

## The Belt and Road initiative in Italy

# GLOBAL POLITICS AND SECURITY

Volume 9

Edited by

Prof. Lorenzo Kamel,  
University of Turin's History Department,  
and Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)



**PETER LANG**

Bern · Berlin · Bruxelles · New York · Oxford

Only for Author Use

Beatrice Gallelli and Francesca Ghiretti (eds)

**The Belt and Road initiative  
in Italy**  
**Five case studies**



**PETER LANG**

Bern · Berlin · Bruxelles · New York · Oxford

Only for Author Use

**Bibliographic Information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek**

The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data is available in the internet at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
A CIP catalog record for this book has been applied for  
at the Library of Congress.

Volume prepared in the framework of the IAI project  
'When Italy Embraces the BRI'.

Cover illustration: vladm/Shutterstock.com

ISSN 2624-8905 • ISBN 978-3-0343-4496-8 (Print)  
E-ISBN 978-3-0343-4707-5 (E-PDF) • E-ISBN 978-3-0343-4708-2 (EPUB)  
• DOI 10.3726/b20683

**PETER LANG**  
open



Open Access: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution CC-BY 4.0 license. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

© Beatrice Gallelli und Francesca Ghiretti (Hrsg.), 2023

This publication has been peer reviewed.

Peter Lang Group AG, International Academic Publishers, Bern 2023  
[bern@peterlang.com](mailto:bern@peterlang.com), [www.peterlang.com](http://www.peterlang.com)

Only for Author Use

# Contents

Figures .....	7
Tables .....	9
<i>Lorenzo Kamel</i> Foreword .....	11
<i>Beatrice Gallelli, Francesca Ghiretti and Lorenzo Mariani</i> Introduction .....	13
<i>Francesca Ghiretti</i> Chapter 1: The Maritime Belt and Road: Italian ports .....	27
<i>Nicola Bilotta</i> Chapter 2: China–Italy: An analysis of financial cooperation .....	47
<i>Francesca Ghiretti and Lorenzo Mariani</i> Chapter 3: One belt one voice: Chinese media in Italy .....	71
<i>Nicola Casarini</i> Chapter 4: Silk road academic connections .....	97
<i>Lorenzo Mariani</i> Chapter 5: The internationalisation of China’s scientific power .....	119
<i>Beatrice Gallelli, Francesca Ghiretti and Lorenzo Mariani</i> Conclusion .....	145
Contributors .....	161
Abbreviations .....	163

Beatrice Gallelli, Francesca Ghiretti and Lorenzo Mariani

## Introduction

On 21 March 2019, at 6:30 p.m., an Air China airline Boeing 474–400 landed in an armoured Rome. On board were Chinese President Xi Jinping and the first lady Peng Liyuan. That was the time when relations between Italy and the People's Republic of China (PRC) moved into the spotlight as never before: during that state visit to Rome, the President Xi Jinping signed a Memorandum of Understanding between the Government of the Italian Republic and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Cooperation within the Framework of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (henceforth, MoU) together with the then Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, supported by a coalition between the anti-establishment Five Star Movement (M5S) and the Eurosceptic Northern League (later, simply the League). Twenty-nine further agreements (ten of commercial and nineteen of an institutional nature) were signed as additions to the overarching MoU between the two countries. Italy thus became the first (and, thus far, only) G7 country to officially join the so-called Belt and Road Initiative (一带一路) launched by President Xi in 2013. Despite being a non-binding document merely outlining a framework for cooperation, the MoU sparked a heated debate inside and outside Italy's borders: notwithstanding the Italian policymakers' efforts to make the language of the MoU consistent with European norms and standards as well as with the European Union's Strategy on Connecting Europe and Asia of September 2018, the move was welcomed neither in Washington nor in several other European capitals.

In view of the potential review of the MoU scheduled for 2024, this book offers a precious overview of such agreements, the framework in which they are embedded and the history that brought them to be. Before doing so, we will introduce the debate revolving around the MoU and also the historical context in which it took place.

