

Pandemic Trust: China-Italy Relations during COVID-19

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INTRODUCTION

Before the global spread of COVID-19, China was reaping victory after victory through the massive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the country's vast international infrastructural project that has increasingly come to resemble a real foreign policy strategy. Other than the considerable success achieved in the Pacific, where China has managed to snatch away from Taiwan two of the island's few remaining allies by offering economic support and favourable trade agreements,¹ the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) signed with Italy on 23 March 2019 remains one of China's greatest victories.² However, COVID-19 has not only presented the world with the main modern health and economic crises, but also challenged China's international rise, calling into question the reputational approach the country adopted to engage the world.

Based on this premise, this paper examines the soft power and public diplomacy strategies China implemented during the pandemic to preserve Italy's support on the international stage and re-build public trust at an exceptionally sensitive juncture for bilateral relations. In particular, in light of Italy's "special relation" with

¹ Dezan Shira and Associates. 2020. "China Completes Pacific Islands Sweep As Kiribati Signs Up To The Belt & Road Initiative". *Silk Road Briefing*. January 13. <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2020/01/13/china-completes-pacific-islands-sweep-kiribati-signs-belt-road-initiative/>.

² Baldassarre, Rita, trans. 2019. "Via Della Seta, Ecco Il Testo Dell'Intesa Italia-Cina". *Corriere Della Sera*, March 12. https://www.corriere.it/economia/19_marzo_12/via-seta-testo-dell-intesa-l-italia-cina-versione-inglese-traduzione-italiano-9ea09020-44c2-11e9-b3b0-2162e8762643.shtml.

China, the paper asks whether specific tools or narratives were employed to engage the country during the crisis.

The analysis is divided into three sections. First, the main principles of China's foreign engagement are presented, together with a discussion on the challenges the country faced to preserve them in recent years. The second section looks at the specific case of Italy, discussing the state of bilateral relations during the pandemic and identifying the tools China employed to raise its status with the European partner, both at institutional and public levels. Lastly, the main narratives constructed in China's political discourse towards Italy are discussed in relation to the principles that govern China's modern foreign policy. The paper concludes by reviewing the main findings.

REBRANDING "CHINA" ABROAD

China's pandemic challenge has proven to be different from the rest of the world. In addition to being forced to confront a health and economic crisis like the entire international community, China has also faced a significant reputational challenge as the place where the outbreak started. Because it is the country of origin of the virus and a superpower that exercises influence through investments and development projects, during the pandemic, China witnessed public opinion shutter around the world, on the one hand, jeopardising its international standing and, on the other, shaking its core principles of foreign engagement. Seven-years-worth of engagement-building through the BRI and 850-billion-dollars-worth of investments around the world,³ in fact, are now endangered by the potential estrangement of the international community from the country.

China is actually no stranger to the issue of foreign support. The country has often had to come to terms with the risks of dealing with negative foreign public opinion in the recent past. In July 2018, for instance, Malaysia's newly elected Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad suspended the BRI-sponsored East Coast Rail Link, a planned 640kilometrelong double-track high speed railway connecting the South China Sea to the Straits of Malacca.⁴ Mohamad in fact distrusted China's goodwill after the Hambantota port *affaire* in Sri Lanka, as the island's government had

³ The number includes BRI and non-BRI projects. See Scissors, Derek. 2020. "China Global Investment Tracker". Washington D.C.: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research (AEI). <http://www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/>.

⁴ Sipalan, Joseph. 2019. "China, Malaysia Restart Massive 'Belt and Road' Project After Hiccups". *Reuters*, July 25. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-silkroad-malaysia-idUSKCN1UK0DG>.

become insolvent on Chinese loans and had then been forced to lease the port to China for 99 years the year before.⁵ Malaysia's distrust eventually cost China a year's suspension of works and 5.4 billion dollars of cost reduction.⁶ A similar experience on a larger scale would prove devastating for the country, especially now that China is experiencing a deep economic crisis like the rest of the world.

