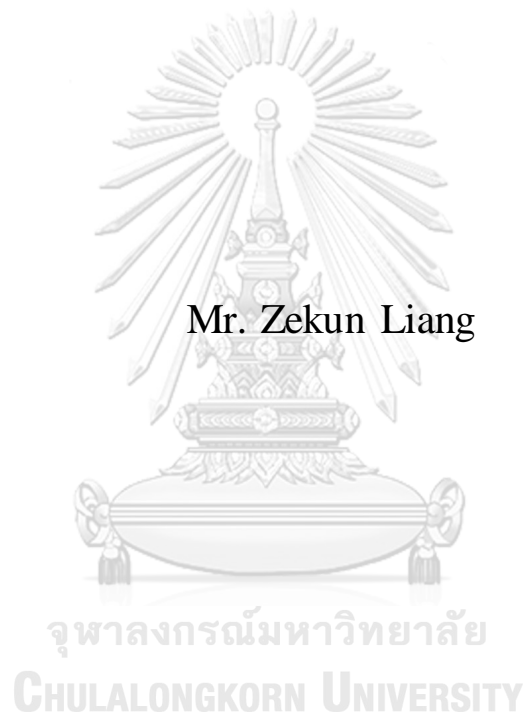


THE ADJUSTMENT AND INFLUENCE OF THE ITALIAN
GOVERNMENT'S POLICY TOWARDS CHINA UNDER
THE BACKGROUND OF BRI



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This paper makes a brief review of the Italy's policy towards China before the BRI was proposed, and the characteristics of Italy's policy towards China through the methods of literature analysis and comparative study.

This paper holds that based on the BRI, the adjustment of Italy's policy towards China is mainly reflected in three aspects: politics, economy and culture. The adjustment of the policy towards China has also had an important impact on Sino-Italian relations and Sino EU relations. 2020 marks the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Italy. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations, although the two countries have experienced hardships, they have always adhered to the principles of mutual respect, mutual benefit and win-win results, and achieved in-depth development. In 2019, Italy experienced a government crisis that has attracted much attention. After a series of changes, Italy's policy towards China has shown a more moderate and pragmatic attitude. It has not only strengthened its relations with China in the field of economic and trade investment, but also continuously promoted exchanges and cooperation between the two sides in the fields of science and technology, green and low-carbon economy and culture. More importantly, Italy has deeply promoted cultural exchanges and cooperation with China under the framework of the BRI. The cultural exchanges and cooperation between the two countries have made a qualitative leap. China and Italy no longer stick to the traditional "gathering for profit", strengthened mutual trust and enhanced mutual understanding. As one of the founding member states of the European Union, Italy is of great significance to the development of China-EU relations. The prominence of China-Italy relations has led to a big step forward in China-EU relations. In addition, the United States plays an important role in Sino-European relations, and Italy joined the "Belt and Road" initiative marking the gradual weakening of US influence in Sino-European relations. Therefore, Italy is very likely to play a certain role in Sino-European relations in the future.

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1. History and characteristics of Italian policy toward China

Due to a variety of causes, Italy and China did not have significant diplomatic interactions prior to 1970. However, beginning in 1970, Italy began to see China as a significant economic partner. Italy's economy has been heavily impacted since the European debt crisis, and the country is eager to reclaim its internal economic progress. Italy's approach toward China is currently characterized by pragmatism.

1.1 A Historical Review of Italian Policy Toward China Since World War II

When World War II ended in Europe in May 1945, all the anti-Fascist parties formed a predominantly northern government led by the Resistance hero and Party of Action leader Ferruccio Parri. The Committees of National Liberation continued to administer the northern regions and the larger northern factories for a short time. Up to 15,000 Fascists were purged or killed, and in some areas (such as Emilia and Tuscany) reprisals continued through 1946.¹ The end of World War II intensified Italy's security concerns, forcing it to protect its interests more aggressively. China and Italy became members of the Soviet and American camps, respectively, during a period when the two sides were at odds. Although intimate ties existed between China and Italy as early as 1955, they were stifled by US pressure and the Italian government's recurrent attitudes. Within the United Nations, Italy was even active in backing the "two Chinas" theory. The United States' meddling in China's domestic affairs and sanctions policy harmed the growth of diplomatic relations between China and the European Union, while the North Atlantic Treaty hampered the autonomy of the Italian government, which was a key impediment to Sino-Italian relations. At the same time, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization limited the autonomy of the Italian government, which was a major impediment to Sino-Italian relations. The EU countries did not try to break through the US blockage and re-examine

¹ Nangeroni, G, et. al (2022, May 25). Italy. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Italy>

their diplomatic relations with China until the end of the Cold War. Following the creation of diplomatic relations between China and France, Italy altered its policy toward China, and when diplomatic relations were formally established through trade and commerce in 1970, Italy began to face up to its strategy toward China.

The ups and downs in the process of joining the eurozone in the 1990s caused Italian politicians and citizens to be dissatisfied with the EU. Although Italy became the first member of the eurozone in 1997, the EU's assistance fell short of the Italian people's expectations, and the country's political divisions grew, eventually leading to a reduction in Italy's ties with the EU. Italy's worldwide status as a defeated country is deteriorating, therefore the country is confronted with not only the challenges of its domestic political crisis but also the challenges of the international environment. Italy's major aims at this point are to stabilize its domestic political situation, strengthen its international standing, and build its economy. China was not initially a priority in Italy's foreign policy, but with both economic and political momentum, China has progressively become an ambitious aim for the country. Small and medium-sized businesses in Italy are drawn to China and are increasingly interacting more with it, while the Italian government is gradually seeing its China policy as a weapon to highlight its worldwide stature.² On this basis, the frequency of high-level visits between Italy and China has steadily increased, and economic and trade relations and cultural exchanges have deepened.

Italy has gradually come to see China as a source of part of its economy since the European debt crisis in the twenty-first century, against the backdrop of increasing Italian public debt and decreasing credit supply, and because both China and Italy rely heavily on the manufacturing sector, there is considerable competition between the two sides, which makes Italy not fully trust China at

² Dossi, S. (2020). Italy-China relations and the belt and road initiative: The need for a long-term vision. *Italy in the 21st Century's International Politics*, 15(1), 8.

this time. The severe competition between manufacturing and third-party markets has resulted in a massive trade deficit between the two countries, making trade deficit reduction and attracting Chinese investment significant objectives of Italy's China policy. Early on, the "Belt and Road" programme showed a particular interest in increasing Italy's access to the Chinese market and balancing bilateral trade in order to attract more Chinese investment and help the country's sluggish economy recovery. Simultaneously, the two countries have increased cultural exchanges and cooperation, such as the "Sino-Italian Joint Declaration on the "Year of Chinese Culture" to be held in Italy in 2010, the "Memorandum of Understanding on Tourism Cooperation between the Tourism Administrations of the People's Republic of China and Italy," and so on. China and Italy also inked an agreement on mutual recognition of higher education degrees in July 2005. In addition, in July 2005, China and Italy struck an agreement on mutual recognition of higher education degrees.³ During this time, the EU's policy toward China was mostly focused on economic and commercial issues. In short, the two sides' relationship was closer to "collecting for profit" at this point. Italy has always used "free-rider" diplomacy, while China's rapid economic and technological progress has prompted Italy to set new development goals. As a result, both sides have accelerated their overall development since the establishment of the China-Italy comprehensive strategic partnership, but the level of economic development between Italy and China is not the same, and cooperation in the fields of economy, trade, science, and technology is at a stage of complementarity with competition. Although there have been some tiny successes in the sphere of humanistic exchanges, they have not yet reached an active level. The "Belt and Road" programme has provided new chances and highlights for Italy's policy toward China to be adjusted. Not only is economic and trade cooperation between Italy and China pushed as part of the "Belt and Road" programme, but cultural contact between the two nations has also improved.