### 1. The debate on the MoU

#### 1.1. The view from the United States

Unsurprisingly, the harshest criticism came from Washington. When, in early March 2019, Italy's Undersecretary of State for Trade and Foreign Investment Michele Geraci confirmed to the *Financial Times* that the Italian Government

was negotiating an MoU in support of the BRI, Garrett Marquis – at that time Senior Director for Strategic Communications at the US National Security Council (NSC) – urged it to refrain from supporting what he called China’s ‘vanity project’.<sup>1</sup> A tweet from the official account of the US NSC stated that ‘endorsing [the] BRI lends legitimacy to China’s predatory approach to investment and will bring no benefits to the Italian people’.<sup>2</sup> In the following days, more US officials joined in the criticism of Italy’s decision. US Ambassador to Italy Lewis Eisenberg publicly stated that Chinese investments in Italian infrastructures would carry risks for Italy’s national security.<sup>3</sup>

Ambassador Eisenberg’s concerns about Chinese investments in infrastructural development in Italy revolved around two sectors in particular: telecommunications and maritime hubs. At that point, the administration of Donald Trump had already embarked on a global campaign to convince US allies to enact bans on the use of Chinese 5G technologies on the grounds that companies such as Huawei or ZTE could grant the Chinese government access sensitive data. Such concerns led to 5G technologies being excluded from the remit of the Sino–Italian MoU, yet concerns regarding the signing of the MoU evidently persisted in Washington.

Another reason for apprehension was that China’s state-owned enterprises (SOEs) could now acquire shares in large Italian infrastructure facilities, especially ports, as had already been the case with the Greek port of Piraeus. Criticisms of Italy’s decision to sign the MoU also drew on the experience of other countries involved in BRI-related projects, which showed that the initiative was fraught with problems. Specifically, some commentators argued that Italy might be unable to repay the generous Chinese loans through which joint infrastructural projects were supposed to be funded, and it could thus eventually fall into the so-called debt trap.<sup>4</sup>

- 
- 1 Jan Wolfe, ‘U.S. Official Suggests Italy Avoid China’s Belt and Road Plan’, in *Reuters*, 9 March 2019, <https://reut.rs/2CboaSf>.
  - 2 NSC 45 Archived, ‘Italy is a major global economy and a great investment destination’, *Twitter*, 9 March 2019, <https://twitter.com/WHNSC45/status/1104402719568203776>.
  - 3 ‘Ambasciatore USA: Preoccupati per sicurezza porti italiani’, in *AdnKronos*, 29 July 2020, [https://www.adnkronos.com/fatti/esteri/2020/07/29/ambasciatore-usa-preoccupati-per-sicurezza-porti-italiani\\_NiUKrmKdC67AhmttAlgKfO.html](https://www.adnkronos.com/fatti/esteri/2020/07/29/ambasciatore-usa-preoccupati-per-sicurezza-porti-italiani_NiUKrmKdC67AhmttAlgKfO.html).
  - 4 Former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo also warned that Beijing would take advantage of Rome, recalling the common assumption that the BRI only plays in China’s favour. Hannah Roberts, ‘US Warning to Italy: You’re being Exploited by China’, in *Politico*, 30 September 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/?p=1469788>.

The US Government apparently also signalled its distress in private high-level meetings. According to the *New York Times*, Trump Administration officials pressured members of the League to disown the deal – with former Trump campaign manager Steve Bannon warning against China’s ‘British East India Company model of predatory capitalism.’<sup>5</sup> Although criticism coming from US officials was centred on security concerns, the main problem was that Italy was lending Xi’s pet project a good deal of international legitimacy.<sup>6</sup>

## 1.2. The views from Europe

While criticisms from Washington focused on technology and infrastructures, the debate in Europe revolved around the concern that Italy’s decision to act bilaterally would create divisions between EU member states – thus jeopardising the Union’s unity vis-à-vis China.<sup>7</sup> The Dutch prime minister, Mark Rutte, warned Italy not to be ‘naive’ and suggested considering ‘the possibility that China [was] also pursuing some of its national interests.’ French President Emmanuel Macron stated that ‘it is not a good method to discuss bilaterally agreements on the new “Silk Road”’.<sup>8</sup> In addition, veiled criticism came from German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas. Asked about Italy’s endorsement of the BRI, Maas said that ‘if some countries believe that they can do clever business with the Chinese, then they will be surprised when they wake up and find themselves dependent.’<sup>9</sup>

EU institutions also expressed some displeasure. European Commission spokesperson Maja Kocijančič commented that ‘neither the European Union nor any of the member states can effectively achieve their aims with China without full unity’. She also recommended that the Italian Government ‘ensure consistency with EU law rules and policies’ as well as respect for ‘EU unity in

---

5 Jason Horowitz, ‘A Forgotten Italian Port Could Become a Chinese Gateway to Europe’, in *The New York Times*, 18 March 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/18/world/europe/italy-trieste-china-belt-road.html>.