As exemplified by the Malaysian case, China's global reputation remains a priority, even more so as the country starts the post-pandemic recovery phase. After all, the virus has struck directly at the concept that regulates Chinese foreign engagement – that is, the presentation of the country as a “responsible stakeholder”. However, it is worth noting that this concept entered Chinese discourse from the outside. It was Robert Zoellick, Deputy Secretary of State of the United States (US) in fact who made the connection in a 2005 speech, during which he stated: “[T]he essential question is – how will China use its influence? ... We need to urge China to become a responsible stakeholder ... China has a responsibility to strengthen the international system that has enabled its success”.⁷

Since then, the concept has stuck with Chinese leaders, who commonly adopt it as the baseline for presenting an alternative model of engagement to the US. The issue of China's international responsibility is thus frequently raised in comparison with the actions of the US administration, which are qualified as being “less responsible”, especially when East Asia is involved. American regional influence is in fact presented as a destabilising force, as it risks precipitating unresolved tensions between China and neighbours such as Japan and South Korea.⁸ At the same time, the concept is also employed to highlight China's positive contributions to the in-

⁵ Sautman, Barry, and Hairong Yan. 2019. “Truth About Debt Traps”. *South China Morning Post*, May 6, sec. Comment.

⁶ Grassi, Sergio. 2020. “The Belt and Road Initiative in Malaysia: China's Geopolitics and Geoeconomics Challenged by Democratic Transformation”. Berlin: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/16766.pdf>.

⁷ Zoellick, Robert. 2005. “Whither China? From Membership to Responsibility”. Presented at the Remarks to the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations, New York, September 21. https://www.ncuscr.org/sites/default/files/migration/Zoellick_remarks_notes06_winter_spring.pdf.

⁸ Bowie, Julia. 2016. “China: A Responsible Stakeholder?” *The National Interest*, May 10. <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/china-responsible-stakeholder-16131>.

ternational system and the United Nations (UN) in particular, emphasising the role played by the country in UN peacekeeping operations.⁹

It is worth noting that a substantial difference exists in the concept when it is applied in American or Chinese discourse. In Mandarin Chinese, the concept is in fact rendered as 负责任大国 (Fù zérèn dàguó), which literally means “responsible great power” instead of “responsible stakeholder” as it is presented in the US.¹⁰ This phrasing entails that China’s role in the international system is interpreted differently, on the one hand, as a contributor to the international order and, on the other, as one of its key players. For instance, in the traditional Work Report of the 2015 “Two Sessions”, Premier Li Keqiang affirmed that “relations and cooperation with other countries have become more and more solid, and China’s image as a responsible power on the international stage increasingly prominent”.¹¹ Li’s quote details how the concept operates in Chinese discourse, while also emphasising its primacy in the country’s foreign policy strategy, as it is included among the issues reported in the main annual event of China’s political life.

As discussed in this section, China’s image as a responsible stakeholder/power was not created during the pandemic, but is historically eradicated in the country’s political discourse. The concept thus lies at the basis of China’s foreign engagement and was especially exploited in promoting the BRI. As the pandemic raised doubts on the conformity of this image to reality, it did not only weaken the concept *per se* but also lowered the level of trust by China’s foreign partners. Therefore, attempts to direct the international narrative during COVID-19 are to be considered as an effort to build a new, positive image of the country and restore trust in China’s ability to operate as the main power in the international system. In this regard, China-Italy relations make an interesting case. On the one hand, bilateral relations experienced a revival shortly before the pandemic, strengthening the connection between the two countries in different sectors. On the other, Italy has recently acquired a

⁹ For a discussion on China’s growing role in UN peacekeeping operations, please see Sciorati, Giulia. 2020. “Chinese Tides in the Upper Western Indian Ocean”. *Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI)*. March 20. <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/chinese-tides-upper-western-indian-ocean-25309>.

¹⁰ Duggal, Niall. 2015. “China’s Changing Role in Africa”. In *China’s International Roles: Challenging or Supporting International Order?*, edited by Sebastian Harnisch, Sebastian Bersick, and Jörn-Carsten Gottwald, 207–25. London and New York: Routledge.

