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Continuity and change in Italy-China relations

Navigating the political, economic and social context of the tactical entente between Rome and Beijing

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The Italian government's decision to sign the Belt and Road Initiative MoU in March 2019 should not be seen as marking a strategic shift in Rome's foreign policy: it is best understood as a political shortcut to energise the bilateral relationship especially in the realms of trade, investment, logistics, and tourism. While Giuseppe Conte's administration injected fresh impetus in relations with Beijing, an ambitious China policy had already been implemented by the centre-left governments led by Renzi and Gentiloni, including with regards to the BRI. Italy has traditionally lacked a whole-of-government approach to China and this limit resurfaced after the signing of the BRI MoU, with the *Lega* - the junior partner of the former coalition government - increasingly vocal in its criticism of China. In Italy the societal foundations underpinning relations with China remain fragile: Italy's main business association is closely aligned with its European peers in advocating a more robust approach to competition with China through better market access, a level playing field, and more effective coordination across Europe; meanwhile, the Italian public remains Europe's most skeptical about China. China continues to see Italy as an interesting partner that is predictable, politically more relevant in a post-Brexit Europe, comparatively porous to international influence, endowed with strategic assets that are worth investing in, populated by the largest community of PRC passport holders in the European space, and geopolitically salient in the critical West Asia - Northern Africa quadrant. Capacity-building in both countries does not match the growing dynamism of bilateral relations: a sparse community of contemporary China experts has limited traction on decision- and opinion-making in Italy, while a relatively even smaller set of experts in China can combine sound command of the language with a nuanced understanding of the current trends in Italy's society, economy and politics.

Throughout its 14 months in power, between June 2018 and August 2019, the Italian administration led by Giuseppe Conte chose to proactively invest political capital on a very limited number of high foreign policy issues. Europe and Libya are the most obvious examples, and the easiest to explain: in the first instance, a sharp realignment away from mainstream political partners toward right-wing populist and otherwise antagonist forces reflects the political milieu and priorities of the two partners supporting the former coalition government, respectively the *Lega* (League) and *Movimento 5 Stelle* (Five Star Movement, M5S). In the case of Libya, the deterioration of the situation on the ground and compelling security and geo-economic interests encouraged action beyond the otherwise very pervasive but often inconsequential rhetoric emanating from relevant Ministers.