6 Giovanna De Maio, ‘Playing with Fire: Italy, China, and Europe’, in *Brookings Reports*, May 2020, <https://brook.gs/2LyMwtc>.

7 Maaïke Okano-Heijmans and Tomoki Kamo, ‘Engaging but Not Endorsing China’s Belt and Road Initiative’, in *Clingendael Policy Briefs*, May 2019, <https://www.clingendael.org/node/10262>.

8 Alexandra Brzozowski and Jorge Valero, ‘“Don’t Be Naive with China”, EU Leaders Tell Italy’, in *Euractiv*, 22 March 2019, <https://www.euractiv.com/?p=1325630>.

9 Natasha Turak, ‘Italy Joining China’s Belt and Road Project Is “Geopolitically Unwise,” Former Prime Minister Says’, in *CNBC*, 25 March 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/03/25/italy-joining-chinas-belt-and-road-project-is-unwise-former-pm.html>.



implementing new policies.<sup>10</sup> The same advice came from Jean-Claude Juncker, the then president of the Commission, who, on the eve of Xi's visit to Italy, called for a unified EU policy towards China. Growing entanglement with the Chinese economy, he added, could result in the Union losing the ability to hold China accountable for its malpractices – from market distortions to human-rights violations.<sup>11</sup>

However, it is worth highlighting that not everyone in Brussels shared these concerns and the negative perception of the MoU between Italy and China. A very high-ranking and authoritative EU bureaucrat expressed his satisfaction with Italy's MoU with China and the language used in the agreement.<sup>12</sup>

### 1.3. The debate in Italy

Interpretations also diverged in Italy. Some Italian commentators explained the MoU in support of the BRI as a profit-driven choice by a populist and Eurosceptic government ready to defy Italy's EU partners (and the United States) in order to secure greater access to China's market and investments.<sup>13</sup> The MoU was, in this respect, interpreted as a 'soft balancing strategy' targeting Paris, Berlin and Brussels, as Italy could leverage strengthened ties with the PRC in negotiations with those European capitals on other issues.<sup>14</sup> The timing was indeed sensitive from the perspective of other EU member states, because the MoU was signed while the European Council was discussing the preparations for an upcoming EU–China summit.<sup>15</sup>

---

10 Gerardo Fortuna and Samuel Stolton, 'Leaked Memo Reveals China's Detailed Plans in Italy', in *Euractiv*, 8 March 2019 (updated 26 September 2022), <https://www.euractiv.com/?p=1320628>.

11 Ben Westcott, 'EU Leader Juncker Criticizes Uneven Relations with China Days after Xi Visit', in *CNN*, 2 April 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/04/02/asia/juncker-xi-eu-china-intl>.

12 Giulio Pugliese, 'Italy and China: Much Ado about an MoU', in *East Asian Policy*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (April/June 2021), p. 73–89.

13 Nicola Casarini, 'Rome-Beijing: Changing the Game. Italy's Embrace of China's Connectivity Project, Implications for the EU and the US', in *IAI Papers*, No. 19|05 (March 2019), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/10105>.

14 Philip Giurlando, 'Populist Foreign Policy: The Case of Italy', in *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, Vol. 27, No. 9 (2021), p. 251–267.

15 The priorities of the European Council included the establishment of a screening mechanism, an instrument widely seen as essential in defending against predatory investments – including, and especially, from the PRC. Italy abstained from the vote on the mechanism, which made it one of the two outliers (the other being post-Brexit vote

Others maintained that the MoU by no means implied that Rome was changing its traditional Euro–Atlantic foreign-policy approach. They argued that the heated debate about the MoU reflected mounting tensions over trade and other issues between the United States and China, and the politicisation of the PRC in the US domestic debate, rather than the agreement’s actual contents.<sup>16</sup> According to this view, striking the agreement represented a way for Italy to defend its economic and strategic interests. These ranged from the desire to strengthen trade and investment relations with the world’s second-largest economy to the need to establish a platform for dialogue with a new global power that was gradually increasing its presence in Italy’s surrounding regions – especially at a time of perceived American disengagement.<sup>17</sup> But that did not change Italy’s preferences, which continued to lie within the Euro-Atlantic framework.

