

Italy's embrace of the Belt and Road Initiative: populist foreign policy and political marketing

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Italy and China in 2018–19: a disruptive populist foreign policy?

Western Europe's first all-populist parliamentary coalition, between Italy's Movimento 5 Stelle (Five Star Movement, M5S) and the Lega per Salvini Premier (LSP, but commonly known as Lega), constitutes a fertile testing ground for scholarly assumptions on the impact of populist foreign policy as an inherently disruptive process. In fact, scholars have argued that, once in power, populist leaders shape their foreign policies according to issues critical to the context-specific configuration of 'the people' they claim to represent, out of either shrewd political calculation, ideological commitment or a combination of the two.¹ The result of this drive to disrupt is the emergence of two types of friction-inducing dynamics. The first is the bureaucratic tug of war between populists in power, who see themselves as 'authorized to act unilaterally and make decisions without meaningful institutional consultation or mediations',² and institutional actors embedded in the state machine who choose to preserve the status quo. In this contest, populist leaders may achieve a successful systemic transformation,³ or a disarticulation of the traditional bureaucratic actors involved in foreign policy-making.⁴ Wider bureaucratic resistance and institutional resilience, however, can frustrate or even defuse the populist rupture in foreign policy—at least in the short term.⁵ In other cases, the populist rupture, while packaged in the usual anti-pluralist and anti-elite frames, may simply result in a 'style over substance'

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¹ Bertjan Verbeek and Andrej Zaslove, 'Populism and foreign policy', in Cristóbal Rovira Kaltwasser, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo and Pierre Ostiguy, eds, *The Oxford handbook of populism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 489–514; Erin K. Jenne, 'Populism, nationalism and revisionist foreign policy', *International Affairs* 97: 2, 2021, pp. 323–43.

² Nadia Urbinati, 'Political theory of populism', *Annual Review of Political Science*, vol. 22, 2019, p. 120.

³ Emidio Diodato and Federico Niglia, *Berlusconi 'the diplomat': populism and foreign policy in Italy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

⁴ Daniel W. Drezner, 'Present at the destruction: the Trump administration and the foreign policy bureaucracy', *Journal of Politics* 81: 2, 2019, pp. 723–30; Daniel W. Drezner, 'Immature leadership: Donald Trump and the American presidency', *International Affairs* 96: 2, 2020, pp. 383–400.

⁵ Georg Löfflmann, 'America First and the populist impact on US foreign policy', *Survival* 61: 6, 2019, pp. 115–38.

makeover, at least in the case of countries facing global governance issues without being enveloped in processes of regional integration.⁶

The second friction-inducing dynamic occurs in the external political arena. Populists in power aim to increase their ‘freedom of action by playing alternative suppliers of international club and private goods against one another’, but also to manifest a ‘rhetorical aspiration’ towards a new multipolar international order as an alternative to mainstream liberal rights and values.⁷ For this reason, populist foreign policy may hasten the fraying of post-Cold War alignments and the contestation of rules-based international and supranational architectures. This has been the case with both the left-wing and right-wing populist executives in the EU, which, throughout the 2010s, chose Russia and China as privileged interlocutors.⁸

These friction-inducing dynamics appeared to be also at play in the foreign policy of Italy’s Yellow–Green government (the M5S–Lega coalition). Recent research has pointed out that the confrontational stance Rome assumed against EU institutions and key member states of the Union on budgetary matters and migration policies resulted in a mostly rhetorical disruption. Independent and technocratic actors within the government, the President of the Republic Sergio Mattarella, and the international constraints posed by the web of supranational institutions and alliances in which the country is embedded, each contributed to soften the impact of a populist rupture that would have fundamentally changed Italy’s position in international politics.⁹ Yet the most notable foreign policy decision of the Yellow–Green government, the signature of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for bilateral cooperation under China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in March 2019—the first and only MoU of its kind between Beijing and a G7 member state—does not seem to fit with these scholarly accounts.¹⁰

⁶ Johannes Plagemann and Sandra Destradi, ‘Populism and foreign policy: the case of India’, *Foreign Policy Analysis* 15: 2, 2019, pp. 283–301; Ian Hall, *Modi and the reinvention of Indian foreign policy* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2019); Dorit Geva and Felipe G. Santos, ‘Europe’s far-right educational projects and their vision for the international order’, *International Affairs* 97: 5, 2021, pp. 1395–414; Karin Aggestam and Jacqui True, ‘Political leadership and gendered multilevel games in foreign policy’, *International Affairs* 97: 2, 2021, pp. 385–404.

⁷ Alexander Cooley and Daniel Nexon, ‘Why populists want a multipolar world’, *Foreign Policy*, 25 April 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/25/populists-multipolar-world-russia-china/>. (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 18 Feb. 2022.) See also Feliciano de Sá Guimarães and Irma de Oliveira e Silva, ‘Far-right populism and foreign policy identity: Jair Bolsonaro’s ultra-conservatism and the new politics of alignment’, *International Affairs* 97: 2, 2021, pp. 345–63; Owen Worth, ‘Reasserting hegemonic masculinity: women’s leadership within the far right’, *International Affairs* 97: 5, 2021, pp. 503–21.

⁸ Aristotle Tziampiris, ‘Foreign policy against austerity: Syriza’s multifaceted experiment’, in Spyridon Litsas and Aristotle Tziampiris, eds, *Foreign policy against austerity: Greece’s return to normality?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 261–92; Mihai Varga and Aron Buzogány, ‘The foreign policy of populists in power: contesting liberalism in Poland and Hungary’, *Geopolitics*, publ. online March 2020, doi: 10.1080/14650045.2020.1734564; Wade Jacoby and Umut Korkut, ‘Vulnerability and economic re-orientation: rhetoric and in reality in Hungary’s “Chinese Opening”’, *East European Politics and Societies* 20: 10, 2015, pp. 1–23; Jenne, ‘Populism, nationalism and revisionist foreign policy’.

⁹ Philip Giurlando, ‘Populist foreign policy: the case of Italy’, *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, publ. online Nov. 2020, doi: 10.1080/11926422.2020.1819357; Fabrizio Cotichia, ‘A sovereignist revolution? Italy’s foreign policy under the “Yellow–Green” government’, *Comparative European Politics* 19: 6, 2021, pp. 739–59.

¹⁰ Italian Government, ‘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 Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st century Maritime Silk Road Initiative’, March 2019, https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/Memorandum_Italia-Cina_EN.pdf.

The MoU has been considered a tangible departure from the country's traditional alignments in international politics.¹¹ Moreover, it appears to contradict analyses that emphasize the constraining power of institutional and status quo actors *vis-à-vis* their populist counterparts in the executive. For Dossi, the MoU was the result of 'uncoordinated initiatives' by government actors close to Beijing, in particular the minister of economics and finance Giovanni Tria, and the under-secretary of the Ministry of Economic Development Michele Geraci, which were enabled by 'substantial divergences' between a pro-Beijing M5S and a more sceptical Lega.¹² Conversely, Giurlando, downplaying differences on China policy between the two coalition partners, claims that the MoU was the result of a soft balancing strategy targeting Brussels, Berlin and Paris—another case of populists in power attempting to create leverage in negotiations by engaging with alternative suppliers of international club and private goods.¹³ Casarini, meanwhile, highlights the populist coalition's 'Italy First' agenda, going against the mounting China-sceptic tide sweeping across Europe,¹⁴ while Spinosa presents the Italy–China 'deal' as a typical example of populism that successfully hijacked conventional decision-making mechanisms.¹⁵ In the face of mounting US–China strategic competition, the role played by European and other 'like-minded' allies may indeed tip the balance in favour of one or the other camp.¹⁶

This article provides a radically different interpretation of the MoU and of Rome's wider engagement with Beijing between 2018 and 2019. It shows how a Yellow–Green 'foreign policy executive' (FPE) acted not only (a) in close coordination with the country's bureaucratic apparatus, but also (b) in broad *continuity* with earlier Italian governments and (c) in accordance with the EU's rethink on China. It does so by making extensive use of a variety of primary sources, including official documentation and as many as 60 semi-structured elite interviews composed around a core set of questions. These were supplemented by ad hoc questions drawing on the particular expertise and role of the interviewee, while 'grand tour' questions facilitated the emergence of elements unknown by the interviewer.¹⁷ The decision to rely on a qualitative and subjective method of data collection was dictated by the nature of the research question itself. The information the research sought required access to a pool of information that would help the authors

¹¹ Lorenzo Cladi and Andrea Locatelli, 'Explaining Italian foreign policy adjustment after Brexit: a neoclassical realist account', *Journal of European Integration*, publ. online July 2020, doi: 10.1080/07036337.2020.1800676.