¹¹ See Li Keqiang as cited in Liu, Xiaopeng. 2015. “李克强：中国在国际舞台上负责任大国形象日益彰显 (Lǐ Kèqiáng: Zhōngguó Zài Guójì Wǔtái Shàng Fù Zérèn Dàguó Xíngxiàng Rìyì Zhāngxiǎn)”. *Xinhua News Agency*, March 5. http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2015lh/2015-03/05/c_1114527770.htm.

privileged position among China's foreign partners, as the sole economy in the "Group of Seven" officially to join the BRI and, as a consequence, offers significant external support to the project as a whole.

CRITICAL JUNCTURES IN CHINA-ITALY RELATIONS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC/CRISIS

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Italy played the unfortunate role of the first European hotspot. The epidemic started on 31 January 2020, after two Chinese tourists in Rome tested positive for the virus.¹² In the same period, coronavirus cases in China had neared 79,000.¹³ The case of the two tourists, in particular, proved to be particularly significant for stimulating China-Italy relations. Indeed, other than encouraging a visit from the Chinese embassy to the hospital ward where the two tourists and other COVID-19 cases had been hospitalized,¹⁴ it also led to an official call between China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi and his Italian counterpart, Luigi Di Maio. It is interesting to notice that both parties made reference to the BRI during the call, with Wang mentioning future plans to work for establishing a Health Silk Road.¹⁵ References to deepened bilateral cooperation at this particular juncture should be considered in light of the tensions that had emerged a month earlier between the two countries, when Italy had suspended air traffic to and from China – the sole European country to opt for the strictest possible virus containment measures.¹⁶

¹² Severgnini, Chiara, and Redazione. 2020. "Coronavirus, Primi Due Casi in Italia: Sono Due Turisti Cinesi". *Il Corriere Della Sera*, January 31. https://www.corriere.it/cronache/20_gennaio_30/coronavirus-italia-corona-9d6dc436-4343-11ea-bdc8-faf1f56f19b7.shtml.

¹³ World Health Organization. 2020. "WHO Coronavirus Disease Dashboard". Geneva: World Health Organization. <https://covid19.who.int/>.

¹⁴ Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Italy. 2020. "L'ambasciata Cinese in Italia fa Visita ai Pazienti Cinesi Colpiti dal Coronavirus e ai Turisti Cinesi sotto Osservazione". February 6. <http://it.china-embassy.org/ita/sbdt/t1740994.htm>.

¹⁵ Xinhua. 2020. "Wang Yi Had a Phone Call with Italian Foreign Minister to Express Sympathy", February 28. https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1750607.shtml.

¹⁶ Berberi, Leonard. 2020. "Coronavirus, l'Italia Ferma i Voli con la Cina, gli Ultimi Aerei sono Arrivati a Roma e Milano". *Il Corriere Della Sera*, January 30. https://www.corriere.it/cronache/20_gennaio_30/coronavirus-l-italia-ferma-voli-la-cina-ma-5-aerei-stanno-arrivando-roma-milano-4c159766-43a8-11ea-bdc8-faf1f56f19b7.shtml.

However, as cases increased, so did tensions.¹⁷ For instance, a television interview¹⁸ to the President of the Veneto region Luca Zaia incurred the curt reply of the Chinese embassy because of a controversial statement on China's food culture.¹⁹ The exchange resonated among civil society, adding to discussions about the repatriation of Italian citizens from China, which had met with several issues due to the high health standards adopted.²⁰

One of the pillars of China-Italy relations during the crisis remained the Chinese diaspora community. The Chinese embassy had been the prime supporter of the community, stressing the efforts made by the diaspora to assist the country.²¹ However, during the first phases of the pandemic, the Chinese community in Italy was among the worst-hit segments of the population, economically. According to estimates from the "Italian Chinese Business Association", even before nationally imposed lockdowns, Chinese restaurateurs in Milan suffered losses of about 50-60 per cent due to a generalised fear among Italian consumers of everything that concerned East Asia.²² The situation became so negative that the city of Milan, where Italy's oldest Chinese diaspora resides, launched a solidarity initiative to support Chinese entrepreneurs.²³ Yet, in addition to economic difficulties, the Chinese community had to deal with episodes of xenophobia and racism. One of

¹⁷ At this stage, Italian cases had soared to 199,000, according to civil protection bulletins.