The MoU was also considered to be in continuity with Italy’s previous approach to China, although its signing also resulted from the contingent political context of an unorthodox ruling coalition lacking a strategically long-term vision.<sup>18</sup> Supporters of the MoU defended the agreement, claiming that the document was compliant with both the EU strategy on connecting Europe and Asia (released in 2018) and with the principle listed in the EU–China 2020 Strategic Agenda for Cooperation.<sup>19</sup>

## 2. Contextualising the MoU: Italy’s attempts to enter the court of China

### 2.1. The state of Italy–China trade and investment relations

Between 2000 and 2019, Italy was the EU’s third-largest recipient of Chinese direct investment (15.9 billion euro) after the United Kingdom (50.3 billion

---

UK); even Greece and Hungary, traditionally deemed to be closer to Beijing than other member states, approved the draft text. Nicola Casarini, ‘Rome-Beijing: Changing the Game’, cit.

16 Giulio Pugliese, ‘Italy and China: Much Ado about an MoU’, cit.

17 Dario Cristiani, ‘Italy Joins the Belt and Road Initiative: Context, Interests, and Drivers’, in *China Brief*, Vol. 19, No. 8 (April 2019), <https://jamestown.org/?p=82758>.

18 Simone Dossi, ‘Italy-China Relations and the Belt and Road Initiative: The Need for a Long-Term Vision’, in *Italian Political Science*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (May 2020), p. 60–76, <https://italianpoliticalscience.com/index.php/ips/article/view/126>.

19 Federico Manfredi Firmian, ‘Italy, Like Any EU Member State, Has a Right to Pursue Bilateral Agreements’, in *Financial Times*, 25 March 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/cbcdc214-49ab-11e9-bbc9-6917dce3dc62>.

euro), at the time still an EU member, and Germany (22.7 billion euro).<sup>20</sup> Recently, however, Chinese investments in the Union have decreased – most notably, due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic: 2020 was the lowest year, in 2021 investments remain low despite a slight increase. In 2021 The Netherlands received most Chinese investment, followed by Germany, France and the UK. The UK and Germany continue to be the main recipients of Chinese direct investment; Italy still ranks third, but with a significant gap from the top two.<sup>21</sup> Chinese direct investments in Italy peaked some time ago – in 2013 – while Italian direct investments in China did so a year earlier. Official data provide a distorted picture of Chinese investments in the EU and vice versa. This is because most Chinese foreign direct investments pass through Hong Kong before reaching Europe, while European companies investing in China do so through holding companies registered in tax-subsidised countries.<sup>22</sup>

While general trends in investment have followed an irregular trajectory, trade between China and Italy has increased more steadily. As is almost always the case with China's trade partners, Italy imports from the PRC much more than it exports to it. In 2019, Italy was the third-largest importer of Chinese goods in the EU (after Germany and France),<sup>23</sup> while China was the ninth destination market of Italian exports – albeit the first in Asia.<sup>24</sup>

These figures tell the story of an unsteady – at times, even troubled – economic relationship between Italy and the PRC. Whatever strategic considerations its supporters may have factored in, the MoU of 2019 was largely intended to inject greater stability and growth potential into this relationship.

---

20 Agatha Kratz, Max J. Zenglein and Gregor Sebastian, 'Chinese FDI in Europe: 2020 Update', in *MERICCS Reports*, June 2021, <https://merics.org/en/report/chinese-fdi-eur-ope-2020-update>.

21 Agatha Kratz, Max J. Zenglein and Gregor Sebastian, 'Chinese FDI in Europe: 2021 Update', in *MERICCS Reports*, April 2022, <https://merics.org/en/report/chinese-fdi-eur-ope-2021-update>.

22 Giuseppe Gabusi and Giorgio Prodi, "Reality check": le relazioni bilaterali Italia-Cina in ambito economico dagli anni Settanta alle "nuove Vie della Seta", in *OrizzonteCina*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2020), p. 12–25, <https://doi.org/10.13135/2280-8035/5395>.

23 Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, *Osservatorio economico. Statistiche relative all'import/export di merci dell'Italia*, last updated on 17 November 2022, <https://www.infomercatiesteri.it/osservatorio-economico-inter-scambio-commerciale-italiano-mondo.php>.

24 Italian Ministry of Economy and Finance, *I rapporti tra Italia e Cina*, 9 July 2019, <https://www.mef.gov.it/focus/I-rapporti-tra-Italia-e-Cina>.