¹² Simone Dossi, 'Italy–China relations and the Belt and Road Initiative: the need for a long-term vision', *Italian Political Science* 15: 1, 2020, pp. 60–76.

¹³ Giurlando, 'Populist foreign policy'.

¹⁴ Nicola Casarini, *Rome–Beijing: changing the game—Italy's embrace of China's connectivity project, implications for the EU and the US* (Rome: Istituto Affari Internazionali [IAI], 2019), <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaip1905.pdf>.

¹⁵ Luca Spinosa, *Populism and foreign policy: insights from the Italian policy towards China*, MA diss., Fudan University, 2020, https://www.china-files.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/19210170123_SpinosaLuca_Thesis.pdf.

¹⁶ Sebastian Biba, 'Germany's relations with the United States and China from a strategic triangle perspective', *International Affairs* 97: 6, 2021, pp. 1905–24; Hugo Meijer and Luis Simón, 'Covert balancing: Great Powers, secondary states and US balancing strategies against China', *International Affairs* 97: 2, 2021, pp. 463–81.

¹⁷ Beth L. Leech, Frank R. Baumgartner, Jeffrey M. Berry, Marie Hojnacki and David C. Kimball, 'Lessons from the "lobbying and policy change" project', in Layna Mosley, ed., *Interview research in political science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), pp. 209–24, pp. 215–16.

understand the deep and unpublicized underlying elements of a foreign policy decision. Well-known problems associated with interviewing as a main method of data collection, such as the risk of eliciting highly subjective and inexact answers, have been mitigated by posing the same questions to a wide range of interviewees, and by multiple interviews with the same interviewee.¹⁸

The article's findings align with Monteleone's work, according to which the populist coalition government's voting behaviour at the UN General Assembly testified to overall consistency with Italy's foreign policy line under the previous Euro-Atlanticist governments of Matteo Renzi (2014–16) and Paolo Gentiloni (2016–18).¹⁹ Moreover, earlier Italian governments presided over by Silvio Berlusconi arguably witnessed more foreign policy disruptions. Attempts to 'renationalize' Italy's foreign policy, and the media-tycoon-turned-premier's own 'appetite for bilateral "special relationship[s]" outside the traditional European and Atlantic diplomatic perimeter,²⁰ led to substantial ruptures with major EU partners, in contrast with the Yellow-Green under-the-radar continuity with the consensus emerging from the main European chancelleries. Yet, as Diodato and Niglia argue, Berlusconi's own variety of populism never embraced the 'instinctive and post-functional Euroscepticism' of other populist leaders on the continent,²¹ in stark contrast with the rhetoric of the Yellow-Green government.

Aside from its important empirical findings, this article presents a novel explanation of the Yellow-Green government's engagement with China as a case of foreign policy as political marketing. From this perspective, the symbolic rupture of the MoU can be seen as the result of a conscious choice rooted in a policy-as-product logic. This reading is supported by the gradual expansion of the conceptual scope of political marketing from a concept originally associated with electioneering to a wider approach that 'seeks to facilitate political exchanges of value through interactions', not just at the ballot box and in parliament, but also in the implementation of policies, within what scholars in the field call the 'governmental market'.²² In short, a 'political marketing' reading suggests that the Yellow-Green government made use of the BRI brand to repackage the engagement with China pursued by its predecessors with the aim of signalling Italy's supposedly new-found freedom of action to their constituencies and the wider Italian electorate. The MoU was a case of populist grandstanding, not one of grand strategy and international realignments.

The implications of this article's findings for the research agenda on populist foreign policy are multiple. First, it presents a previously undetected dynamic:

¹⁸ Erik Bleich and Robert Pekkanen, 'How to report interview data', in Mosley, ed., *Interview research in political science*, pp. 84–105; Brian C. Rathbun, 'Interviewing and qualitative field methods: pragmatism and practicalities', in Janet M. Box-Steffensmeier, Henry E. Brady and David Collier, eds, *The Oxford handbook of political methodology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 685–701.

¹⁹ Carla Monteleone, 'Foreign policy and de-Europeanization under the M5S-League government: exploring the Italian behavior in the UN General Assembly', *Journal of European Integration* 43: 5, 2021, pp. 551–67.

²⁰ Elisabetta Brighi, *Foreign policy, domestic politics and international relations: the case of Italy* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013).

²¹ Diodato and Niglia, *Berlusconi 'the diplomat'*, p. 179.

²² Robert P. Ormrod, Stephan C. Henneberg and Nicholas J. O'Shaughnessy, *Political marketing: theories and concepts* (London: Sage, 2013), p. 18.

concerted continuity under the guise of populist rupture within an EU member state. Second, by explaining this dynamic as the result of the commodification of populist showmanship, the article presents a case of populist foreign policy that can be fully ascribed to the politico-strategic approach to populism, thus filling an important gap in the literature.²³ In contrast with the ideational approach consistently used in the study of European populists in power, which looks at the phenomenon as a 'thin-centred set of ideas' built upon a moralistic distinction between 'the pure people' and 'the elites' to which left-wing and right-wing 'host ideologies' are attached,²⁴ the politico-strategic approach conceives of populism as an opportunistic playbook designed to gain and maintain power.²⁵

In essence, then, this article tackles the broader dimensions of and goals connected to the signature of the Italy–China BRI MoU and major ancillary deals to gauge how Yellow–Green populism affected foreign policy outcomes. Methodologically, we adopt 'explaining-outcome process tracing' for research in which 'ambitions are more case-centric than theory-oriented';²⁶ while the heuristic approach comes close to a historical narrative, our process tracing aims to conceptualize and operationalize populist ruptures in foreign policy, or lack thereof, and thereby to 'extract generalities from those unique sequences of events'.²⁷

The first section contests the characterization that Italian foreign policy was appropriated by disruptive small group dynamics, as posited by standard conceptualizations of populism and foreign policy. The second section provides a panoramic perspective of Rome's earlier China overtures under the Renzi and Gentiloni governments, establishing that the populist government's overtures—specifically the attraction of Chinese investment into Italy, with particular attention to the upgrading of the ports of Genoa and Trieste—were no revolution, but rather in line with its predecessors' policy course. These first two sections thus dispel facile accounts of the impact of populism in steering the Italian ship of state into uncharted waters; as a result, our in-depth analysis argues against standard accounts in the foreign policy analysis literature on Italy. Finally, the third section provides a closer look at the language of and the substance behind the BRI memorandum, emphasizing that Italy's overtures to Beijing were not antithetical to the EU's sterner outlook on China. Throughout the sections, the article stresses the populist government's emphasis on its overtures as rupture to identify instances where political marketing did indeed act as a key intervening variable that must be considered when studying populist foreign policy outputs, in Italy and elsewhere.