³ Sun, Y. (2020). Annual development report of Italy (2019-2020): 50 Years of the Establishment of Diplomatic Relationship between China and Italy. *Social Sciences Academic Press*, 224.

1.2 Characteristics of Italian China Policy

China and Italy have experienced significant changes in their internal and international environments since the beginning of the twenty-first century, resulting in comparable changes in their foreign policies. It is a "weak country in a strong country" and a "resource-poor country in a resource-rich country" (Sun, 2020). The EU countries have been thrown into crisis by the sovereign debt crisis, the influx of refugees, and the development of populism, and the majority of them have been "badly wounded" by the crisis. This has resulted in difficulty in creating a foreign policy consensus, as well as a climate of "renationalization".⁴ As a result of the multiple crises, the Italian economy remained stagnant for a long time, unemployment remained high and public opinion was divided. After experiencing "no recourse", Italy's attitude towards the US and the EU gradually turned indifferent, focusing more on other countries, especially the fast-growing China.

Tables 1 Prime Ministers of Italy since the Belt and Road Initiative

Time	Name
28 April 2013-22 February 2014	Enrico Letta
22 February 2014-12 December 2016	Matteo Renzi
12 December 2016-1 June 2018	Paolo Gentiloni
1 June 2018-5 September 2019 5 September 2019-13 February 2021	Giuseppe Conte
13 February 2021-Incumbent	Mario Draghi

Italy's policy toward China has always been moderate and pragmatic, and since the economic collapse, the pragmatism in Italy's policy toward China has been more prominent. As one of the founding members of the European Union, the third largest economy in the EU, and a member of the G7, Italy's policy toward China has a substantial impact. Italy's China policy has taken a more realistic

⁴ Wang, M. (2018). Adjustment of the EU's foreign policy under the impact of multiple crises. *International Forum*, 20, 30-37.

approach in 2019 after a series of reforms in the aftermath of a highly publicized political crisis. It intends to deepen its cooperation with China in a number of sectors, such as marketing more "Made in Italy" items to the Chinese market, in order to relieve strain on the Italian domestic economy caused by issues like the European debt crisis. Despite repeated changes of administration, Italy has maintained a pragmatic approach to China in recent years, strengthening collaboration within the "Belt and Road" concept.

The year 2019 began with a spike in Italian-Chinese cooperation. In addition to pragmatism, Italy's China policy is marked by mercantilism, with an agreement on the first issuing of "panda bonds" in China to aid the expansion of small and medium-sized Italian businesses in China that lack easy access to capital. Furthermore, with a number of agreements inked, China and Italy have deepened collaboration not only in the economic, trade, and financial spheres, but also in science and technology and the low-carbon green economy. China and Italy's bilateral ties will continue to thrive regardless of changes in the domestic or international environment as long as they trust each other and deepen their practical collaboration in various fields to achieve mutual benefits. As the first EU founding member and one of the G7 countries to join the Belt and Road Initiative, Sino-Italian and Sino-European relations are symbolic. With the ascent of the Five Star Movement in 2013, the political landscape in Italy was reshaped, with the Five Star Movement becoming the country's largest party.⁵ With the termination of the "populist administration", which had been in office for just over a year, and the election of a new coalition government led by the Five Star Movement and the Democratic Party, Italy's political environment has drastically changed, revealing uncertainty. The country's position is critical, and the political environment is much more convoluted.

⁵ Li, K. (2020). The Reconfiguration of the Italian Political Party Landscape: Manifestations, causes and implications. *Contemporary World and Socialism*, 2, 121–128.

The year 2019 marks the 15th anniversary of the foundation of a comprehensive strategic partnership between China and Italy, and despite a complex domestic political situation and external environment, Italy's overall strategy toward China has held up to numerous challenges. In the midst of domestic turmoil and divergent attitudes toward China among the major political parties, the Italian government has not only strengthened its economic, trade, and investment relations with China by signing a memorandum of understanding on the construction of the "Belt and Road," but has also encouraged exchanges and cooperation between the two countries in the fields of science and technology, the green low-carbon economy, and culture. In addition, Italy has continued to strengthen bilateral and multilateral policy dialogue in key areas such as environmental protection, cultural heritage protection and health issues.⁶ As of 2019, Italy and China have signed 29 agreements in diverse fields like as trade, energy, science and technology, and culture. Italy's participation in the Belt and Road plan will enable it to take advantage of the growth and geographical benefits that come with being a marine country, revitalizing long-forgotten port building and effectively boosting Italy's standing in the European Union. That is why Italy is becoming increasingly active in international commerce and cooperation with China, becoming a leader in the EU.

1.3 Summary

In 1970, Italy defied the US by establishing diplomatic relations with China and confronting the US's China policy. The status of a defeated country, the impediment to its membership into the Eurozone, and the European Union's "cold shoulder" all put pressure on the Italian government. China, on the other hand, was considered as a country that might showcase Italy's international standing, despite the Italian government's initial non-diplomatic goal. The establishment of a comprehensive strategic partnership between Italy and China in 2004 facilitated deeper contacts and hastened the growth of bilateral relations,

⁶ Fardella, E. (2014). The Normalization of Relations between Italy and the People's Republic of China. *In Italy's Encounters with Modern China*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York. 117-146

although Italy's attitude toward China remained moderate and pragmatic. The development of the European debt crisis, frequent government changes, and a growing sense of disillusionment with the European Union and the United States have highlighted Italy's pragmatic approach to China. The "Belt and Road" programme, as well as Italy's participation in it, has provided new chances for Sino-Italian cooperation. Despite the frequent changes in the internal political climate and the international environment, Italy's policy toward China has remained pragmatic and stable.