## 2.2. The historical background to the MoU

In the 1980s and 1990s, Italy and China competed more than they cooperated economically. The reason for this state of affairs was that the Chinese and Italian economies mirrored one another in three critical respects: the existence of a strong manufacturing sector, a heavy reliance on exports and a low-tech production basis.<sup>25</sup> Unable to sustain competition from Chinese exporting giants in core sectors such as textiles, machinery, furniture and home appliances, Italian companies ended up losing out badly. Especially in the early 2000s, Chinese exporters outperformed Italian companies in foreign markets and even at home.<sup>26</sup> To be sure, competition from China was asymmetrical, if not unfair, given the PRC's overall lower labour and production costs as well as the facilitating role played by the party-state. In contrast to other European countries, Italy thus largely missed out on the lucrative chance to exploit the opportunities offered by the rise of the PRC.

The relative loss of international competitiveness was one of the factors that contributed to Italy's unsteady economic performance during the 2000s. This difficult situation was exacerbated by the 2010 financial crisis and the ensuing recession and sovereign-debt crisis in the Eurozone, which further increased Italy's high level of public debt and resulted in a credit-supply crunch. In this much worsened situation, Italy began to regard China as a source of investment as well as a market for Italian products well before the MoU.

In 2009, Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi (at the time in his fourth spell in power, which lasted from 2008 to 2011) welcomed to Rome then Chinese President Hu Jintao (2003–13) in the first PRC high-level visit to the Italian capital in ten years.<sup>27</sup> Berlusconi signed a cooperation agreement that, on paper, was aimed at expanding bilateral trade – although the Italian prime minister hoped that it would pave the way for greater Chinese investment in Italy.<sup>28</sup> However, the deal did not bring about the wished-for boost in bilateral economic relations. With the Italian economy ravaged by the Eurozone crisis,

---

25 Giovanni Andornino, 'The Political Economy of Italy's Relations with China', in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (June 2012), p. 87–101.

26 Giorgio Prodi, 'I rapporti economici Italia-Cina', in Giovanni B. Andornino (ed.), *Prospettive di un paese in trasformazione*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2021, p. 107–123.

27 'Cina: firma con Italia accordi che portano avanti sviluppo (Berlusconi)', in *Agi*, 6 July 2009, [https://www.agi.it/estero/agichina/cina\\_firma\\_con\\_italia\\_accordi\\_che\\_portano\\_avanti\\_sviluppo\\_berlusconi\\_-3260527/news/2009-07-06](https://www.agi.it/estero/agichina/cina_firma_con_italia_accordi_che_portano_avanti_sviluppo_berlusconi_-3260527/news/2009-07-06).

28 Ibid.

the Chinese grew sceptical about investing in the country's sovereign-debt market without EU guarantees. Berlusconi bequeathed his attempt to court China to the technocratic government led by Mario Monti (2011–13), who met with his Chinese counterpart, Wen Jiabao, in Beijing as part of a tour across Asia to find potential investors. Addressing Chinese officials gathered in the Great Hall of the People, Monti depicted China as a 'strategic partner' and emphasised the need for increasing the level of bilateral investments.<sup>29</sup>

The idea of China being the source of its economic lifeblood became embedded in the strategic outlook of subsequent Italian governments. In June 2014, Matteo Renzi, at the time prime minister and leader of the centre-left Democratic Party (PD), signed the *2014–2016 Action Plan for Economic Cooperation between Italy and China* and a memorandum of understanding on cooperation in six major areas (environmental protection and energy, agricultural products and processing, food security, urbanisation, medicine and health, and aviation) during a state visit to Beijing.<sup>30</sup> Just like Berlusconi, at home Renzi was not exactly a China enthusiast and he repeatedly complained about the growing trade deficit and the lack of reciprocity in bilateral investments.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, at the EU level Renzi stood out as one of the most vocal opponents to the granting of market economy status to China.<sup>32</sup> None of this prevented him from having a private meeting with representatives of major Chinese companies that had already invested heavily in Italy on the margins of the 2016 Hangzhou G20 summit.<sup>33</sup> Renzi met with representatives from Suning (which had bought the Milan-based football team Inter), China National Chemical (which had acquired Pirelli), Bank of China (which had opened its first physical branch in Italy in 2011) and the State Grid Corporation of China: In 2015, Italy was among

---

29 'Monti: La Cina partner strategico', in *Tg1*, 31 March 2012, <http://www.tg1.rai.it/dl/tg1/2010/articoli/ContentItem-b14c95be-705f-4e44-bac2-9d1952b328ca.html>.

30 Giovanni B. Andornino, 'Le relazioni Italia-Cina: verso il rilancio del partenariato', in *OrizzonteCina*, Vol. 6, No. 1, (gennaio-febbraio 2015), p. 6–10, <https://www.twai.it/?p=1216>.