²³ Sandra Destradi, David Cadier and Johannes Plagemann, 'Populism and foreign policy: a research agenda', *Comparative European Politics* 19: 6, 2021, pp. 663–82.

²⁴ See Cas Mudde, 'Populism: an ideational approach', in Kaltwasser et al., eds, *The Oxford handbook of populism*, pp. 45–70.

²⁵ Kurt Weyland, 'Clarifying a contested concept: populism in the study of Latin American politics', *Comparative Politics* 34: 1, 2001, pp. 1–22.

²⁶ Derek Beach and Rasmus Brun Pedersen, *Process tracing methods: foundations and guidelines* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), p. 3.

²⁷ John Lewis Gaddis, 'History, theory, and common ground', *International Security* 22: 1, 1997, pp. 75–85.

Italy's embrace of the BRI: bureaucratic gatekeepers and political marketing calculations

The M5S–Lega coalition formed a government led by Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte in June 2018. The glue uniting the two parties was a widespread disaffection among their respective electorates with the political and socio-economic state of affairs in Italy and more widely: nationalist and sovereigntist rhetoric aside, both parties claimed to represent the ‘people as underdogs’ against domestic and international establishments. The discontent with the EU was also aimed at Italy’s political class, which was understood as an enabler, if not a passive recipient, of decisions taken elsewhere, on topics ranging from illegal migration to the financial constraints imposed by the eurozone’s fiscal compact during the Great Recession. The government’s budget was the thorniest issue the newly born government faced. The populist coalition unveiled a set of ambitious expansionary fiscal reforms that would have cemented public support. While the M5S pushed for a citizens’ income scheme, both parties initially aimed at scrapping the ambitious, if painful, pension reform devised by the technocratic government led by Mario Monti (2011–13). The coalition thus needed to reassure the markets while wresting major fiscal expenditure from the European Commission in a protracted tug of war.²⁸ With domestic audiences in mind, prominent actors from the Conte government emphasized the coalition’s Eurosceptic posturing.²⁹ In this tense context—one that also revolved around an additional tug of war on migration—the M5S–Lega executive wished to sideline a European external constraint by shoring up relations with major external players—notably with the US Trump administration, Russia and China. Such overtures were also intended for domestic political consumption, to avoid giving the impression of a government isolated in international politics.

Rome faced immediate pressure, closely linked to the need of both M5S and the Lega to preserve (or indeed boost) their political fortunes: it had to placate international investors during its tug of war with the EU over the drafting of its annual budget. The government feared that the European Central Bank might put an end to its ultra-expansionary monetary policy—as indicated by the partial halting of its quantitative easing programme in 2018–19. In that context, Italy’s political engagement of governments in Washington, Moscow and Beijing—all of which were adopting a strong *dirigiste* outlook—was also aimed at shoring up the sale of Italian debt among major sovereign wealth funds and central banks. As the risks of holding Italian bonds rose owing to the potential ending of quantitative easing, Finance Minister Giovanni Tria immediately looked to investments from China and the United States as quick solutions to restore market confidence.³⁰

²⁸ Erik Jones, ‘Italy’s dangerous budget showdown with Europe’, *Foreign Affairs*, 2 Nov. 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/italy/2018-11-02/italys-dangerous-budget-showdown-europe>.

²⁹ Jacopo Barigazzi, ‘5 fights between France and Italy’, *Politico*, 8 Feb. 2019, <https://www.politico.eu/article/5-fights-between-france-and-italy-yellow-jackets-luigi-di-maio-emmanuel-macron/>.

³⁰ Federico Fubini, ‘Debito pubblico, obiettivo Cina: La strategia di Tria per i Btp e contro il pressing di Lega e M5S’, *Corriere della Sera*, 16 July 2018, https://www.corriere.it/economia/18_luglio_16/debito-pubblico-obiettivo-cina-strategia-tria-btp-contro-pressing-lega-m5s-e313eb62-8933-11e8-b6ba-4bfe4ae0a3.shtml.

Tria's 2018 visit to China, the first time a newly appointed Italian finance minister had selected that country as a first diplomatic destination, included meetings with officials from the People's Bank of China, and participation in the Boao Forum for Asia. The diplomatic tour aptly exemplifies the Yellow–Green government's aim of attracting Chinese capital to reassure financial markets.³¹

Additional short-term political calculations were tightly knit with Italy's decision to deepen its engagement with China. The coalition government needed to showcase success in multiple areas to win over the electorate, thus confirming the emphasis assigned to political marketing dynamics. While the head of the Lega, Matteo Salvini, stressed the migration agenda, the head of M5S, Luigi di Maio, who also served as minister of economic development, insisted on new welfare initiatives at home, and on the expansion of Italian trade and of inbound foreign direct investment (FDI). The economic benefits of a symbolic engagement with China were understood as low-hanging fruit in line with Di Maio's priorities, to the extent that Italian exports and FDI deals remained his priority in his new capacity as minister of foreign affairs under the second Conte and, to a lesser extent, Draghi governments.³² In line with our political marketing argument, the Italy–China BRI MoU preceded the May 2019 European Parliament election, which was understood as a first testing ground for M5S and the Lega.³³ Domestic political factors facilitated the Yellow–Green government's overtures towards China. Until the pandemic caused an anti-China backlash in 2020, Italian public opinion towards Beijing was relatively positive.³⁴ Direct testimonies also suggest that the September 2018 Provisional Agreement between the Holy See and the People's Republic of China on the appointment of bishops, evidence of the Vatican's willingness to engage with the Xi regime, provided further impetus and legitimation for the Italian government's overtures.³⁵

Assisted by Under-Secretary Michele Geraci, an academic who taught business and economics in foreign universities based in China and was close to the Lega leadership, Di Maio took control of the China dossier.³⁶ Geraci's and Di Maio's scant political experience and inadequate professional background, lacking in expertise on the management of public and international affairs, seemed to fit well with the narrative of up-and-coming populist decision-makers hijacking Italy's bureaucratic machine. Experts and journalists implied that Rome's populist FPE was unconventional, consisting of obscure figures in the Ministry of Economic Development rather than the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International

³¹ Federico Fubini, 'Tria prepara la missione Cina—Lo scambio tra l'acquisto del debito pubblico e le rotte verso l'Italia', *Corriere della Sera*, 14 Aug. 2018, https://www.corriere.it/economia/18_agosto_14/tria-prepara-missione-cina-6752801e-9f28-11e8-85a1-8239add4b598.shtml.

³² Interview with adviser to Foreign Minister Luigi di Maio, Rome, June 2021.

³³ Interview with Italian diplomats, Rome, April 2019 and Dec. 2019.

³⁴ Davide Angelucci, Gianluca Piccolino, Pierangelo Isernia, Silvia Colombo, Andrea Dessì and Ettore Greco, *Gli italiani e la politica estera 2021* (Rome: IAI, Nov. 2021), <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/gli-italiani-e-la-politica-estera-2021>.

³⁵ Interviews with east Asian and Italian diplomats based in Rome, April 2019, Dec. 2019, May 2021.

³⁶ Andrea Carli, 'Chi è Geraci, il sottosegretario in prima linea nella partita per la via della seta cinese', *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 7 March 2019, <https://www.ilsol24ore.com/art/chi-e-geraci-sottosegretario-prima-linea-partita-la-via-seta-cinese--AB93LjbB>.