2. The main elements of the Italian government's policy towards China in the context of "Belt and Road"

Under the possibility of a lengthy economic downturn and the refugee issue, Italy has always sought to relieve its economic strains by cooperating with China. Under the impetus of the "Belt and Road" construction, Italy's policy toward China has become more mercantilist and pragmatic since 2013, and bilateral investment between Italy and China has gradually transformed, with not only Chinese investment in Italy but also Italian investment in China showing a growing trend. The "Action Plan on the Strengthening of Economic, Trade, Cultural, and Scientific Cooperation" was signed by Italy and China in 2017 as a framework to promote economic and trade cooperation between the two countries. By the end of 2018, there were 6,000 Italian investment projects in China, with a total investment of around \$7.31 billion, and bilateral trade between China and Italy had expanded by roughly 5.7 times between 2001 and 2018. In addition, the two countries have decided to focus on third-party market collaboration and have signed a Memorandum of Understanding on third-party market cooperation. " The "Belt and Road" plan is critical not just for Asia's development, but also for strengthening Asia-Europe ties. Italy and China have unparalleled prospects with the Belt and Road Initiative as a significant platform. With the two nations' economic and trade ties developing, Italy and China are paying more attention to cultural exchanges.

In June 2018, two months after the Italian coalition government was announced, Italian officials announced that a "China Task Force" would be officially established under the leadership of Deputy Minister of Economic Development Geraci to develop a deeper understanding of China in order to deepen Italy's exchanges and cooperation with China, as well as to better study and understand China. Geraci will be working on the China Task Force in the meanwhile. At this point, Geraci stated that the previous Italian government had no united policy toward China, and that such an uncoordinated policy toward China might

be defined as a "failure".⁷ As a result of Geraci's proposal, Italy's China policy will be re-examined in order to reach a united China policy throughout the Italian government's numerous agencies. Cooperation in the cultural sphere has been underlined in Italy's strategy with China as a result of the "Belt and Road" programme. A Memorandum of Understanding on the Establishment of Cultural Cooperation Mechanisms, an Implementation Plan for Cultural Cooperation from 2015 to 2019, and a Statute on Cultural Cooperation Mechanisms between the People's Republic of China and the Republic of Italy were signed in June 2014, April 2015, and July 2016.⁸ It also indicates that Italy's strategy toward China is about more than just sustaining interest-based partnerships; it's also about delving deeper into Chinese culture and developing mutual understanding and trust.

In general, cooperation between Italy and China has accelerated in recent years, with the "Belt and Road" programme bringing new highlights and chances for both countries' development, as well as new entrance points for Italian policy toward China. With the "Belt and Road" initiative serving as a key platform for promoting Sino-Italian cooperation, the two countries have been expanding their areas of cooperation and defining cooperation in sectors such as infrastructure, ports, and logistics. The closeness between Italy and China has gradually deepened, mutual political trust has been strengthened, cultural exchanges and cooperation have yielded fruitful results, and the scale of cooperation in many fields has been expanded, laying a solid foundation for future cooperation between the two countries and enabling them to open up a deeper level of cooperation. It's also worth noting that the previous Italian policy toward China, which prioritized profit over righteousness, is gradually being counterbalanced by the deepening of cultural exchanges and cooperation between the two countries, and that the development of Sino-Italian cooperation

⁷ Xie, W. (2018, September 14). *Why Italy's populist government set up a "Task Force China."* Guancha. <https://user.guancha.cn/main/content?id=39331>

⁸ Sun, Y. (2020). Annual development report of Italy (2019-2020): 50 years of establishment of diplomatic relationship between China and Italy. *Social Sciences Academic Press*.

is no longer based solely on economic and trade pillars, but also on cultural exchanges.

2.1 The proposal of the BRI

The "Belt and Road" initiative runs through the Eurasian continent, connecting the Asia-Pacific economic sphere to the east, the European economic sphere to the west, and the North American economic sphere at the same time, and is a continuation of the ancient Silk Road and gives it new life. The situation today is always unpredictable, and the negative effects of the financial crisis are becoming increasingly evident. To date, it is the only development initiative that links the three major economic zones. Despite the West's continued distrust of the Belt and Road Initiative, the initiative is devoted to a more open and positive approach to the world economy's recovery and development, as well as the promotion of global economic integration. The Belt and Road initiative aims to promote a more open and positive recovery and development of the global economy, as well as the development of the global economic integration process, expanding opportunities for developing countries, and dispelling negative public opinion in the West through practical actions. The Belt and Road Initiative has made a significant contribution to global economic development since its beginning. The Belt and Road Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation has been signed by 123 nations and 29 international organizations, and more than 2,000 cooperation projects have been completed, providing work for tens of thousands of people and tackling global economic challenges. The programme has helped tens of thousands of people find work and handle employment issues.

Economic development is crucial, but economic cooperation will not always be seamless without the support of culture and a lack of mutual understanding and trust between the two parties. The Belt and Road Initiative has gradually shifted its main goal from economic cooperation to enhancing cultural exchanges and cooperation with countries along the Belt and Road, in order to promote communication and exchanges between countries, strengthen mutual trust, and

promote public opinion, laying a crucial foundation for future economic and trade cooperation. This will play an important foundation for future economic and trade cooperation. Under the Belt and Road Initiative, exchanges and cooperation in the fields of education, tourism and the arts have been enriched, enhancing people-to-people exchanges between the countries, and making cultural exchanges and cooperation between China and abroad increasingly fruitful. In the future, the "Belt and Road" construction will promote global economic development and cultural exchanges to a deeper and comprehensive development.

2.2 The Renzi Government's policy towards China

The year 2014 is likely to be an important turning point in Italy's domestic and foreign affairs,⁹ with Matteo Renzi coming to power as the youngest Prime Minister in Italy's history, and his Democratic Party becoming the ruling party after winning the European Parliament elections in May. Renzi's government has pursued a series of measures in an attempt to alter Italy's stagnant job market since assuming office in 2008 but has faced a twin challenge of "back and forth," with the Democratic Party under his leadership divided on constitutional reform. At the same time, several Italian parties, including as the Five Star Movement, the Forza party, and the Northern League, are highly opposed to Renzi's planned constitutional revisions. Italy's economy has been in the doldrums for a long time as a result of the European debt crisis, and unemployment is high.¹⁰ The negative growth of the Italian economy has resulted in an increase in protests, with marches taking place in more than 20 major cities, including Milan and Venice, and paralyzing buses, trains, and flights. As a result, Renzi's administration has been hampered by financial constraints, the Italian national debt has become overburdened, and the EU has

⁹ Zhong, Z. (2016). Italian Foreign Policy and Its New Role in the EU: A Party Politics Approach". *European Studies*, 34, 117–130.