31 Alessandro Barbera, 'Renzi in Cina: dobbiamo aprirci di più', in *La Stampa*, 11 June 2014, <https://www.lastampa.it/esteri/2014/06/11/news/renzi-in-cina-dobbiamo-aprirci-di-piu-1.35743135>.

32 Francesca Ghiretti, 'Italy and the Comprehensive Agreement on Investments: Disappointment Over the Process', in *Asia Europe Journal*, 25 July 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-021-00630-6>.

33 'Renzi in Cina incontra presidente Xi, "le relazioni si rafforzano"', in *AGI*, 3 September 2016, [https://www.agi.it/politica/primo\\_giorno\\_di\\_renzi\\_in\\_cina\\_incontro\\_con\\_xi\\_imprenditori\\_e\\_studenti-1049092/news/2016-09-03](https://www.agi.it/politica/primo_giorno_di_renzi_in_cina_incontro_con_xi_imprenditori_e_studenti-1049092/news/2016-09-03).

the seventeen EU member states (alongside the United Kingdom, France and Germany) that joined as founding members the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which was meant to lend financial support to projects related to the Belt and Road Initiative.<sup>34</sup>

The political investment made by Prime Minister Renzi survived his term in office. In February 2017, the Italian president of the republic, Sergio Mattarella (2015–present), visited China, and a few months later then Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni (2017–18) – Renzi’s successor to the PD leadership – attended the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing, the only leader of a G7 country participating in the event.<sup>35</sup>

These high-level political initiatives show that cooperation in the fields covered by the MoU was set up largely before the signing of the MoU itself in March 2019. In this regard, the Italian case validates the argument that the BRI is largely a ‘rebranding’ tactic for projects that predate the 2013 launch of the initiative and that can be traced back to the ‘Go out policy’ of 1999, through which Chinese firms were encouraged to invest abroad.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, Italy’s pursuit of deeper trade and investment relations with the PRC was a decade-long effort that was very much in line with a general trend in Europe and elsewhere to get economically closer to the fastest-growing large country in the world.<sup>37</sup> The issue is whether the signing of a document in support of a controversial political initiative such as the BRI has indeed increased Italy’s vulnerability to potential malpractices by China’s government and/or corporations or not.

### 3. Book structure

To deeply understand the implications of the MoU between Italy and the People’s Republic of China, five fields of cooperation are analysed, namely infrastructures—specifically ports—, media, finance, research in science and

---

34 Giuseppe Gabusi, ‘Global Standards in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank: The Contribution of the European Members’, in *Global Policy*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (November 2019), p. 631–638.

35 Nicola Casarini, ‘Rome-Beijing: Changing the Game’, cit.

36 Juliet Lu and Erik Myxter-Iino, ‘Beyond Competition: Why the BRI and the B3W Can’t and Shouldn’t be Considered Rivals’, in *Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Publications*, 14 October 2021, <https://rosalux.nyc/?p=14763>.

37 Giulio Pugliese, Francesca Ghiretti and Aurelio Insisa, ‘Italy’s embrace of the Belt and Road Initiative: populist foreign policy and political marketing’, in *International Affairs*, Vol. 98, No. 3 (May 2022), p. 1033–1051, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiac039>.

technology, and higher education including academia. As mentioned above, the MoU is a non-binding document merely outlining a framework for cooperation in various areas. The research has focused specifically on these five fields, because they are crucial areas of cooperation both in terms of China's domestic politics as well as Italy–China relations. In addition, all of them are mentioned in the Sino–Italian MoU in support of the BRI (Paragraph II, Areas of Cooperation). The memorandum includes specific sections on transport, logistics and infrastructure as well as finance – while the fields of science, education and media go under ‘people-to-people connectivity’.

To gauge the impact of the MoU in concrete terms, the agreements signed in the context of the MoU are situated in the larger context of China–Italy cooperation in the previous years, that is before 2019.

The first chapter focuses on ports and maritime infrastructures, which are some core elements of the China-led Initiative (BRI). Two commercial agreements that accompanied the MoU involved the ports of Genoa and Trieste and the state-owned enterprise China Communications Construction Company (CCCC). These agreements were among the most discussed in the debate around the MoU, as there was a general concern that CCCC would eventually obtain a controlling share of the ports, not unlike that recently secured by the China Ocean Shipping Company (COSCO) with Greece's Port of Piraeus. However, as the in-depth research shows, existing legal constraints, an open international and national debate, and the vague nature of the agreements have so far kept these fears from materializing.