Cooperation (MAECI), which was headed by a bland technocrat.³⁷ In fact, it was the desire of Italy's new FPE to claim results and display them to the electorate, and to present the BRI MoU as evidence and as a political legacy, that fed into sensationalist analyses that depicted them—especially Geraci—as the only players who mattered. The coalition's intention to make Italy the first G7 country to recognize China's connectivity vision was thus also aimed at domestic political marketing; but this became a double-edged sword as engagement with China came under greater scrutiny, as well as arousing international and, over time, domestic opposition.

Thus, Xi's grandiose state visit, the unveiling of bilateral agreements worth €2.5 billion, and the promise of more investments as well as greater exposure to Chinese markets, were aimed at Italian voters. While the Lega leadership was split over the merits of the MoU, the coalition ultimately supported it for reasons of domestic political expediency.³⁸ After all, the regions that attracted the highest value of Chinese investments and that exported most to the People's Republic—accounting for 81 per cent of all Italian exports to China—were in northern Italy, where Lega voters are concentrated.³⁹ Increasing Italian exports to China was a prominent item on the government's political agenda, but these calculations were shared with the state apparatus. To be sure, the populist FPE reasoned that a symbolic political agreement with an economy controlled by a Leninist party-state would favour Italy's position in the Chinese market *vis-à-vis* its European competitors, as testified by Geraci.⁴⁰ Economic data suggest that Italy lags behind France and Germany in the ability to leverage highly concentrated market players, such as the French-led Airbus consortium and France's luxury conglomerates, as well as Germany's automotive, machinery and food and beverage industries.⁴¹ Direct testimonies from Italian diplomats stressed this factor as the main rationale behind the MoU, which was also viewed as an international marketing operation *before* the advent of the populist coalition.⁴²

Early confirmation that the diplomatic apparatus had been eyeing up the trade opportunities in China, as well as cooperation with Chinese economic actors in developing countries and emerging economies, is provided by testimonies from MAECI's then director-general for global affairs, and the ministry's current secretary-general, back in 2017.⁴³ In short, Italy's bureaucratic machine was well

³⁷ Giulia Pompili, 'Chi mise la Cina al governo', *Il Foglio*, 7 March 2019, <https://www.ilfoglio.it/esteri/2019/03/07/news/chi-mise-la-cina-al-governo-241742/>; Clive Hamilton and Mareike Ohlberg, *Hidden hand: exposing how the Chinese Communist Party is reshaping the world* (London: Hardie Grant, 2020), pp. 58–60.

³⁸ Carmelo Lopapa, 'Via della seta, Salvini fa l'americano: "Non saremo colonia di Xi, così salta tutto"', *La Repubblica*, 14 March 2019, https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2019/03/14/news/via_della_seta_salvini_fa_l_americano_non_saremo_colonia_di_xi_cosi_salta_tutto_-300988453/.

³⁹ Filippo Fasulo, *11° rapporto annuale Centro Studi Fondazione Italia-Cina: scenari e prospettive per le imprese* (Milan, 2020), pp. 126–7, <https://www.fondazioneitaliacina.it/m/cesif/rapporto-annuale/2020/>.

⁴⁰ Michele Geraci, 'Italy will secure its place on the New Silk Road', *Financial Times*, 21 March 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/137cbab8-4b21-11e9-bde6-79eaea5acb64>.

⁴¹ Giorgio Prodi, 'I rapporti economici Italia-Cina', in Giovanni B. Andornino, ed., *Cina: Prospettive di un paese in trasformazione* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2021), pp. 107–26.

⁴² Interviews with Italian diplomats, Rome, Jan.–Feb. 2020, May–June 2021; Washington DC, Feb. 2020.

⁴³ Massimo Gaiani, 'La connettività Europa-Asia come opportunità per lo sviluppo sostenibile dei territori nelle regioni attraversate dalle nuove vie della seta', in Matteo Bressan and Domitilla Savignoni, eds, *Le nuove vie della*

aware of the potential of the BRI, described as a much more tangible and detailed investment plan than Japan's 'free and open Indo-Pacific',⁴⁴ well ahead of the formation of the Yellow–Green government. Indeed, state officials reasoned that the Italy–China BRI MoU and Xi's state visit to Rome would have smoothed the path for a more pronounced exposure of China to Italian commodities, goods and services in both the short and the long term. MAECI's current secretary-general, Ettore Sequi, hinted as early as 2017 that Italy and China should take advantage of the 50th anniversary of the normalization of bilateral relations as an opportunity to strengthen their political and economic ties.⁴⁵

A further indication of the alignment of short-term political considerations with structural bureaucratic planning was the willingness to improve Italy's tourism exposure to China, an overlooked goal of the 2019 BRI MoU and concomitant state visit by Xi. Tourism is possibly the export sector that received the most attention from policy-makers, because of its importance to the Italian economy. OECD figures indicate that the tourism industry accounted for as much as 13 per cent of Italy's GDP in 2017, including indirect effects.⁴⁶ According to the UN World Tourism Organization, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, even though only 10 per cent of Chinese people travelled abroad, they accounted for 20 per cent of global tourist expenditure, making them the world's largest spenders in the sector.⁴⁷ By design, the Chinese president's state visit in March 2019 included direct reference by Xi to Italy's allure as a destination for Chinese tourists, especially during his stopover in Sicily.⁴⁸ Italian diplomats reinforced this by trying to enlist Chinese influencers to promote Italy as a key destination, while forging deals between local and national tourist promotion agencies and Chinese state-owned tour operators, e-commerce websites and other institutional actors.⁴⁹ This was policy by design rather than by populist improvisation.

These efforts were part of a broader design and trend that dated back to at least the mid-2010s. For instance, Italy's controversial decision to allow Chinese policemen to patrol Italian tourist locations (along with their Italian counterparts), so as to assuage the concerns of Mandarin-speaking visitors, dated back to 2016.⁵⁰ Moreover, data from 2019 suggest that Italy *had already* turned into the most

seta e il ruolo dell'Italia (Rome: Pacini, 2018), pp. 23–9; Ettore Sequi, 'La Belt and Road Initiative e le opportunità per l'Italia', in Bressan and Savignoni, eds, *Le nuove vie della seta*, pp. 30–36.

⁴⁴ Gaiani, 'La connettività Europa–Asia', pp. 23–4. See also Kei Koga, 'Japan's "Indo-Pacific" question: countering China or shaping a new regional order?', *International Affairs* 96: 1, 2020, pp. 49–73.

⁴⁵ Sequi, 'La Belt and Road Initiative e le opportunità per l'Italia', pp. 33–5.

⁴⁶ Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 'Italy: tourism in the economy', in *OECD tourism trends and policies 2020*, 2020, <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/3d4192c2-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/3d4192c2-en>.

⁴⁷ UN World Tourism Organization, *International tourism highlights*, 2019, <https://www.e-unwto.org/doi/pdf/10.18111/9789284421152>.

⁴⁸ 'Tutti pazzi per Xi Jinping: "La mia visita a Palermo porterà in Sicilia milioni di cinesi"', *La Sicilia*, 23 March 2019, <https://www.lasicilia.it/news/politica/230850/tutti-pazzi-per-xi-jinping-la-mia-visita-a-palermo-portera-in-sicilia-milioni-di-cinesi.html>.

⁴⁹ Stefano Carrer, 'Via della Seta: "Le opportunità prevalgono sui rischi"', *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 4 May 2019, <https://www.ilssole24ore.com/art/via-seta-le-opportunita-prevalgono-rischi-ABHn8HuB>; interviews with former high-ranking decision-maker, Rome, May 2019, Jan. 2020.