¹⁸ See "Zaia: 'I Cinesi Li Abbiamo Visti Tutti Mangiare Topi Vivi'". 2020. A3 News. Legnano: Antenna 3. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YXEYddVR6kY&feature=emb_logo.

¹⁹ Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Italy. 2020. "Dichiarazione del Portavoce dell'Ambasciata Cinese in Italia in Merito alle Posizioni Espresse da un Politico Italiano sulla Cina". February 28. <http://it.china-embassy.org/ita/sbdt/t1750749.htm>.

²⁰ Santevecchi, Guido, and Fiorenza Sarzanini. 2020. "Virus, la Farnesina: Pronto il Piano di Rientro per gli Italiani". *Corriere Della Sera*, January 29. https://www.corriere.it/esteri/20_gennaio_29/coronavirus-italiani-in-quarantena-wuhan-farnesina-pronto-piano-rientro-3181aee2-421f-11ea-a986-8b98b73aaf06.shtml.

²¹ ANSA. 2020. "Comunità Cinese in Italia attivamente Impegnata". *Agenzia Nazionale Stampa Associata*, March 2. http://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/mondo/notiziario_xinhua/2020/03/02/comunita-cinese-in-italia-attivamente-impegnata_701a0c1c-dc06-419c-a2b0-85eba1c16285.html.

²² ANSA. 2020. "Coronavirus: A Milano -50% Fatturato Ristoranti Cinesi". *Agenzia Nazionale Stampa Associata*, February 7, sec. Terra e Gusto. http://www.ansa.it/canale_terraegusto/notizie/business/2020/02/07/coronavirus-a-milano-50-fatturato-ristoranti-cinesi_da90934f-1045-4f17-a172-cd067b77530b.html.

²³ Maccotta, Federica. 2020. "Coronavirus, a Milano una Sera Solidale nei Ristoranti Cinesi". *Wired*, February 12. <https://www.wired.it/lifestyle/food/2020/02/12/coronavirus-milano-solidale-ristoranti-cinesi/>.

the best known cases was that of a Milanese marketing lecturer of Chinese origin being insulted on a high speed train by other passengers because of her ethnicity.²⁴ The country faced several similar episodes with some turning violent.²⁵ As anti-Chinese sentiment as well as the total number of cases increased, the embassy devoted additional resources to public diplomacy: between February and June, for instance, China's ambassador to Italy Li Junhua made no less than ten appearances on various media outlets from newspapers and magazines to national television.²⁶ Moreover, in mid-March, Chinese President Xi Jinping personally expressed support to Italy by sending a message of sympathy to Italian President Sergio Mattarella²⁷ and by contacting Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte on the phone.²⁸ It is interesting to notice that Xi's messages came just a few days after his first official inspection to the city of Wuhan, the epicentre of the pandemic in China,²⁹ and the arrival of the first Chinese medical team to Italy, the third group dispatched around the world after those sent to Iran and Iraq.³⁰ When examining the two texts, some similarities among them and the Wang-Di Maio call stand out. First, the military terms adopted by the Chinese leadership to legitimize policy choices inside the country are also applied to Italy by means of warfare-related terms such as "fight", "victory" and "forcibly". Second, China's foreign engagement strategies are referenced extensively (e.g., Health Silk Road, Community with a Shared Future), along with Italy's status as a BRI country. Lastly, China's aid to Italy is also mentioned greatly

²⁴ Cavadini, Federica. 2020. "Coronavirus Italia, la Prof Cinese Derisa in Treno e il Tweet Virale". *Il Corriere Della Sera*, February 18. https://milano.corriere.it/notizie/cronaca/20_febbraio_18/coronavirus-italia-professoressa-cinese-lala-hu-derisa-treno-frecciarossa-tweet-virale-45a09b94-5279-11ea-ac26-d47429c3b2e0.shtml.