¹⁰ Riotta, G. (2016, September 5). *The Resignation of Renzi, The Fall of Rome*. Foreign Policy Magazine. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/12/05/the-resignation-of-renzi-the-fall-of-rome/>

imposed increasingly harsh deficit standards on Italy, making it harder for his government to fulfil many of its reform promises.¹¹

The Italian Presidency of the European Union in 2014 was a difficult year for Italy at a politically delicate time for Europe. The severe situation in Libya, the near-collapse of EU border management, and the spread of ISIS terrorism have posed a direct security danger to a number of EU members. Italy's own economic and debt issues have been worsened by the escalating refugee crisis. During the Renzi administration, the refugee issue was a major issue, and the lack of unity within the EU on the topic, as well as political divides within Italy, had a big impact on the resolution of the refugee situation in Italy. "The Arab Spring, the war in Libya and other major events have led to a volatile situation in the Mediterranean region, which has had a huge impact on Italy's national security. The number of refugees arriving in European countries has exploded in 2015, with the number of missing and dead refugees in the Mediterranean region soaring, and the resettlement of refugees putting a huge strain on Italy's finances. On the other hand, Italy's foreign policy has always been a balance between "free-riding" and seeking diplomatic autonomy.¹² The diplomatic dependence of the EU countries on the US since the Second World War is still present today, and the US is trying to enforce strict and comprehensive sanctions against Iran and has expressed its desire for Italy to work with the US as part of this, while in fact, Italy's oil imports will be greatly hampered once it joins the sanctions against Iran, making it difficult for Italy to strike a balance between the two sides of the Iran sanctions policy and Italy's long-standing relationship with The pursuit of an autonomous foreign policy in the African region is not in line with what the United States has been demanding and is therefore likely to attract strong discontent from the United States, and Renzi's administration can be described as having "internal and external problems."

¹¹ Xu, L. (2015). Renzi, prime minister of Italy. *International Study Reference*, 4, 47–53.

¹² Ratti, L. (2012). All Aboard the Bandwagon? Structural Realism and Italy's International Role. *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, 23(1), 87-109.

2.2.1 Keeping the trade balance in the black and ensuring Chinese exports to Italy

The huge trade deficit between Italy and China, according to the Italian government, is an insurmountable barrier. Italy has been running a trade deficit with China since 2000, and bilateral trade between Italy and China reached 33 billion euros in 2013, while China's imports from Italy totaled less than 10 billion euros. Renzi stated during a meeting between the two governments in June 2014 that the long history of Italian-Chinese connections, as well as the fact that both countries are ancient civilizations, form a natural link between the two countries. The past accords with China are only a "appetizer", and he intends to expand collaboration with China by bringing more of China "into Italy" and more of Italy. To China, Italy, and even more Italy. At the same time, the Italian government is working to strengthen European-Chinese ties. During Prime Minister Renzi's visit to Beijing, the two governments issued a three-year action plan (2014–2016) to strengthen economic cooperation between Italy and China, agreeing on priority areas of cooperation in five areas: energy efficiency, environmental protection, food safety, aerospace and space, as well as signing intergovernmental agreements and commercial contracts. In addition to this, the Italian government will also support technical cooperation with Chinese research institutions.

Since the start of the "Belt and Road" initiative in 2013, China has worked hard to retain its openness and commitment to the global economy's development. Prime Minister Renzi has consistently emphasised his desire for more Chinese enterprises to invest in Italy throughout his promotional activities. Premier Li Keqiang also stated during his visit to Italy that cooperation between Chinese and Italian enterprises has become the main driving force of cooperation between the two countries, and that in the four months since the establishment of the China-Italy Business Council, the two sides have been cooperating more in the areas of investment, technology, and finance in both directions, demonstrating that China-Italy cooperation has gone beyond the origins of the two countries. This is a reflection of the high level and quality of cooperation

between the two sides, which will create even more fruitful cooperation in the future, based on the complementary advantages of both sides and the expansion of the depth of cooperation.

2.2.2 Expanding the areas of cooperation with China

Several cooperation agreements with China were made under the Renzi administration, including an agreement for infrastructure and export financing of up to €3 billion between the Italian state-owned bank and the China Development Bank.¹³ Renzi not only focused on the economic and trade sectors during his visit to China, but he also expressed an interest in Chinese culture and a desire to strengthen the dialogue and cooperation between Italy and China in the cultural field, with frequent interactions between the two countries between 2014 and 2016. China and Italy have promoted collaboration in a variety of areas in addition to economics.

Tables 2 Communication between Italy and China from 2014 to 2016

Time	Content
June 2014	Sign the “Memorandum of Understanding between Italy and China for the establishment of a cultural cooperation mechanism” to deepen cultural exchanges and cooperation between the two sides.
October 2014	Sign the “Sino-Italian Cultural Cooperation Implementation Plan 2015-2019” to implement the various collaborations.
October 2015	Launch the Sino-Italian Cooperation

¹³ Landini, F. (2014, October 15). *Italy and China sign business deals worth \$10 billion*. REUTERS.

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-italy-china-deals-idUSKCN0I327020141014>

Time	Content
	Program for Environmental Protection.
September 2016	Italian Prime Minister Renzi visited China and participated in the G20 Leaders' Summit
October 2016	Italian government and China signed commercial agreements worth eight billion euros in the fields of energy and engineering.

Source: Sun, Y. (2020). *Annual development report of Italy (2019-2020): 50 years of establishment of diplomatic relationship between China and Italy*. Social Sciences Academic Press.

Furthermore, the Italian government is concentrating its efforts on luring more Chinese tourists to the country.¹⁴ The year 2015 marked the 45th anniversary of China-Italy diplomatic ties, and the two countries commemorated the occasion with a series of key events in order to continue to deepen their cooperation in the future. In comparison to Germany and France, Italy has just lately begun to deepen its ties with China, and the Italian government has been more favourable to Chinese company acquisitions since 2014. In general, Italy's policy toward China has improved, and, as Prime Minister Renzi explained using the story of Pinocchio as an analogy, Italy will vigorously engage in more practical cooperation with China and hopes to deepen cooperation with China in a variety of fields, including port construction, healthcare, and culture, in which the Italian government has expressed interest. Furthermore, the Italian government has expressed interest in participating in the "Belt and Road" initiative. It will also play a key role in putting the four primary Sino-European partnerships of peace, growth, reform, and civilization into action.

¹⁴ Huotari, M., Otero-Iglesias, M., Seaman, J., & Ekman, A. (Eds.). (2015). *Mapping Europe-China relations: a bottom-up approach*. Mercator Institute for China Studies.

2.3 The Gentiloni government's policy towards China

The referendum rejected the previous Renzi government's planned constitutional reforms, forcing Prime Minister Renzi to resign in December 2016. Although supported by most political parties and with higher approval ratings than other leading Italian politicians, and a coalition between the Democratic Party and the right-wing centrists, the Italian president authorized Gentiloni, a member of the Democratic Party and then foreign minister, to form a transitional government, populists and some opposition parties, including the Five Star Movement, reacted angrily. For the next round of voting, the election law will be used. The populist parties have taken a hard stand against electoral reform for the next round of voting, preventing Prime Minister Gentiloni from effectively unifying the two voting systems. With elections coming up in early 2018, the pre-election period in Italy might be the quiet before the storm, with media sources saying that current polls predict results that could lead to a hung parliament and possibly even an electoral triumph for the anti-establishment Five Star Movement party. As a result, the Gentiloni government's status is insecure and unclear.