The following chapter deals with financial cooperation, an essential element to boost bilateral economic ties, providing firms with more effective instruments to operate in foreign markets. It should come as no surprise, then, that financial cooperation was a pillar of the MoU, and agreements in this sector were signed in March 2019. However, the analysis of BRI-related commercial agreements between Italian financial institutions and their Chinese counterparts shows that they have not resulted in any ground-breaking development. These agreements have apparently just added a ‘BRI’ badge to pre-existing trends of collaboration. The BRI-related MoUs in the field of financial cooperation do not, for the time being at least, justify concerns that China may gain an economic foothold in Italy large enough to win it much political influence.

The third chapter is concerned with a field that is often overlooked in the mainstream debate on China, that is China's presence in foreign media. In recent years, Beijing has pushed its national media outlets to ‘go global’ with the aim of improving China's image abroad. In the occasion of the signing of the MoU in March 2019, two of the most important Italian media outlets, Rai

and Ansa, signed bilateral agreements with China Media Group (CMG), China's conglomerate of state radio and television broadcasters, and Xinhua, the PRC's state-run press agency, respectively. Despite they have not had a deep impact on Italians' perception of China. These deals fit in a broader picture of an Italian media environment that is being increasingly targeted by Chinese media. It must be acknowledged that the impact that such an effort has had on the Italian public opinion has been very limited so far and the Italian media landscape keeps offering free and varied information. However, the way in which the cooperation between Italian media and Chinese counterparts has developed raise some concerns as they may be vehicles of potential disinformation.

The fourth chapter delves into China–Italy cooperation in higher education and research. China has invested considerable sums to promote cooperation and exchanges with the Italian academy, including through the establishment of a dozen Confucius Institutes and a number of Confucius Classrooms. In other EU countries and in the US, the Confucius Institutes and Confucius Classrooms over the political interference they may exert in the host country. However, in Italy the debate has been more narrowly focused. As the research shows, while cooperation in higher education and research is a positive aspect of the broader Italy–China relationship as it contributes to the advancement of the scientific and cultural environment in both countries, at the same time it has also posed inevitable risks of self-censorship and kowtowing to Chinese wishes.

Tightly bound to the previous chapter, the following one is concerned with Italy–China cooperation in the research on science and technology. Like many other developed countries, Italy has played a role in contributing to China's growth as a science and technology (S&T) power. Scientific cooperation was included in the MoU of March 2019. The study of the agreements in this field will demonstrate that most S&T bilateral collaborations are decade-long and predate the MoU; however, the MoU of March 2019 has reinforced the process of centralisation of S&T collaborations as well as a public debate that has grown to include matters regarding 5G technology and public procurement involving Chinese technology.

## References

- Agatha Kratz, Max J. Zenglein and Gregor Sebastian, 'Chinese FDI in Europe: 2020 Update', in *MERICs Reports*, June 2021, <https://merics.org/en/report/chinese-fdi-europe-2020-update>
- Agatha Kratz, Max J. Zenglein and Gregor Sebastian, 'Chinese FDI in Europe: 2021 Update', in *MERICs Reports*, April 2022, <https://merics.org/en/report/chinese-fdi-europe-2021-update>