⁵⁰ Nick Squires, 'Chinese police officers go on patrol in Venice for the first time', *The Times*, 31 May 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/05/31/chinese-police-officers-go-patrol-venice-first-time/>.

popular destination for Chinese tourists in Europe, with Sicily becoming a new discovery.⁵¹ The plan was to further boost those numbers—which had already registered a 20 per cent increase on the previous year, 2018—by holding the Italy–China Year of Culture and Tourism in 2020, on the occasion of the above-mentioned diplomatic anniversary.⁵² By design, Di Maio took the oversight of international trade away from the Ministry of Economic Development to MAECI when he became minister of foreign affairs and international cooperation in the second Conte government, a position he retained following the inauguration of the Draghi administration. Yet this change of institutional supervision over trade authorities had been in the making since at least the early 2010s. The expectations of cashing in on the BRI MoU by more actively leveraging MAECI were widely shared among the diplomatic corps, including a former ambassador to the United States.⁵³ These are powerful hints of the activity of the Italian bureaucratic machine behind Italy’s ‘populist’ foreign policy, which was less disruptive *vis-à-vis* the state apparatus than has been acknowledged in the literature.

Had it not been for the pandemic, the tangible boom of Chinese tourism would have brought positive spillovers to the economy, while burnishing the political credentials of Di Maio, the leading political impresario behind the BRI MoU. As this section has made evident, a symbolic rupture that was closely coordinated with Italy’s public administration was intended to function as political marketing for internal purposes, while potentially also appealing to Chinese consumers. Thanks to a plethora of events, symbolic overtures and the ability to capitalize on China’s party-managed propaganda, Italian imports to China—such as tourism—would have picked up further. By these calculations, Italy’s symbolic overtures to China qualified as political marketing with both Italian and Chinese audiences in mind.

Italy’s embrace of the BRI as a superficial rupture

This section of the article emphasizes the broad continuity in Italy’s China policy between the Yellow–Green coalition and the two governments that preceded it. Between 2014 and 2018, under the leadership of the Partito Democratico (PD), in governments headed first by Renzi and then by Gentiloni, Italian foreign and security policy moved within the compass of the country’s transatlantic and European alliances. At the same time, it was under these two premierships that Italy started to welcome major Chinese investments in its ailing economy, and to

⁵¹ Silvia Marchetti, ‘Why Chinese tourists love Italy’s quaint rural villages: scenery, solitude, silence’, *South China Morning Post*, 12 Dec. 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/travel-leisure/article/3041561/why-chinese-tourists-love-italys-quaint-rural-villages>.

⁵² ENIT, ‘L’Italia a tutta Cina: ENIT all’ITB di Shanghai con il Ministro delle Politiche Agricole, Alimentari, Forestali e del Turismo Centinaio’, 10 May 2019, <https://www.enit.it/wwwenit/it/pressroomonline/comunicati-stampa/3114-enit-itb-shanghai-2019-turismo-cina.html>.

⁵³ Giovanni (aka Gianni) Castellaneta, ‘Le priorità che deve avere la diplomazia italiana’, *Il Foglio*, 15 Sept. 2019, <https://www.ilfoglio.it/home/2019/09/15/news/le-priorita-che-deve-avere-la-diplomazia-italiana-spunti-273418/>.

plan for the expansion of logistical port facilities in Genoa and Trieste through China's mammoth connectivity project, the BRI.⁵⁴

Not unlike the Yellow–Green coalition government, the previous Euro-Atlantic PD administrations extended overtures to China in the light of cool-headed cost–benefit analyses. In fact, first-hand interviews and primary sources suggest that *by 2015* Italy's diplomatic apparatus was already heavily involved in courting Chinese investments, and was doing so while working via EU institutions.⁵⁵ Italy's economic stagnation from the 1990s onwards, especially in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis, made the country particularly receptive to FDI—including capital injections and acquisitions by major Chinese conglomerates. Up to 2014, however, Chinese FDI in Italy was lagging behind its levels in many other European economies.⁵⁶ After all, China's central bank, the People's Bank of China, held only 2 per cent of shares in the peninsula's three biggest financial actors, as well as in TIM, ENI and ENEL—Italy's main telecommunications and energy utility companies. China also owns just a 5 per cent stake in Italy's highway company, which had been privatized in the late 1990s.⁵⁷ Shares in these companies are freely traded on the stock market, and China's FDI in Italy was smaller than its investments in the United Kingdom, France, Germany and even other smaller European economies.⁵⁸ Moreover, Italy was very much behind in China's acquisition of major stakes in harbour facilities across the European continent. By 2014, the small investment by the Chinese state-owned enterprise (SOE) COSCO in the Tyrrhenian port of Vado Ligure paled in comparison to Chinese FDI in port terminals in Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Spain and France.⁵⁹

Thus, under the Renzi government China's State Grid International Development SOE bought a 35 per cent stake in Italy's majority-state-owned CDP Reti, which in turn held a 30 per cent share in Italy's main gas and power grid utility firms.⁶⁰ Moreover, top diplomats back then suggested that ports strategically located near affluent central and west European markets could be turned into key gateways for international trade with Asia—and China loomed large in this thinking, given the size of its economy.⁶¹ Local politicians from the region of Friuli Venezia–Giulia and key stakeholders echoed this reasoning as the 2015 expansion of the Suez Canal, doubling its size, made the Mediterranean and Indo-Pacific route more attractive to international trade: in this context, courting a Chinese presence in northern Italian logistical hubs and land-based freight links

⁵⁴ Selina Ho, 'Infrastructure and Chinese power', *International Affairs* 96: 6, 2020, pp. 1461–85.

⁵⁵ Interview with high-ranking Italian civil servant responsible for east Asian matters, Rome, Jan. 2016.

⁵⁶ Thilo Hanemann and Mikko Huotari, *Chinese FDI in Europe and Germany: preparing for a new era of Chinese capital* (Berlin: Mercator Institute for China Studies and Rhodium Group, 2015), https://rhg.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/ChineseFDI_Europe_Full.pdf.

⁵⁷ Renzo Cavalieri, 'La Belt and Road Initiative e gli investimenti cinesi', *Mondo Cinese*, no. 165–6, 2019, pp. 89–108, 99–100.

⁵⁸ Hanemann and Huotari, *Chinese FDI in Europe and Germany*.

⁵⁹ Cavalieri, 'La Belt and Road Initiative e gli investimenti cinesi'.

⁶⁰ Cassa Depositi e Prestiti, 'CDP: il Consiglio di amministrazione approva la cessione del 35% di CDP RETI al Gruppo Cinese State Grid Corporation of China', 30 July 2014, https://www.cdp.it/sitointernet/page/it/cdp_il_consiglio_di_amministrazione_approva_la_cessione_del_35_di_cdp_reti_al_gruppo_cinese_state_grid_corporation_of_china?contentId=CSA11040.

⁶¹ Sequi, 'La Belt and Road Initiative e le opportunità per l'Italia'.

made strategic sense, not least as a way to divert Eurasian trade away from the Greek port of Piraeus or north European competitors.⁶² The development of global trade hubs would also have enriched the industrial development of the neighbouring hinterland, as was happening elsewhere in Europe.⁶³ As the next section of this article will make clear, these initiatives would abide by EU tender regulations, and the Italian state apparatus was mobilized to include potential Chinese infrastructure investments in northern Italian port facilities within the framework of EU-approved connectivity initiatives.