Prime Minister Gentiloni's political troubles aren't the only ones he's had to deal with in office; two earthquakes in a row have cost Italy millions of dollars, but the European Central Bank has ignored Italy's "pleading for assistance" and refused to provide any. Gentiloni argued that Italy was in the midst of the worst economic crisis since World War II in 2017, and that the heavy public debt burden and bank difficulties were urgent problems for the country, at a time when Banca dei Siena (Italy's third largest bank) was also in need of government intervention due to its impending collapse, which was the government's primary crisis. Italy had accomplished its legislative mission during Gentiloni's administration, avoiding the economic shocks that political uncertainty had brought. Even though Italian jobs had grown, Italy remained the eurozone's economic laggard, with an unemployment rate consistently higher than the European average and the country's debt rates at their lowest point throughout its presidency. The economic austerity challenge that the Renzi

government faced continues to be a concern for the Gentiloni government.

In a volatile geopolitical context, Italy under the Gentiloni government faces significant foreign policy challenges in 2017. First, in Atlanticist foreign policy circles, the influence of Italian foreign policy appears to have diminished due to the growth of foreign relations, despite the fact that the Gentiloni government has to some extent succeeded in building bridges with the United States, the growing isolationism of the United States and the uncertainty surrounding NATO and multilateralism. Secondly, within the European foreign policy community, Italy has increased its foreign policy influence by aligning itself with its European partners on the most critical security, economic and environmental issues. Finally, in the Mediterranean foreign policy circle, Italy's attempts to use its policies to resolve the Libyan conflict and the migrant crisis to make its foreign policy more active have been somewhat overshadowed by the election of French President Macron.¹⁵ Overall, during this period Italy has remained focused on its traditional interests within its three foreign policy areas, while attempting to use multilateral institutions to achieve its foreign policy objectives in an increasingly volatile global environment, increasing its global influence and its voice within the EU.

2.3.1 Italian government offers to join the BRI for the first time

"The Belt and Road initiative has made significant progress since its inception, with the number of participating countries and international organisations gradually increasing, with more than thirty countries having signed memoranda of understanding with China by 2016, and important results achieved in various areas such as infrastructure, humanities and finance. The Italian government has gradually shown a strong interest in the Belt and Road Initiative, and the decision to join China's Belt and Road Initiative and sign a memorandum of understanding appears to have been finally confirmed by the coalition

¹⁵ Simone, D. (2020). Italy-China Relations and the Belt and Road Initiative: The need for a long-term vision. *Italy in the 21st Century's International Politics*, 15(1), 8.

government under the Conte administration and is also considered to be an important step in the new Italian government's "approach to China". In May 2017, Italian Prime Minister Gentiloni took part in the first Forum on the Belt and Road Initiative in Beijing. Prime Minister Gentiloni said that, thanks to the Belt and Road Initiative, mutual benefits and win-win situations between Italy and China, and even between China and Europe, would exist in more areas, and that the Initiative would also bring opportunities for globalization, which is of great importance to Italy, which, as the end of the ancient Silk Road, is eager to participate in it. "As the end of the ancient Silk Road, Italy is eager to participate in the Belt and Road Initiative, which is why the Italian Government first proposed the idea of officially joining it. During his state visit to China the same year, Italian President Mattarella also supported the signing of a memorandum of understanding on cooperation between Italy and China.¹⁶ This has laid an important foundation for the Conte government's determination to join the Belt and Road Initiative since taking office. The meeting sent a positive message on the promotion of open international trade and commerce. As Made in Italy 4.0 has much in common with Made in China 2025, the Italian government has shown its willingness to participate in the cooperation on infrastructure development in the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, supporting a richer cooperation between the two countries' enterprises in the fields of ports, shipbuilding, and shipping. Italy is committed to the "One China" policy and attaches great importance to the development of its relations with China. It is willing to work with China to maintain high-level contacts, to maintain close ties and communication with China on major international issues, to strengthen cooperation in the fields of small and medium-sized enterprises, health care, education, economy, technology, agriculture, tourism, etc. Italian government also committed to promoting Sino-European relations.

¹⁶ Casarini, N. (2020, June 22). *Echowall*. Italy Oscillates on China. <https://www.echo-wall.eu/node/75>

2.3.2 Promote cooperation in education and tourism

As China and Italy are both important members of the international community, the two countries should maintain the momentum of high-level exchanges and continue to strengthen ties and exchanges in various fields, including government, legislative bodies, political parties and local affairs. During Prime Minister Gentiloni's tenure, China and Italy signed the "Plan of Action for the Strengthening of Economic, Commercial and Cultural-scientific Cooperation between Italy and China 2017-2020" with the aim of enhancing two-way investment, promoting industrial parks, strengthening cooperation in areas such as e-commerce, and enhancing ties between the two sides. The two sides also signed bilateral cooperation agreements in the fields of agriculture and finance. In order to deepen educational exchanges and cooperation with China, the Italian Ministry of Education issued the Chinese Language Syllabus for High Schools in September 2016 to establish a unified Chinese language teaching system, and at this time Italy has provided Chinese language courses for 100 primary and secondary schools, as well as Chinese language related majors for 40 universities. The following year, an agreement was signed between the Politecnico di Milano and Tsinghua University for The China-Italy Design Innovation Hub in Milan.

China and Italy have long had friendly relations, and through the active promotion of frequent exchanges of high-level visits, cooperation between the two countries has grown stronger, the development of Sino-Italian relations has been accelerated, and Sino-Italian cooperation has entered a new phase of rapid development. Italy has expressed its willingness to work with China to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the two countries' diplomatic relations, to fully utilize the important role of the mechanism of regular meetings between Prime Ministers, to effectively implement the "Plan of Action for the Strengthening of Economic, Commercial, and Cultural-scientific Cooperation between Italy and China 2017-2020," and to carry out extensive cooperation. Italy welcomes more Chinese citizens to travel and study in the country to get to know Italy better, and is ready to facilitate visa applications, as it promotes

cooperation in third-party markets, agriculture and small and medium-sized enterprises, as well as strengthening cooperation in port construction to promote regional connectivity and to create all-round, in-depth people-to-people exchanges in a broader field. Prime Minister Gentiloni emphasised the great potential for future human exchange cooperation between Italy and China, noting that all Italian destinations have seen record numbers of Chinese tourists in the last ten years, and he hopes that trend will continue steadily, with the Italian government committed to providing a better tourist experience for Chinese tourists. Furthermore, the Italian government expressed its willingness to work actively to promote EU-China relations and to facilitate negotiations on the EU-China Investment Agreement, as well as to actively expand practical cooperation to align China's Belt and Road Initiative with the European Fund for Strategic Investments Plan, providing new impetus to EU-China relations.