²⁵ Coldani, Andrea A. 2020. "Xenofobia e Covid-19 (i): Il Ritorno del Pericolo Giallo in Occidente". *Il Caffè Geopolitico*. July 1. <https://ilcaffegeopolitico.net/125111/xenofobia-covid-19-parte-1>.

²⁶ For a partial list, see Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Italy. 2019-2020. "I Rapporti Bilaterali". <http://it.china-embassy.org/ita/sbdt/>.

²⁷ Hua, Xia. 2020. "Xi Says China Firmly Supports Italy's Efforts Against Covid-19". *Xinhua News Agency*, March 14. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-03/14/c_138877537.htm.

²⁸ Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Italy. 2020. "Colloquio Telefonico tra il Presidente Xi Jinping e il Presidente del Consiglio Italiano Conte". March 17. <http://it.china-embassy.org/ita/sbdt/t1756976.htm>.

²⁹ Hua, Xia. 2020. "Highlights of President Xi's Inspection to Wuhan". *Xinhua News Agency*, March 10. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-03/11/c_138863849.htm.

³⁰ Redazione. 2020. "Coronavirus: Arrivati in Italia dalla Cina 9 Medici Specializzati". *La Repubblica*, March 13, sec. Cronaca. https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/03/13/news/coronavirus_italia_aggiornamento_13_marzo-251129542/.

from both parties. In particular, Xi stressed: “We [the People’s Republic of China] will send other teams of medical experts to Italy and will do our best to provide aid in terms of medical supplies and more” (Xi as cited in Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Republic of Italy 2020).³¹

These instances of “mask diplomacy” that Xi mentioned during the Conte phone call are part of a comprehensive Chinese strategy that originally focused exclusively on the worst afflicted countries in the world, but was later extended to all of China’s partners, especially in Africa and South and South East Asia. Simply put, mask diplomacy – a concept that the Director General of the World Health Organization (WHO) Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus also named the “politics of generosity”³² – consisted of dispatching medical teams and donating medical supplies in an attempt to demonstrate solidarity and control the narrative on the role played by countries during the pandemic. For China, the ultimate aim was to restore trust in the country’s ability to act as a great power in the international system.³³ In a sense, it was the most straightforward application of Joseph Nye’s idea of soft power that could be identified during the crisis.³⁴

The extent of China’s engagement with Italy is difficultly quantifiable. On the one hand, the number of medical teams despatched to the country was only three. On the other, donations came from all around China, relying on business connections, town and university twinning and the Chinese diaspora community, in addition to traditional institutional channels. Aligning with the public diplomacy efforts made by the Chinese embassy, mask diplomacy was imprinted with the most distinctive elements of Italy’s own foreign engagement. On 17 March, the “Jack Ma Foundation” (Alibaba’s philanthropic arm), for instance, donated to Italy one million surgical masks branded with some verses of the most famous *aria* from

³¹ See Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Republic of Italy. 2020. “Colloquio Telefonico tra il Presidente Xi Jinping e il Presidente del Consiglio Italiano Conte”. March 17. <http://it.china-embassy.org/ita/sbdt/t1756976.htm>.

³² EEAS. 2020. “The Coronavirus Pandemic and the New World It Is Creating”. *European External Action Service*. March 23. https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/76379/coronavirus-pandemic-and-new-world-it-creating_en.

³³ For a full discussion on “mask diplomacy”, see Sciorati, Giulia. 2020. “La Diplomazia Delle Mascherine: il Nuovo Soft Power della Cina”. Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI). March 26. <https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/la-diplomazia-delle-mascherine-il-nuovo-soft-power-della-cina-25554>.

³⁴ On soft power, see Nye, Joseph S. 2009. *Soft Power: The Means To Success In World Politics*. New York City: PublicAffairs.