Chinese FDI could help Italy's manufacturing, artisanal and export base, which is mostly made up of small and medium-sized enterprises, provided that bilateral economic interactions were regulated according to a level playing field consistent with EU standards. Overtures to China under both PD-led governments went hand in hand with the quest for greater reciprocity between Europe and China as well as stricter regulation at the national and European levels of predatory FDI from foreign actors. Gentiloni was the only G7 head of government to attend the first BRI Forum for Cooperation. At the same time, Rome was a leading supporter of an EU-wide foreign investment screening mechanism mooted in 2017. Guarded by the country's state apparatus, the Yellow-Green coalition would walk in the same direction but was simply more vocal about its China overtures and symbolically abstained when the EU-wide FDI screening mechanism was voted in 2019.⁶⁴

Italy's embrace of the BRI within the EU context

The messaging that preceded and followed the signing of the MoU highlighted the seemingly disruptive nature of Italy's decision, compared not only to the country's traditional foreign policy but also to the EU's 'new' China policy. During the same month in which Italy signed the MoU, March 2019, the EU adopted its tripartite approach that qualifies China as a cooperation/negotiation partner, an economic competitor, and, significantly, as a systemic rival, signalling a formalization of a shift of views that had been under way for a while.⁶⁵ Nonetheless, in early 2019 the EU's outlook towards China was still relatively positive and largely collaborative, as illustrated by the presentation in autumn 2018 of the EU Strategy for Connecting Europe and Asia.⁶⁶

⁶² Interview with high-ranking officials from the Trieste port authority, online, Sept. 2020, and Genoa port authority, online, May 2020; speech by Friuli Venezia-Giulia governor at event 'The New Silk Roads', Udine, 3 May 2019.

⁶³ Zeno D'Agostino, 'Trieste, nodo della Via della Seta nel mare Adriatico orientale', in Bressan and Savignoni, eds, *Le nuove vie della seta*, pp. 73–87.

⁶⁴ Giulio Pugliese, 'Italy and China: much ado about an MoU', *East Asian Policy* 12: 4, 2020, pp. 73–89.

⁶⁵ European Commission, *EU-China: Strategic Outlook*, 12 March 2019, p. 1, https://ec.europa.eu/info/publications/eu-china-strategic-outlook-commission-contribution-european-council-21-22-march-2019_en.

⁶⁶ European External Action Service, *The European way to connectivity: a new strategy on how to better connect Europe and Asia*, 19 Sept. 2018, https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/50752/The%20European%20way%20to%20connectivity%20%E2%80%93%20a%20new%20strategy%20on%20how%20to%20better%20connect%20Europe%20and%20Asia.

In fact, the signal that communicated disruption was deliberately crafted as such by the Italian government of the time for political marketing purposes. For the Yellow–Green coalition government, the BRI MoU had various meanings and purposes; among them was the intention to send a tactical signal to Brussels and to its own electorate. As a Eurosceptic government, Rome was showing the EU and Italian voters (a) that it could design its own foreign policy independently, and (b) that it was able to diversify its partners on a ‘purely’ bilateral level.⁶⁷ However, while this messaging was in line with the Eurosceptic posturing of the populist coalition government, it was also misleading. Below the surface of the political marketing rhetoric, the decision to sign the MoU and its content were much more ‘European’ than the government itself, news outlets and critical voices wanted to reveal. Four elements show that, despite the Eurosceptic message, the signing of the MoU was not only consistent with the EU framework, but also fully embedded in it and its constituent projects. The first is the lack of initial opposition from Brussels to Italy’s decision; the second is the process that led to the actual signing of the MoU; the third is the wording of the MoU itself; and the fourth is the content and development of the agreements.

The initial response to the initiative from Brussels was in fact relatively supportive. Concerns did exist, and some remarks were made that criticized Italy’s decision.⁶⁸ However, the biggest concerns had to do with two longstanding wider issues: the lack of a cohesive EU China policy, and the potential lack of transparency in the allocation of contracts.⁶⁹ One should add here an acknowledgement of Brussels’ mistrust towards the populist government in Rome: had the document been signed by a non-populist government, some of these concerns would not have arisen.⁷⁰ In fact, the president of the republic intervened to reassure Italy’s allies, above all Washington, of the non-disruptive nature of the agreement and of Italy’s staunch Euro-Atlantic allegiances.⁷¹ Eventually, however, Brussels would turn increasingly sceptical towards Italy’s decision. This shift, rather than being the result of a careful assessment of the content of the MoU, resulted from a changing geopolitical scenario marked by an increasingly stark polarization between China and the ‘West’ driven by the openly adversarial stance of the US government

⁶⁷ Interview with high-ranking political figure with ministerial post, Rome, Jan. 2021.

⁶⁸ Alexandra Brzozowski and Jorge Valero, “Don’t be naive with China”, EU leaders tell Italy’, *Euractiv*, 22 March 2019, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/economy-jobs/news/dont-be-naive-with-china-eu-leaders-tell-italy/>.

⁶⁹ Enrico Fardella and Giorgio Prodi, ‘Italy–China cooperation: a matter of concern in the US and the EU?’, Valdai Club, 28 March 2019, <https://valdaiclub.com/a/highlights/italy-china-cooperation-a-matter-of-concern/>; Maaïke Okano-Heijmans and Tomoki Kamo, *Engaging but not endorsing China’s Belt and Road Initiative* (The Hague: Clingendael, 2019), https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2019-05/PB_China_Belt_and_Road_Initiative_May_2019.pdf; Alessia Amighini, ‘Italy’s embrace of BRI and the role of internal political dynamics’, in Vassilis Ntousas and Stephen Minas, eds, *The European Union and China’s Belt and Road: impact, engagement and competition* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021); Davide Ghiglione, Demetri Sevastopulo, Michael Peel and Lucy Hornby, ‘Italy set to formally endorse China’s Belt and Road Initiative’, *Financial Times*, 6 March 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/17f91d24-3f60-11e9-b896-fe36ec32aece>.

⁷⁰ Interview with EEAS official, Brussels, May 2021.

⁷¹ Barbara Tedaldi, ‘Tra Italia e Cina un paragone utile grazie ai gol di Mattarella’, *Agenzia Giornalistica Italia*, 23 March 2019, https://www.agi.it/blog-italia/punto-politico/italia_cina_pareggio_mattarella_xi_jinping-5194807/post/2019-03-23/.

and other liberal democracies towards Beijing.⁷² Nonetheless, initially, with a few exceptions, there was little or no opposition to the MoU from Brussels. After all, it should be noted that by the time Italy signed the BRI MoU, *more than half* of EU member states had already acceded to China's Silk Roads initiative through memorandums that, unlike the Italian one, have not been made public. While Italy was the first G7 country to sign a BRI MoU, it wasn't the sole EU founding member to do so: Luxembourg—home to the then president of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker—had recently signed an undisclosed BRI MoU.