2.4 The Conte government's policy towards China

In March 2018, Italy's anti-establishment populist party, the Five Star Movement, became the largest party in parliament in the general election. In June of the same year, Salvini's far-right Alliance party and Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte's Five Star Movement party formed a governing coalition, becoming the first far-right populist government in Western history. During the 14 months of the coalition, the two parties have had many differences over issues such as taxation and immigration in Italy, with support for the Five Star Movement declining and support for the Alliance rising. As a result of the conflict with the Five Star Movement party, Salvini announced that the Alliance party could not continue to work with him and withdrew from the ruling coalition. At this time, the former "rivals", the Five Star Movement and the Democratic Party, have re-formed a new governing coalition, but the new government is still unstable, and its future is still uncertain in terms of the domestic political situation. The decision of the Conte government to sign the Belt and Road Memorandum of Understanding is the result of multiple factors, while the opposition camp is more driven by a different view of Sino-Italian

relations and a preference for the EU and the US. Due to the tense political situation in Italy in 2019, the question of whether to support the formal signing of the Belt and Road Memorandum of Understanding has been the subject of intense debate within the Italian political parties, with one side supporting the government's new pro-China policy and the other side arguing that Italy should traditionally focus on the US and the EU. The US and the EU have been working together on the "Belt and Road Initiative". The negative comments made by the US and the EU on the Belt and Road Initiative have been amplified by some of the Italian mainstream media, further exacerbating the polarized nature of Italy's parties and hence the growing conflict and contradictions within them. The different preferences of the ruling Five Star Movement party and the Democratic Party towards China, with the leaders of the Five Star Movement party favoring China and the Democratic Party favoring the US and the EU, have become a major obstacle to the formation of a unified Italian policy towards China.¹⁷

Overall, Italy has been in a state of "internal and external trouble" since 2018, with the economic downturn leading to government turmoil. At the international level, Italy's economic growth has been below the eurozone average since the financial crisis, so the Italian government, anxious to revive the domestic economy, initially looked to the European Union for assistance, but eventually gave up due to disagreements between the two sides and turned its attention to areas outside the EU. In September 2019, the new governing coalition took office and attempted to return to the mainstream EU policy framework (Sun, 2020), but Italy's other diplomatic focus was on powers outside the EU. While the Italian government has always emphasized the importance of its alliance with the United States, the Trump administration's unilateralist approach is incompatible with Italy's own interests, and Iran is a major source of oil imports to Italy, so the Italian government cannot follow the U.S. sanctions against Iran.

¹⁷ Lanzavecchia, O. (2020, August 28). Beppe Grillo still cheering for China as Italy aligns with the US. Formiche.Net. <https://formiche.net/2020/08/beppe-grillo-cheering-china-italy-aligns-us/>

In addition, the Trump administration's trade protection policy towards the European Union has had a negative impact on Italian exports, and the signing of the "Belt and Road" Memorandum of Understanding has also caused discontent in the United States, which is a source of pressure on Italy. On the other hand, the sanctions imposed by the European Union on Russia have also had a negative impact on Italy's economic interests. Against this background, Italy's foreign policy has gradually moved towards actively developing relations with Russia and China in order to safeguard its interests.

2.4.1 Signing of Memorandum of Understanding and cooperation in third party markets

While Chinese investment in key sectors has increased in Italy since 2013, it remains much lower than in other major EU economies, such as Germany and France, which have not endorsed the Belt and Road Initiative but have signed important trade and investment agreements with China. This has also had a subtle effect on Italy. "The Belt and Road Initiative aims to promote global mutual benefits and common development, and while global trade is still in the doldrums, trade along the Belt and Road has remained fluid, with China driving the development of the Belt and Road Initiative. "As the countries of the Belt and Road Initiative have advanced their trade, with total trade increasing by 4.88%, the Conte government has decided to join the Belt and Road Initiative and to gain a competitive advantage to address a long period of economic stagnation.¹⁸ In November 2018, the two countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the Dialogue between the Italian and Chinese Finance Ministers, and the following year, as part of an agreement to strengthen the comprehensive strategic partnership, the two sides established a "dialogue mechanism between the Italian and Chinese finance ministers." Prime Minister Conte has always been supportive of China's agenda and has gone to great lengths to exclude some aspects from the Belt and Road Initiative, thereby providing a "silver lining" to Italy's economic recovery.

¹⁸ G. De Maio (2020). Playing with fire: Italy, China and Europe. *Foreign Policy at Brookings*.

2.4.2 Bring the important role of cultural cooperation mechanisms between Italy and China into full play

"The "Belt and Road" initiative has not only brought economic development opportunities to many developing countries but has also promoted people-to-people contacts through cultural exchanges. Under the dual impetus of the "Belt and Road" initiative and the Sino-Italian cultural cooperation mechanism, China and Italy have been deepening their cultural cooperation since 2019, with a particular focus on illegal entry and exit, broadcasting, film and television, press and publishing, cultural heritage and the arts, as well as strong support for people-to-people exchanges between the two countries. In the same year, the second meeting of the Sino-Italian cultural cooperation mechanism was successfully held in Italy, laying the groundwork for further cooperation and plans. On the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Italy and China, the "China-Italy Year of Culture and Tourism" was organized as planned. This efficient and authoritative cooperation mechanism has enabled a new era of cultural exchange between Italy and China, as culture does not exist on its own, but is complementary to economic and trade exchanges. The opening of the "Governmental Dialogue Platform" has also led to a rapid development of Sino-Italian tourism cooperation, opening up more tourism routes and projects and becoming a successful example of cultural exchange and cooperation between China and Italy. The Sino-Italian cultural cooperation mechanism has become an important channel for deepening communication between the two sides, and under the dual role of the "Belt and Road" initiative, Italy has built the "Italian Cultural Window" and the "Sino-Italian Joint Studio". The "Italian Cultural Window" and the "Sino-Italian Joint Studio" have been set up as important windows for Chinese people to learn about Italian art, and to develop cooperation in art education between Italy and China.

Because of the intrinsic significance of language, one of the major responsibilities of the Sino-Italian cultural cooperation mechanism, a kind of

cultural exchange highly valued by both governments, is to promote language training. The "Belt and Road" project and the Sino-Italian cultural cooperation mechanism provide a solid foundation for language study and exchange programmes between Italy and China, with young people on both sides eager to learn about each other's languages and cultures. To encourage and attract Chinese students to study in Italy, Italy has developed several exchange programmes, while the Italian government has expressed its willingness to support the opening of more Confucius Institutes in China, to provide more opportunities for Italian youth to learn Chinese, to expand the scale of mutual student exchanges, and to look forward to deepening mutual understanding with China.

2.5 Summary

Despite political instability in Italy as a result of economic and other constraints, the fact that the country has had three governments in seven years, and the unfavorable international climate, Italy's attitude toward China has remained supportive generally. To deepen exchanges and cooperation with China, the three governments have made corresponding adjustments in various aspects of their policies toward China, such as trade, investment, third-party markets, tourism, and education, and the Italian government's adjustments have also laid an important foundation for the development of Sino-Italian relations. Under the "Belt and Road" programme, the Italian government hopes that the two nations would get a better knowledge of each other, strengthen their trust, deepen their people-to-people interactions, and elevate their ties to new heights. Under the "Belt and Road" programme, the Italian government stated its hope that the two nations would get a better knowledge of each other, build mutual trust, enrich people-to-people interactions, and elevate their ties to new heights.

