expect fierce resistance from Italian companies and public opinion as a whole. Based on these risks, Zhao and Zhang make specific recommendations to Chinese companies and authorities. First, China should strengthen its ‘top-level planning’ and consolidate ‘guidance and oversight’ over Chinese companies, providing them with adequate support in risk assessment and compensation policies. Second, Chinese companies should diversify their ‘mode of investment’ in Italy, complementing mergers and acquisitions with the establishment of joint ventures, and they should identify innovative sources of financing. Finally, Chinese investors should learn more about the local context, manage appropriately cultural differences, labour disputes and environmental issues, and invest in ‘social responsibility’ (*shehui zeren*, 社会责任).

4. Italian views of China and the BRI

For Italy, China has never been a foreign policy priority. As argued by Carlo M. Santoro (1991) at the end of the Cold War, the foreign policy of Italy as a ‘middle power’ is traditionally focused on the regional system composed of the Euro-Atlantic, Balkan, Middle Eastern and North African subsystems. Three decades later, this regional focus continues to characterise Italy’s foreign policy, although in a context that has been altered dramatically by the crisis of the EU and by instability in the Middle East and North Africa (Mammarella and Cacace 2013, pp. 290-316; Diodato and Niglia 2019; Isernia and Longo, eds. 2019; for a critique of the ‘middle power’ model, see Romero 2016). While certainly not a priority, however, China has been the recurrent target of Italian ambitions, driven by a mix of economic and political motivations. On the one hand, sectors of the business community have been attracted by the economic opportunities offered by China, although such attraction has often been based on a rather limited understanding of the real conditions of the Chinese market. On the other hand, the Italian government has periodically looked at its China policy as a tool to demonstrate Italy’s international status. At different stages of Italian history, relations with China thus assumed a symbolic meaning that went beyond the bilateral relationship in itself (Samarani and De Giorgi 2011, pp. 18-32; Samarani 2008, pp. 118-19; Samarani 2014; Fardella 2014a; Olla Brundu 2004).

While this traditional mix of economic and political elements persists, since the 1990s the economic rise of China has introduced a major discontinuity by dramatically altering the structure of bilateral relations. Exposed to fierce competition in the manufacturing sector, Italy now runs a large deficit in its trade with China, while Italian companies compete with Chinese ones in third markets (Prodi 2014; Andornino 2015a). In addition, since the Euro crisis, Italy has looked to China as a source of capital for its economy, in the context of high levels of public debt and a reduction in credit supply (Andornino 2014). In Italy’s calculations, China is thus no longer just a ‘land of opportunity’, but also a manufacturing competitor and a potential source of investments: accordingly, reducing the trade deficit and attracting Chinese investments have become key goals of Italy’s China policy.

It is in this context that Italy has increasingly focused on economic cooperation as a key dimension of the ‘comprehensive strategic partnership’ (*partenariato strategico globale; quanmian zhanlüe huoban guanxi*, 全面战略伙伴关系) established with China in 2004. In June 2014, during Prime Minister Matteo Renzi’s visit to Beijing, the two sides signed the *2014-2016 Action Plan for Economic Cooperation between Italy and China* and a Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation in five major areas: environmental protection and energy, agricultural products and processing, food security, urbanization, medicine and health, and aviation (Andornino 2015b). Between 2014 and 2015, important Chinese investments in Italy were finalized. In 2014, Chinese SOEs Shanghai Electric and State Grid Corporation of China acquired respectively a 40 percent stake in Ansaldo Energia and a 35 percent stake in CDP Reti, which in turn manages holdings in Snam (construction and integrated management of natural gas infrastructure) and Terna (electricity transmission grid) (Andornino 2015b; 2016). The People’s Bank of China bought stakes in eight major Italian companies (ENEL, ENI, Prysmian, FCA, Telecom Italia, Generali, Mediobanca, Saipem), while Chinese SOE ChemChina acquired

Pirelli, with the involvement of the Silk Road Fund, the investment vehicle launched by the Chinese government in December 2014 to support BRI projects (Fatiguso 2015).