- Alessandro Barbera, 'Renzi in Cina: dobbiamo aprirci di più', in *La Stampa*, 11 June 2014, <https://www.lastampa.it/esteri/2014/06/11/news/renzi-in-cina-dobbiamo-aprirci-di-piu-1.35743135>
- Alexandra Brzozowski and Jorge Valero, "'Don't Be Naive with China', EU Leaders Tell Italy", in *Euractiv*, 22 March 2019, <https://www.euractiv.com/?p=1325630>
- Ben Westcott, 'EU Leader Juncker Criticizes Uneven Relations with China Days after Xi Visit', in *CNN*, 2 April 2019, <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/04/02/asia/juncker-xi-eu-china-intl>
- Dario Cristiani, 'Italy Joins the Belt and Road Initiative: Context, Interests, and Drivers', in *China Brief*, Vol. 19, No. 8 (April 2019), <https://jamestown.org/?p=82758>
- Federico Manfredi Firmian, 'Italy, Like Any EU Member State, Has a Right to Pursue Bilateral Agreements', in *Financial Times*, 25 March 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/cbcdc214-49ab-11e9-bbc9-6917dce3dc62>
- Francesca Ghiretti, 'Italy and the Comprehensive Agreement on Investments: Disappointment Over the Process', in *Asia Europe Journal*, 25 July 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-021-00630-6>
- Gerardo Fortuna and Samuel Stolton, 'Leaked Memo Reveals China's Detailed Plans in Italy', in *Euractiv*, 8 March 2019 (updated 26 September 2022), <https://www.euractiv.com/?p=1320628>
- Giorgio Prodi, 'I rapporti economici Italia-Cina', in Giovanni B. Andornino (ed.), *Prospettive di un paese in trasformazione*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2021, p. 107–123
- Giovanna De Maio, 'Playing with Fire: Italy, China, and Europe', in *Brookings Reports*, May 2020, <https://brook.gs/2LyMwtc>
- Giovanni B. Andornino, 'The Political Economy of Italy's Relations with China', in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 47, No. 2 (June 2012), p. 87–101
- Giovanni B. Andornino, 'Le relazioni Italia-Cina: verso il rilancio del partenariato', in *OrizzonteCina*, Vol. 6, No. 1, (gennaio-febbraio 2015), p. 6–10, <https://www.twai.it/?p=1216>
- Giulio Pugliese, 'Italy and China: Much Ado about an MoU', in *East Asian Policy*, Vol. 12, No. 4 (April/June 2021), p. 73–89
- Giulio Pugliese, Francesca Ghiretti and Aurelio Insisa, 'Italy's embrace of the Belt and Road Initiative: populist foreign policy and political marketing', in *International Affairs*, Vol. 98, No. 3 (May 2022), p. 1033–1051, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iia039>
- Giuseppe Gabusi and Giorgio Prodi, "'Reality check": le relazioni bilaterali Italia-Cina in ambito economico dagli anni Settanta alle "nuove Vie della Seta"', in

- OrizzonteCina*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2020), p. 12–25, <https://doi.org/10.13135/2280-8035/5395>
- Giuseppe Gabusi, 'Global Standards in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank: The Contribution of the European Members', in *Global Policy*, Vol. 10, No. 4 (November 2019), p. 631–638
- Hannah Roberts, 'US Warning to Italy: You're being Exploited by China', in *Politico*, 30 September 2020, <https://www.politico.eu/?p=1469788>
- Italian Ministry of Economy and Finance, *I rapporti tra Italia e Cina*, 9 July 2019, <https://www.mef.gov.it/focus/I-rapporti-tra-Italia-e-Cina>
- Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, *Osservatorio economico. Statistiche relative all'import/export di merci dell'Italia*, last updated on 17 November 2022, <https://www.infomercatiesteri.it/osservatorio-economico-intercambio-commerciale-italiano-mondo.php>
- Jan Wolfe, 'U.S. Official Suggests Italy Avoid China's Belt and Road Plan', in *Reuters*, 9 March 2019, <https://reut.rs/2CboaSf>
- Jason Horowitz, 'A Forgotten Italian Port Could Become a Chinese Gateway to Europe', in *The New York Times*, 18 March 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/18/world/europe/italy-trieste-china-belt-road.html>
- Juliet Lu and Erik Myxter-Iino, 'Beyond Competition: Why the BRI and the B3W Can't and Shouldn't be Considered Rivals', in *Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Publications*, 14 October 2021, <https://rosalux.nyc/?p=14763>
- Maaïke Okano-Heijmans and Tomoki Kamo, 'Engaging but Not Endorsing China's Belt and Road Initiative', in *Clingendael Policy Briefs*, May 2019, <https://www.clingendael.org/node/10262>
- Natasha Turak, 'Italy Joining China's Belt and Road Project Is "Geopolitically Unwise," Former Prime Minister Says', in *CNBC*, 25 March 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/03/25/italy-joining-chinas-belt-and-road-project-is-unwise-former-pm.html>
- Nicola Casarini, 'Rome-Beijing: Changing the Game. Italy's Embrace of China's Connectivity Project, Implications for the EU and the US', in *IAI Papers*, No. 19|05 (March 2019), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/10105>
- Philip Giurlando, 'Populist Foreign Policy: The Case of Italy', in *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, Vol. 27, No. 9 (2021), p. 251–267
- Simone Dossi, 'Italy-China Relations and the Belt and Road Initiative: The Need for a Long-Term Vision', in *Italian Political Science*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (May 2020), p. 60–76, <https://italianpoliticalscience.com/index.php/ips/article/view/126>