3. An analysis of the adjustments and new features of the Italian government's policy towards China

The numerous Italian governments have adjusted their policies toward China in response to a continually changing internal and international context. Italy has attempted to obtain policy space and expand national autonomy in order to protect its national interests. Furthermore, the Italian government's policy toward China has steadily taken on a twin-wheeled economic and cultural character in order to foster understanding and trust between the two countries.

3.1 Adjustments and new features of the Italian government's policy towards China

The adjustment of Italy's policy toward China takes place within the context of the European Union's policy toward China, and since 2008, some of the EU's activities have irritated the Italian government, which has sought to move its ambitions toward other big powers in order to reap additional benefits. At the same time, certain Italian political parties are still unsure about their capacity to truly break free from their reliance on the EU and the United States.

3.1.1 Italy's reliance on the EU is relatively weak and the country's sovereign autonomy is growing

Although bilateral relations between Italy and China are vital, they are not entirely self-contained. Italy, as a key member of the European Union, is regulated by the EU, and its policy toward China is consequently inextricably tied to its relationship with the EU. Italy's reliance on the EU and the US after WWII, as well as its economic woes and the EU's "indifference" and "tough fiscal policies," prompted the country to seek diplomatic independence.

Since entering office in 2018, the new Italian government has undertaken two major measures. To begin with, Italy's categorical rejection to admit a migrant rescue boat carrying over 600 people into Italian ports is likely the first time the country has publicly "contradicted" the EU on the topic of migration. Second, the Italian government has said that it will remain in the Eurozone and will decrease its debt. The EU's and Italy's positions on the two fundamental concerns of immigration and finance are likely to conflict. In truth, Italy's open challenge to the EU on immigration was both unexpected and unwelcome. There is no shortage of measures that contradict the EU's position, according to the earlier agreement between the Five Star Movement and the coalition party to create a government. To safeguard the country's interests, the Italian government is currently pursuing a policy of reducing EU limitations and pursuing more policy autonomy.

The modification of Italy's China policy is, to some extent, within the context of the EU's China policy. There are numerous critics of China in the EU, as well as many doubts about the Belt and Road Initiative, including those who believe in the "China danger theory", "Europe is a Chinese colonial target", and "China is separating Europe". There is also a lot of scepticism regarding the Belt and Road programme, with some believing in things like the "China danger theory", "Europe is a Chinese colonial target", and "China is separating Europe". As a result, when Italy proposed joining the Belt and Road Initiative, the EU put a lot of pressure on it, claiming that China's intentions were shady and that it wanted to turn Italy into a colony in Europe in order to prevent the Belt and Road Cooperation Memorandum of Understanding from being signed. However, they were dissatisfied with the outcome. Italy paid little attention to the EU's threats, siding instead with China. While most of the EU was still championing the "China virus" during the pandemic, the Conte administration opted to believe in China's strategy and "locked the city" to the disease, putting Italy ahead of the pack in terms of epidemic prevention and control. The growth of bilateral relations between Italy and Russia, on the other hand, has been influenced by China's tight ties with Russia and the worsening of relations

between Russia and the EU. While the previous coalition parties, the Unionist Party and the Five Star Movement, focused on economic and energy cooperation with Russia, the current Five Star Movement and the Democratic Party, while not as "pro-Russian" as the previous government, place a high value on Italian-Russian cooperation. This demonstrates that the Italian government is more focused on the growth of bilateral collaboration with China and Russia, which is not limited to EU policy. As a result, this is a crucial part of Italy's long-term quest for diplomatic autonomy.

5G technology is probably the frontline in the "technical cold war" between China and the United States, but Italy has made no public remark on the subject, implying that it is avoiding such delicate matters in order to avoid offending either side. During the coalition between the Five Star Movement and the Alliance Party, the Alliance Party's leader, Salvini, chose to distance himself from China and maintain a position similar to that of the United States on issues such as 5G and investment, whereas the current coalition, the Democratic Party, believes that there are security risks and that Chinese technologies such as 5G should be kept out of Italy as much as possible to avoid the uncertainty it may bring. Despite Italy's desire to deepen its cooperation with China, the United States continues to exert influence, and when Italy and China signed a memorandum of understanding on cooperation, no mention of issues such as 5G was made, implying that Italy is avoiding an agreement that would offend the United States. Overall, though, the United States' influence has always been present, but it has been waning since the beginning of World War II. There is also apprehension about the EU's impact on Italy's China policy. The European Commission has yet to adopt a firm stance on the Belt and Road Initiative, despite the fact that EU membership would be politically and economically advantageous. Despite this, the EU has opted to bow to US pressure and withdraw from Central Asia. The EU, on the other hand, has opted to yield to US pressure and has foregone the potential to participate in infrastructure development and regional economic growth.

Domestically, the disparities in sentiments among Italy's major parties have generated uncertainty in the country's China policy. Although the Five Star Movement is a Eurosceptic party, when it first started in 2013, it had a negative stance toward China. However, following the refugee crisis, it abruptly shifted its stance toward China to one of friendship and cooperation. Instead of sharing the EU's many concerns about China and following the EU's rising support for China, the Five Star Movement has grown closer to China over time and become a key player in boosting bilateral cooperation between Italy and China. The founders of the Five Star Movement party have attacked the former Italian-US alliance, with influential members of the party writing a pro-China article that included eliminating the security risks associated with China's 5G technology and pointing the finger at the US--The American companies must be kept out instead, continues the author, as "US networks and companies have been constantly spying on the whole world".¹⁹ On the other hand, former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi endorsed the United States in the European Parliament elections on concerns like Huawei and the South China Sea, while the head of Italy's fraternal party sponsored a measure to intervene in the Hong Kong problem. Because Italy was the most hit country outside of China during the outbreak, the EU viewed Chinese help to Italy as a breakthrough to begin a "invasion strategy". China's assistance to Italy has been characterized as hypocritical, with unsubstantiated assertions that the virus originated in China. The Italian government and civil society, on the other hand, progressively acquired anti-EU attitude, as well as a sense of sorrow and grief toward the EU. Following the pandemic, there has been a noticeable shift in Italy's attitude toward China, both from the government and from its populace, who have expressed thanks to China.

Overall, Italy's policy with China is being reoriented in a good direction, although there are still some doubts. To begin with, Italy is a medium-sized

¹⁹ Lanzavecchia, O. (2020). *Beppe Grillo still cheering for China as Italy aligns with the US - formiche.net*. Formiche.Net. <https://formiche.net/2020/08/beppe-grillo-cheering-China-Italy-aligns-us/>

country that lacks independence, having been reliant on the US since WWII due to its weak international standing and influence. Despite the passage of 70 years, Italy's policies remain politically dependent on the United States (Yanhong 2020). As a result, the Italian government and leadership may virtually be defined as American vassals. Rising global trade protectionism, particularly trade frictions between the United States and other nations, has posed significant hurdles for Italy's largely export-dependent economy. Despite Italy's efforts to re-energize its economy, the obstacles it faces remain formidable, both inside and outside. As a result, Italy is attempting to strike a compromise between protecting its national interests and not insulting the United States.