Coherently with this focus on economic cooperation, Italy showed interest in the BRI and China's related initiatives at a rather early stage. The goal was to rebalance bilateral trade by obtaining greater access to the Chinese market, while at the same time attracting Chinese investments that would help Italy's economic recovery. In 2015, Italy was one of seventeen EU member states to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) as a founding member (Gabusi 2019). In the following years, Italy expressed its high-level support for the BRI during bilateral meetings, as stated in the Joint Communiqués of the seventh and eighth meetings of the Italy-China Governmental Committee in 2016 and 2017 respectively (Ministro degli Affari esteri e della Cooperazione internazionale della Repubblica italiana e Ministro degli Affari esteri della Repubblica popolare cinese 2016, 2017). Also, the BRI figured prominently in two speeches delivered by Italian President Sergio Mattarella (2017a, 2017b) during his visit to China in February 2017. In particular, in his *lectio magistralis* at Fudan University, Mattarella referred to the BRI as a 'new, important direction in relations between our continents' and confirmed that Italy would 'participate with conviction in this ambitious project' (Mattarella 2017b). In May 2017, Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni attended the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing, the only head of government from a G7 country to do so (Casarini 2019).

Begun in 2014-15 under the centre-left governments, Italy's march toward the BRI accelerated dramatically under the 'yellow-green' Conte I government formed in June 2018. Interactions with China were immediately intensified, most notably with separate visits to China by Minister of Economy and Finance Giovanni Tria and Undersecretary of State at the Ministry of Economic Development Giuseppe Geraci in the summer of 2018 and then by Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Economic Development Luigi Di Maio in September and again in November (Santevecchi 2018a; 2018b; 2018c). In January 2019, at the ninth meeting of the Italy-China Governmental Committee, Foreign Ministers Enzo Moavero Milanesi and Wang Yi declared the two countries' "interest in joint collaborations within the 'Belt and Road' Initiative" and announced the imminent visit to Italy by Chinese President Xi Jinping (Ministro degli Affari esteri e della Cooperazione internazionale della Repubblica italiana e Ministro degli Affari esteri della Repubblica popolare cinese 2019).

When it was revealed that the agenda of Xi's visit included the signing ceremony of a BRI Memorandum, Italy's China policy became the subject of heated debate. The domestic context was provided by the tense political situation of spring 2019, with endemic conflict between majority and opposition, as well as growing contradictions within the majority itself. The prospected Memorandum opened a new front in this unstable political situation, with a foreign policy debate apparently centred on two alternative strategies: a new pro-China strategy advanced by the government versus the traditional strategy centred on Italy's alignment with the US and the EU. Negative comments from Washington and Brussels, amplified by the Italian mainstream media, further reinforced the polarized nature of the debate. Under the surface, however, the situation was far more complicated. On the one hand, the decision to sign the Memorandum by the Conte I government was not the manifestation of a comprehensive strategy, but rather

the outcome of a contingent mix of factors. On the other hand, those who contested the Memorandum from the opposition camp did so for different reasons and with different views of Italy's relations with China.

Two main factors contributed to the Conte I government's decision to sign the Memorandum: uncoordinated initiatives by some members of the government and infighting in a coalition with highly heterogeneous views of foreign policy. First, the government included members with considerable experience and connections in China: Minister Tria, who had studied in China in the late 1970s, and Undersecretary Geraci, who had been teaching in Chinese universities for a decade. Geraci, in particular, was extremely vocal in supporting closer relations with China and Italy's involvement in the BRI. Just before his appointment, he had written a controversial piece on Italy-China relations for the blog of Five Star Movement leader Beppe Grillo, where China was uncritically presented as a model for Italy in several fields (including the management of public security) (Geraci 2018). Once in power, Geraci assumed a highly visible role in Italy's China policy, for example by establishing at the Ministry of Economic Development a working group of China experts tasked with promoting relations with China – the so-called 'Task Force Cina'.