Eventually, the geopolitical debate that increasingly identified China as a problem changed the EU's relatively positive outlook towards Beijing. However, the MoU signed by Italy was designed at a time when the EU was still open to collaboration with the BRI. To this day, Brussels is still not entirely opposed to collaboration with China in infrastructural financing, as the initial indications on both the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy and its new connectivity strategy suggest. The EU Council conclusions fleshing out the Union's Indo-Pacific strategy highlight inclusivity, to the extent that 'cooperation' features in its very title, hinting at Brussels' own approach towards China.⁷³ The story is different for Washington, which has shown active opposition to Italy's deal and the agreements it covers at a number of points. Before the MoU was signed, pressure from the United States led to the omission of collaboration between the Italian and the Chinese space agencies on the new Chinese space station Tiangong 3.⁷⁴ After the signing, following several American visits to the ports of Genoa and Trieste, both ports reconfigured future collaborations with their Chinese counterparts. Trieste, in particular, made an assessment that the integrated railways hub that was to be built with investment from the China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) in nearby Servola could not proceed owing to constraints on space.⁷⁵ These constraints, however, became apparent only in 2020, although the project had been launched in 2017, and in 2021 the stations of both Aquilinia and Servola were reactivated without the involvement of Chinese investment.⁷⁶ First-hand testimonies from diplomats and port authorities suggest that US pressure was also exerted indirectly: the US government's decision to sanction Chinese companies, including CCCC for its dredging activities in the South China Sea, made the company unpalatable from a business perspective.⁷⁷ At any rate, these considerations suggest that criticism of and pressure against Italy's MoU came chiefly from Washington, not from Brussels.

⁷² John M. Owen, 'Two emerging international orders? China and the United States', *International Affairs* 97: 5, 2021, pp. 1415–31.

⁷³ European Commission and High Representative, *The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, 16 Sept. 2021, https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_indo_pacific_en.pdf.

⁷⁴ Lorenzo Mariani, *The Belt and Road Initiative and the internationalisation of China's scientific power: the case of Italy* (Rome: IAI, 2021), <https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaip2140.pdf>.

⁷⁵ Interviews with port authority of Genoa, online, May 2020, and of Trieste, online, Sept. 2020.

⁷⁶ Trasporto Europa, 'Porto Trieste riattiva le rotaie con Servola e Aquilinia', 6 Sept. 2021, <https://www.trasporto.europa.it/notizie/ferrovia/porto-trieste-riattiva-le-rotaie-con-servola-e-aquilinia/>.

⁷⁷ Interviews with port authority of Trieste, phone, and with Italian diplomat, Rome, Oct. 2020.

The second element involves the process that led to the signing of the MoU. It was after the BRI forum in 2017 that Prime Minister Gentiloni began informal talks on Italy's participation in the initiative. Two opposite positions on his reasoning are worth highlighting here. One claims that Gentiloni did not intend to join the BRI but wanted to use the framework and the negotiations that would have followed to improve economic relations between Italy and China and conclude smaller agreements; the other maintains that Gentiloni seriously intended Italy to join the BRI, as it then did under a different government.⁷⁸ Whichever interpretation is correct, a degree of continuity is evident, since the MoU itself was couched in very constructive and transparent terms. In fact, the bureaucratic apparatus in charge remained relatively stable. That same apparatus, together with input from the president of the republic, ensured that both the wording and the content of the MoU would be in line with EU standards.⁷⁹

Regardless of Gentiloni's intentions, it was a Euro-Atlanticist government that started the negotiation in 2017. Arguably, beyond the political significance attached to officially joining the BRI, European infrastructures show a widespread involvement of Chinese enterprises on the part of both participating and non-participating states in the BRI.⁸⁰ If we take ports as examples, Chinese enterprises have invested in both participating and non-participating states.⁸¹ Days after Italy signed the MoU, Xi visited Paris, where together with French President Emmanuel Macron he met the then European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker and German Chancellor Angela Merkel. During that visit, even though France did not join the BRI, it signed 15 deals amounting to a value of about €40 billion (\$45 billion).⁸² In other words, the messaging around the Italian MoU might have been different, but its content reflected the European trend of the time. This hardly supports the argument that Italy's decision was not 'European', as in one way or another, many EU member states were attempting to forge closer economic ties with China and concluding agreements for infrastructure investment. The third element lies in the wording of the MoU. The document repeatedly mentions the EU and its projects, explicitly couching synergies with the BRI within the existing EU agenda for China and the Union's own regional connectivity projects.⁸³

These points further confirm not only that Italy was not going rogue, but also that it explicitly embedded the MoU in the European context. One could argue

⁷⁸ Interview with MP from PD, Rome, Feb. 2020; Amighini, 'Italy's embrace of BRI'.

⁷⁹ Interview with officials from Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Rome, Jan. 2020, Washington DC, March 2019.

⁸⁰ Philippe Le Corre, 'Chinese investments in European countries: experiences and lessons for the "Belt and Road" Initiative', in Maximilian Mayer, ed., *Rethinking the Silk Road: China's Belt and Road Initiative and emerging Eurasian relations* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 161–75.

⁸¹ Shivali Pandya and Simone Tagliapietra, *China's strategic investments in Europe: the case of maritime ports*, Bruegel, 2018, <https://www.bruegel.org/2018/06/chinas-strategic-investments-in-europe-the-case-of-maritime-ports/>.

⁸² Marine Penetier and John Irish, 'France seals multi-billion dollar deals with China, but questions Belt and Road project', Reuters, 25 March 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-china-idUSKCN1R61NF>.

⁸³ Italian Government, '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 Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st century Maritime Silk Road Initiative'.

that wording is not enough to prove that the MoU was concluded with the intention that Italy would follow the EU's course of action towards China. This leads into the fourth element, the content of the agreements, which is fundamental to the hypothesis presented here. That content shows a real intent to embed Italy's participation in the BRI within the EU framework, and to avoid friction with Brussels (and Washington). If, once again, we take as an example one of the most contentious parts of the agreement, that relating to ports, we see that both projects that ended up being part of the official MoU were initially included in the EU's TEN-T project—one of the pillars of the EU–China Connectivity Platform established in 2015. Both projects agreed in the framework of the MoU appear in the TEN-T list. The breakwater dam in Genoa and Trieste's integrated railway hub in Servola are precisely the two Italian projects that featured in TEN-T.⁸⁴ In the case of Trieste, the hub was part of a wider project to upgrade and improve connections to the port, which received investment directly from the EU.⁸⁵ As noted above, Italy had actively lobbied for the inclusion of Genoa and Trieste among the list of TEN-T projects within the EU–China Connectivity Platform.

In 2015, when the Connectivity Platform was launched, the EU's view of China was noticeably more positive than it was in 2019. Nonetheless, this shows that the specific projects included in the MoU did not come out of the blue, or from a wild proposal by a populist government, but were in the pipeline of broader EU–China infrastructural collaboration long before either the Yellow–Green coalition came to govern or the MoU took shape. It was the populist government's rhetorical purpose to appropriate earlier overtures to itself and play up the significance of the 'rupture', thus skewing analyses of the significance of the Italy–China BRI MoU and of the populists' impact on the state's diplomatic outlook. Such populist posturing also helps to explain why such criticisms and concerns—as were expressed by the EU—mainly regarded longstanding issues such as the cohesion of the EU's foreign policy, and structural problems such as the potential lack of transparency in the procurement process, rather than security and geopolitical issues. After all, by then EU institutions had been looking at the development of these projects for a few years.

The political marketing message overinflated a narrative that situated the signing of the MoU as a move diverging from the EU rather than embedded within it. This discrepancy can be explained in part by reference to the coexistence of the political line of a populist Eurosceptic government and the bureaucratic apparatus. The political line may have been Eurosceptic and, to a certain extent, pro-Chinese, but the bureaucratic apparatus that drafted the text and negotiated its content remained very much in line with Italy's traditional foreign policy course.⁸⁶ By looking beyond the messages that were sent by Italy, to the story

⁸⁴ European Commission, *List of projects to be considered in the framework of the EU–China Connectivity Platform*, 2018, <https://web.archive.org/web/20210819183841/https://ec.europa.eu/transport/sites/default/files/2018-07-13-european-transport-infrastructure-projects.pdf>; see also the largely unvaried list from 2019: <https://transport.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2019-11/eu-china-connectivity-platform-projects-2019.pdf>.