Giacomo Puccini's opera "Turandot",³⁵ often employed by Italy when engaging Asia, as the opera is set in China. Although Chinese donations were soon joined by those of other European countries and the United States, China remained the most visible donor because of the space reserved by Italy's media outlets.

On 4 May, Italy eventually entered the so-called "phase two" – that is, the phase of the country's re-opening and re-launch. On the same day, China's ambassador to Italy published an "open letter"³⁶ that *de facto* presents a useful summary of the major tools employed by China to conduct public diplomacy in Italy during the crisis and introduces the main narratives framing the country's support.

NARRATIVES ON CHINA'S SUPPORT TO ITALY

A thematic analysis on Chinese discourse to Italy during the pandemic returned four major themes as those employed to construct a narrative of engagement with the country. As highlighted in the previous section, these themes are perfectly exemplified in the "open letter to Italian friends" released by China's ambassador to Italy Li Junhua. The letter was published at a topical moment for the country, which was about to relinquish the strictest virus containment measures after an eight-week-long lockdown. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the letter gained traction among Italy's civil society, especially as it followed up on months of China's public diplomacy efforts. In brief, these four themes are aimed at building a narrative of China-Italy relations that goes beyond the health crisis and places past positive cooperative examples as well as shared future objectives under the spotlight, so as to rely on solid foundations for future cooperation and restore trust between the two countries at different levels (i.e. public and institutional).

The first is a traditional theme of China's political discourse and uses history to increase the legitimacy of bilateral relations. This type of discourse presents current China-Italy institutional relations as the product of an extensive cooperative process between the two countries. Among others, examples of this particular theme are a considerable use of adverbs of time, the emphases placed on common

³⁵ Redazione. 2020. "Jack Ma e Alibaba Donano all'Italia 1 Milione di Mascherine e 100mila Kit per il Coronavirus". *La Repubblica*, March 17, sec. Cronaca. https://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2020/03/17/news/jack_ma_e_alibaba_donano_all_italia_1_milione_di_mascherine_e_100_kit_per_il_coronavirus-251523414/.

³⁶ AGI. 2020. "L'Ambasciatore Cinese si Congratula con l'Italia, 'Amicizia Imperitura'". *Agenzia Giornalistica Italiana*. May 4. <https://www.agi.it/estero/news/2020-05-04/fase-2-ambasciatore-cina-lettera-italia-epidemia-collaborazione-8508911/>.

history and common heritage and frequent mentions of the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of China-Italy diplomatic relations. Despite being shared by many countries around the world, this particular anniversary remained prominent in Chinese discourse to Italy during the pandemic. This theme, moreover, forges a connection between historical bilateral relations and China's principle of "Community with a Shared Future", which roughly maintains that the international community needs to work collectively to create a stable international order and China is in the best position to coordinate joint efforts. From this perspective also derives that it is a common history to set the objectives through which the international system can modernise and evolve.³⁷

The second theme is directly connected to the first and looks at historical relations between China and Italy's civil societies. References to China-Italy people-to-people relations, in fact, remain particularly prominent throughout pandemic discourse. On the one hand, civil society is associated with mask diplomacy, stressing its role as one of the channels through which Chinese donations to Italy were facilitated. On the other, relations between groups and individuals in the two countries are emphasised in an effort to personalise China and avoid abstract characterisations that risked presenting stereotypical or negative images of the country, which could further damage its reputation with the Italian public.

The third theme once again makes reference to China's principle of Community-with-a-Shared-Future by building on the notion that China, Italy and the entire international community continue to stand on common ground and that China, in particular, has no greater advantage than any other country in the world in combating the pandemic. For instance, frequent mentions of COVID-19 as a common challenge are not restricted to China's discourse abroad, but are also regularly employed at the national level. Thanks to this narrative, China does not adopt a position of supremacy, but constructs the identity of an ally against a mutual enemy. In compliance with the Community-with-a-Shared-Future principle, the country is then introduced as the actor that has the most experience in containing the virus and is the best equipped to coordinate and advise on global responses. When engaging with Italy, in particular, China frequently references the similar status enjoyed by the two countries in the international system, often mentioning the mutual membership to the "Group of Twenty". By presenting this narrative, China, on