Second, some sectors of the majority – especially in the Five Star Movement – identified closer relations with China as crucial for a more proactive foreign policy, as opposed to the alleged subservience of the centre-left governments to the US, the EU institutions, Germany and France. The Memorandum thus assumed a symbolic value that went far beyond Italy-China relations. This can be seen in the arguments presented by the Five Star Movement in support of the Memorandum in the parliamentary debates. The MP Santi Cappellani, for example, cautioned against 'submission [*servilismo*] to the North Atlantic Treaty allies' and expressed his 'admiration' for a government that 'finally dares to sign a Memorandum in the interest of the country and its citizens, thus rediscovering the geopolitical tradition that transformed Italy into the great nation that it used to be and that we should return to being' (Camera dei Deputati 2019, p. 37).

While advocated by some sectors of the majority, however, closer relations with China were resisted by others, most notably in the League, as reflected once again in the parliamentary debates. Although never contesting the Memorandum in itself, League Members of Parliament insisted on Italy's traditional alliances and called for reciprocity in trade and investment under the BRI. MP Giulio Centemero, for example, declared that 'we are and we will always be loyal to our alliance with the United States as a pillar [of Italy's foreign policy]' and called for greater scrutiny of the BRI's implications for Italy's infrastructures, communications and networks as 'sectors that impact on national security' (Camera dei Deputati 2019, p. 21). Similarly, Senator Paolo Formentini called on Minister Moavero Milanesi to protect communications infrastructures and networks as 'strategic national interests that are not on sale': 'we say yes to trade, but trade stops when a national interest is at stake – a national interest that our historical ally, the United States, urged us to protect' (Senato della Repubblica 2019).

In the opposition camp, the Memorandum was criticised by most political forces (with the notable exception of the small *Liberi e Uguali* party) but for different reasons. On the one hand, centre-right party *Forza Italia* and right-wing party *Fratelli d'Italia* were opposed not just to the Memorandum, but to the BRI as a whole as a major economic

and political threat. According to Forza Italia MP Deborah Bergamini, the government was ‘closing ports to migrants but opening our country to an invasion of Chinese products’ (Camera dei Deputati 2019, p. 51) and threatening Italy’s membership of the ‘Western bloc’ by transforming the country from ‘NATO’s aircraft carrier’ into a ‘dock for the biggest infrastructure tentacle that the world has even known’ (ibid., pp. 18, 51). On the other hand, the Democratic Party – despite its rhetoric against the Memorandum – did not criticise the BRI as such but rather the Memorandum as a tool, which it considered to be a unilateral political concession made by the Conte I government to China. According to MP Ivan Scalfarotto, who had served as Undersecretary at the Ministry of Economic Development in the Renzi and Gentiloni governments, the Memorandum was ‘the achievement of a praiseworthy goal in the worst possible way’, because ‘agreements with China and work with China have to be done, but without selling out [the country]’ (ibid., pp. 54-55).

In conclusion, the Conte I government’s decision to sign the Memorandum was not the manifestation of a new comprehensive strategy; similarly, the ‘great debate’ on China triggered by the Memorandum was not a truly strategic debate centred on clearly defined alternative options. The whole issue of the Memorandum was rather a by-product of Italy’s contingent domestic political situation in spring 2019. On the one hand, substantial divergences within the ‘yellow-green’ majority left room for uncoordinated foreign policy initiatives; on the other hand, endemic conflict between the majority and the centre-left opposition contributed to a highly polarized debate that failed to recognize long-term elements of continuity in Italy’s China policy. By the end of summer 2019, however, the domestic political context had changed dramatically, with the collapse of the Conte I government and the establishment of a new Conte cabinet, whose majority also included the Democratic Party that had vehemently opposed the Memorandum. Just a few months after the signing ceremony, the political conditions that had led to the Memorandum had largely disappeared.