⁸⁵ Interview with port authority of Trieste, online, Sept. 2020.

⁸⁶ Interview with officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Rome, Jan. 2020, and Washington DC, April 2019.

behind the MoU, its developments and its content, it becomes evident that the MoU did not embody a rupture with Brussels or with other member states; on the contrary, it was in line with the path laid out by the EU in previous years.

Conclusions

On the basis of a variety of primary sources, including multiple elite interviews and official documentation, this article contributes to the study of Italian foreign policy-making, Italy's China policy and, more broadly, the impact of populism on foreign and security policy. First, it has presented important empirical findings that dispute standard representations of the handling of foreign affairs by the Yellow–Green government—western Europe's first all-populist coalition—as a rupture, on three grounds. To begin with, the Italy–China BRI MoU continued on a path laid down by the previous PD-led, Euro-Atlanticist governments. In doing so, the Yellow–Green government relied on and saw eye to eye with the same bureaucratic apparatus that had been cultivating relations between Italy and China, including Chinese investments in the ports of Genoa and Trieste, and that was ultimately responsible for negotiating the memorandum. The first and second sections of this article have provided evidence of such dynamics. Finally, the BRI MoU should be understood as in line with the EU, in the light of four considerations: first, the relative lack of initial opposition from Brussels to Italy's decision; second, the process that led to the signature of the document; third, the wording of the official MoU itself; and fourth, the content and development of the agreements.

Second, this study has operationalized the role that political marketing plays as a key intervening variable aimed at selling supposed foreign policy ruptures, thus presenting a compelling case for adopting a politico-strategic approach to the study of the foreign policy of western populists in power, a major gap in the research only recently identified.⁸⁷ Aside from the growing politicization of matters to do with China, and the brewing pushback against Beijing in the United States and the West more broadly, the suspicions and accusations of a realignment of Italy's relations with China under the Yellow–Green government were nurtured by the very rhetoric and grandstanding undertaken by the leadership of M5S and, to a lesser extent, the Lega. The international dimensions of such political marketing ought also to be considered, because they were intended to feed back domestically via an emphasis on 'taking back control'. In fact, Italy's push towards participation in the BRI were in (symbolic) contrast with a cooling attitude to the BRI on the part of other major EU member states, one that eventually crystallized in the landmark 2019 EU–China Strategic Outlook identifying China as a systemic rival and an economic competitor.⁸⁸ Thus, while the populist coalition in Rome aimed to showcase a broader freedom of manoeuvre, in fact

⁸⁷ Destradi et al., 'Populism and foreign policy'.

⁸⁸ European Commission, *EU–China: Strategic Outlook*. See also Federation of German Industries (BDI), *Partner and systemic competitor—how do we deal with China's state-controlled economy?*, 2019, https://www.wita.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/201901_Policy_Paper_BDI_China.pdf.

this was in line with EU objectives, and no objection of substance came from Brussels—quite the contrary, in fact.⁸⁹

In addition, the Italian government understood that Xi's overall strategy, which was closely tied to the leader's and the Chinese Communist Party's political fortunes, was coming under heavy criticism—both at home and abroad—so that Italy's symbolic accession granted it agency *vis-à-vis* Beijing by leveraging spurious symbolism from the very opposite end of the Silk Road, Rome.⁹⁰ Further research could usefully explore the ripple effects of political marketing campaigns by populist governments in the international arena, especially the link between populist governments and international players such as Russia, China and Trump's United States. Chinese policy-makers, in particular, attach great importance to their own strategic narratives and global image.⁹¹ Yet Italian diplomats were tasked with negotiating the terms of the BRI MoU in accordance with multilateral standards of openness, transparency and sustainability in government financing, with explicit reference to EU-wide initiatives in the body of the document itself.⁹² Moreover, the negotiation process took several months—an unusual length of time, according to direct testimonies, and an indication of Rome's active engagement in framing the terms of its understanding with China.⁹³ In fact, the Italy–China BRI MoU has been unique: it was one of only a few such MoUs that was made public, and the only one that multilateralized the typically bilateral and Sino-centric New Silk Roads initiative.⁹⁴ In short, Italy rejected the implicitly hierarchical nature embedded in previous MoUs on the BRI, instead acknowledging China as a peer and acting as a bridge connecting the BRI with western standards. Scrape the surface of the populist 'Italy First' political marketing rhetoric, and you see that this was hardly Eurosceptic populism at play. Italy's participation in the BRI must be understood instead as clear-eyed populism. Rome harnessed spurious symbolism to play up its relevance to Xi's BRI strategic narrative, on the basis of a cost–benefit calculation that was acutely aware of the 'too-big-to-fail' nature of the project by the late 2010s, once it had become indissolubly tied to the prestige of the Chinese party-state and its leader.

The broader findings of this study suggest that, in the realm of foreign policy and of the provision of international club and private goods, the Italian populist

⁸⁹ Interview with high-ranking EU official, Washington DC, April 2019.

⁹⁰ See Giulio Pugliese, 'A global Rorschach test: responding to the Belt and Road Initiative', *Defence Strategic Communications*, vol. 7, 2020, pp. 113–32; Giovanni B. Andornino, 'Tra status e agency: Cina e Italia a 50 anni dalla normalizzazione delle relazioni', *Orizzonte Cina* 11: 2, 2020, <https://www.twai.it/articles/cina-italia-50-anni/>.

⁹¹ Beatrice Gallelli, *La Cina di oggi in otto parole* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2021); Barbara Onnis, 'COVID-19 and China's global image', in Giulio Pugliese and Michelguglielmo Torri, eds, 'US-China competition, COVID-19, and democratic backsliding in Asia', *Asia Maior* (special issue), forthcoming, 2022.

⁹² 'Via della Seta, il testo dell'intesa tra l'Italia e la Cina', *Corriere della Sera*, 19 March 2019, https://www.corriere.it/economia/19_marzo_12/via-seta-testo-dell-intesa-l-italia-cina-versione-inglese-traduzione-italiano-9ea09020-44c2-11e9-b3bo-2162e8762643.shtml.

⁹³ Interviews with Italian diplomats, Rome and Washington DC, March, April 2019; with high-ranking EU official, Washington DC, April 2019.

⁹⁴ Giovanni B. Andornino, 'Cina: Le nuove vie della seta', *Osservatorio di Politica Internazionale*, no. 140, 2018, https://www.parlamento.it/application/xmanager/projects/parlamento/file/repository/affariinternazionali/osservatorio/approfondimenti/PIo140_App.pdf.

experience between 2018 and 2019 is substantially divergent from that of populists in power among the EU's central and east European member states, resembling instead the 'style-over-substance' case of Modi's India. With a view to the operationalization of populism and foreign policy more broadly, while this study has focused on the Italian FPE under the Yellow–Green government, with an eye on continuity within the bureaucratic apparatus, further research on populist foreign policy could focus on what the trajectory of Italy's relations with China under the 18th legislature from 2018 tells us about the M5S's ambiguous strand of 'transformist' populism. Preliminary evidence suggests that Italy has responded to US pressure and public opinion's growing wariness of China, but Prime Minister Draghi's distancing from key China dossiers—for example, on space collaboration, ports and Chinese SOEs' participation in some sectors of the Italian economy—continued approaches that were already perceptible under the first Conte administration, and should be understood as a rethink of the engagement started under the Euro-Atlanticist Renzi and Gentiloni administrations. This is further evidence that the Yellow–Green government, western Europe's first all-out populist coalition, was indeed preoccupied with political marketing and much less disruptive in its foreign policy course than analysts and experts expected.