³⁷ Zhang, Denghua. 2018. "The Concept of 'Community of Common Destiny' in China's Diplomacy: Meaning, Motives and Implications". *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies* 5 (2): 196–207. doi:10.1002/app5.231.

the one hand, attempts to distract from the virus' origin and, on the other, develops the argument that not only is international cooperation vital to fight the virus, but also that it is cooperation with China which is crucial, as the country is the sole actor that developed the first-hand experience necessary to ensure successful containment measures.

Lastly, the fourth theme relies on Italy's participation in China's BRI. In March 2019, China and Italy had indeed signed an MoU on the margins of Xi's first state visit to Italy since assuming the office of General Secretary of the Communist Party of China in 2012 and President of the People's Republic in 2013.³⁸ The MoU formally ratified Italy's support of the Chinese project. During the visit, Italy also negotiated thirty business contracts between ten Italian companies, ministries and public organisations that amounted to 2.9 billion dollars.³⁹

When Italy signed the MoU, the country mainly aimed to deepen economic ties with China and re-launch the economy. Still, other than economic benefits, China also gained political support from this MoU, as the BRI received the endorsement of a key member of the European Union and one of the major world economies. International debates sparked off after Italy signed the MoU, especially because the text of the agreement appeared vague and arbitrary. These debates are one of the reasons why Italy's membership in the BRI remained central in cooperation discourse during the pandemic. Even at the national level, Italy was among the countries that gained the most attention. As presented at a virtual conference at the University of Edinburgh on 1 June, China's national media outlets presented a few reviews on epidemic outbreaks in other countries and Italy was the sole Western country to be included.⁴⁰ Italy certainly was the first COVID-19 hotspot in the West, but the timing of the country's BRI MoU also made it a sensitive case for China's reputation, which risked incurring even more criticism, if Italy had not been properly engaged and supported by China.

³⁸ *Supra* note 2.

³⁹ Sciorati, Giulia. 2019. "Mediating Between the EU and China: Will Italy Take Up the Task?" *Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI)*. April 8. <https://www.ispionline.it/it/publicazione/mediating-between-eu-and-china-will-italy-take-task-22796>.

⁴⁰ Tin, Cao. 2020. "Domestic Implications of China's Foreign Aid During Covid-19". Presented at the China's Foreign Aid during the Covid-19 Pandemic, University of Edinburgh, June 1.

CONCLUSIONS

The paper has investigated relations between China and Italy during the COVID-19 pandemic in an attempt to identify the tools and narratives China adopted to strengthen the country's international reputation after it was damaged by the health crisis.

One of the most visible and discussed strategies employed by China has been the so-called mask diplomacy, thanks to which the country dispatched teams of doctors and medical supplies around the world. By doing so, the country was partially able to modulate public opinion and detach China's image from that of the place where the virus had originated. Although diplomatic relations between the two countries have remained prominent, it is interesting to notice that the analysis points to the extensive work conducted by the Chinese embassy at the national level as well as the support given to Italy by the Chinese diaspora community, despite the several episodes of xenophobia and racism it had encountered in the early stages of the pandemic. It would then be limiting to identify mask diplomacy as the major tool China employed in Italy, as the country's engagement ran deeper and involved different segments of society. Nonetheless, the narratives constructed in China's political discourse towards Italy remained rooted in China's traditional principles of foreign engagement, especially referencing to the notion of "Community with a Shared Future" and the more operational BRI ties. Indeed, the MoU signed between China and Italy the previous year as well as Italy's inclusion among China's BRI partners remain at the forefront of the discourse.

In conclusion, although China's engagement model during the pandemic rests on pillars that are similar around the world, the Italian case stands out because of several unique elements, such as China's reliance on the diaspora community in Italy and, above all, the BRI agreement that ensures that relations continue to grow, global health crises notwithstanding.

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