5. Conclusions. The need for a long-term vision

For both political and economic reasons, Italy and China might seem to be unlikely partners under the BRI. As we have shown, however, several considerations led Rome and Beijing to identify each other as important partners and the BRI as a key platform for bilateral cooperation. On the one hand, China values Italy’s position as a bridge between different regions involved in the BRI and sees the country as an interesting destination for investments, due to both Italy’s strengths and weaknesses. On the other hand, Italy soon identified the BRI as an opportunity for gaining greater access to the Chinese market and for attracting Chinese investments into the country. While in line with Italy’s long march toward the BRI, however, the Conte I government’s decision to sign the Memorandum in 2019 was the product of a contingent political context that has since changed significantly.

This leaves open the question of the prospects for the Memorandum and the implications for the future of Italy-China relations. As a non-binding document, the Memorandum does not produce immediate returns for the two parties, but rather provides a framework for the negotiation of specific and legally binding documents in the areas that it covers. Yet it would be wrong to conclude that the Memorandum is merely

symbolic. For Beijing, it is a demonstration of Italy's political support for the BRI as China's most ambitious foreign policy initiative and, more broadly, a demonstration of Italy's political support for China's proactive role in international politics. Such support was taken very seriously in Beijing, especially at a time when the BRI was increasingly contested elsewhere. From China's point of view, the Memorandum thus brings relations with Italy to a new level and creates the conditions for a qualitative leap forward in bilateral cooperation. In fact, Beijing has repeatedly signalled this positive attitude to Rome, for example by reserving special treatment to Foreign Minister Di Maio when he visited Shanghai in November 2019 for the second China International Import Expo (Santevecchi 2019).

The ball is, then, in Italy's court. Rome has to decide what it wants to achieve through the Memorandum, a decision that is now considerably complicated by the growing tensions between Washington and Beijing. But a decision has to be made, and it has to be made rapidly, as the BRI itself is under review in Beijing. As mentioned above, there is the perception among Chinese scholars that the BRI will be adjusted, with a stronger emphasis on China's own priorities. If Italian policy-makers are not focused enough, the whole issue of Italy's participation in the BRI might, then, transform into just another missed opportunity for the country. In this respect, the real risk for Italy's engagement in the BRI is the lack of a long-term vision, which is also the main lesson from the 2019 debate and a striking element of asymmetry between Italy and China. The BRI is underpinned by a clear vision of China's future place in the world: it is a quintessentially strategic initiative that was articulated in Beijing as a response to an increasingly complicated international context and based on a long-term vision for China's rise. On the contrary, Italy's approach to China and the BRI seems to be still largely reactive: what is missing is a long-term vision for the future of Italy's relations with a rising power that is going to exercise growing influence – both in economic and political terms – in Europe and in the Mediterranean region.

The lack of a long-term vision is in turn related to the poor conditions of the Italian public debate on China. In a country where foreign policy is rarely the subject of public debate, relations with China are no exception. It is notable that Chinese investments in strategic sectors of the Italian economy under the Renzi government took place in the absence of any public discussion. In this respect, the debate around the BRI Memorandum, with all its limits, was a useful step forward. For a couple of weeks, Italy's China policy was at the centre of discussions among policy-makers, with the involvement of both branches of Parliament. While much of the pathos was merely instrumental to domestic agendas, this nonetheless ensured media coverage of the issue, which created a rare window of opportunity for scholars and experts, who were invited to share their views on China, the BRI and the state of Italy-China relations. Unfortunately, in the turbulent political situation of spring 2019, the attention of the media declined rapidly, and Italy's China policy soon returned to be the specialized field of a small community of foreign policy experts and decision-makers. Yet, if Italy wants to seize the opportunities that participation in the BRI might offer and reduce the associated risks, a more structured and permanent debate on China and Italy-China relations should be encouraged. The current year, 2020, – which marks the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations – might offer a unique opportunity in this respect.

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