3.1.2 Italy and China are cooperating in a wider range of areas and their economies are becoming increasingly complementary

While small and medium-sized enterprises are the backbone of the Italian economy, cities like Milan also define the country with their fashion brands and creativity. The manufacturing industry, with its unique advantages in gas turbines and aerospace, has always been synonymous with high-end and customized products. Through capacity cooperation, Made-in-Italy products will see more opportunities, more capital and broader markets. With the memorandum of understanding, the willingness and motivation for Sino-Italian industrial capacity cooperation will be boosted as never before. Italy specializes in precise manufacturing and high-end designing, while Chinese companies are adept at production capacity and are familiar with Asian markets. The complementary advantages of the two sides will encourage enterprises to further their investment for mutual benefits.²⁰ Through manufacturing capacity collaboration with China under the "Belt and Road" programme, Italy has gained access to greater money and a larger market. More chances are offered to the things it produces, and more Italian-made products are shipped to China.

²⁰ Dong, Y. (2019). *A New Cooperation Model*. BEIJING REVIEW.

http://www.bjreview.com/CHINA_INSIGHT_2019/APRIL_2019/201906/t20190604_800169726.html

The enormous import/export market will raise concerns about product quality, and China, according to the Italian government, is also a key manufacturing country, posing a risk to Italy. China has a significant chance of becoming a direct rival to domestic Italian manufacturing. However, in terms of exports and foreign direct investment, it is also an opportunity for Italy. Rather than sit back and observe, Italy has decided to grasp the chance and ride the Chinese wave. Italy will expand its exports of vehicles and parts, machinery, and agricultural items to China as a result of a series of trade agreements struck by Italian and Chinese enterprises during the 2nd Import Expo, which plays an important role in enhancing the commercial cooperation between Italy and China (Yanhong 2020). In 2017, Italy's exports to China grew by 24.2%, and its most famous companies, such as Bilotti, the manufacturer of coffee pots and other kitchenware, and Dairy Farm, are already present in the Chinese market through e-commerce platforms. The largest Italian shipbuilder has put into service a cruise ship for China,²¹ and trains full of "Made in Italy" products are being shipped to China with the official operation of the Chengdu-Mortara line. This is proof that the practical cooperation between Italy and China is developing in a positive direction in a number of areas under the auspices of the "Belt and Road" initiative.

On the other hand, with the "Belt and Road" Memorandum of Understanding, the willingness and motivation of Italy and China to cooperate in the industrial sector has been boosted as never before. Italy specialises in precision manufacturing and high-end design, while Chinese companies specialise in production capacity and are familiar with the Asian market. The complementary strengths of both sides will encourage further investment in each other's domestic companies for mutual benefit. Furthermore, future investments between Italy and China are likely to move in a greenfield direction, taking advantage of local strengths in talent, technology and scientific research to set

²¹ Gu, W. (2018, January 4). *China becomes Italy's largest export market as "belt and road" takes Sino-Italian cooperation to new heights*. *Guangming Daily*. <http://www.imsilkroad.com/news/p/77841.html>

up R&D centres or new production lines to create new value, jobs and tax revenues. This will not only create more opportunities for Italian workers, but will also create a virtuous circle that will bring economic and social benefits to Italian and Chinese companies. 2018 saw the signing of five projects between the Italian Industry Cooperation and Investment Matchmaking Conference and the Chinese province of Sichuan, including the first cultural and creative industry project between Italy and China, the Italian Home Experience, through which China and Italy have achieved zero distance, The project will allow the people of Chengdu to experience the Italian time. During the first China International Import Expo, the Chairman of the Bank of China said that he would also give full play to the role of a platform and bridge between the Italian and Chinese entrepreneurs' councils and work with all sectors of the two countries to promote a new level of economic, trade and investment cooperation between Italy and China.

Italy has been paying greater attention to Africa since Renzi took office, and the process of "rediscovering" it has accelerated. At the same time, Italy's economic turmoil has prompted it to seek African collaboration with China. In reality, the first collaboration between Italy and China in Africa began in 2008, at a period when both nations did not place a high importance on cooperation in third-party markets. Italy and China are steadily focused on collaboration in the third area after the "Belt and Road" programme. The Italian China Task Force was established in 2017 to guarantee that Italy is well-positioned in Europe in respect to the Belt and Road Initiative and Made in China 2025, as well as to provide an in-depth study of China. The China Task Force was established in 2017 in conjunction with President Mattarella's state visit to China, with the goal of strengthening Sino-Italian cooperation in trade, finance, investment, research and development, and third-country cooperation, as well as creating business opportunities for Italian firms.

In the energy, infrastructure, and banking sectors, Italy's international markets have already achieved some spectacular outcomes. Eni (Ente nazionale

Idrocarburi), the Italian oil and gas conglomerate, has not only had a long presence in the Middle East and Africa, but also a wealth of experience in the area. It will assist Chinese firms standardise their operations while globalising and adapting to local Italian and European business norms as Italian and Chinese companies progressively develop commercial ties in third-party markets. At the same time, Italian firms can expand their international presence by utilising Chinese firms' financial and construction capabilities. Furthermore, the Italian government has expressed its interest in promoting joint cooperation between the two countries within the Belt and Road Initiative, as well as its shared determination to put the Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation in the development of third markets signed between the two countries into effect. The Italian government will be interested in developing synergies between the Belt and Road Initiative and the trans-European transport network, as well as with Italian infrastructure, in order to improve collaboration in the domains of ports, logistics, and marine transport. Cooperation in third-party markets between Italy and China will be a positive example of cooperation between developed and developing countries, as well as countries along the Belt and Road, demonstrating to Western developed countries that the initiative is inclusive and can be a true win-win situation.

Italy can also contribute to third-party market cooperation under the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative. Developed countries are interested in promoting their companies in Asia, Africa and the Middle East, and want to utilize the opportunities provided by the development-promoting blueprint. With the agreement, cooperation in third-party markets will be a priority for the two countries (Dong, 2019). Cooperation in third-party markets will be a priority for Italy and China, according to the agreement between the two governments. Italy and China want to increase their collaboration in Africa in the future, with a focus on transportation and infrastructure, renewable energy, agriculture, and other sectors.

3.1.3 Public diplomacy cooperation between the two countries, driven by economy and culture, has a significant effect

Collaboration in the economic and commercial spheres has expanded since the formation of a comprehensive strategic partnership between Italy and China, while cultural exchanges and cooperation have been pushed in the context of the "Belt and Road" programme. Today, the evolution of Italy-China ties is marked by the progressive acknowledgement of culture as one of the major pillars of bilateral relations, as well as a "two-pronged" approach to economic and cultural interactions that has resulted in increased stability. As the end point of the ancient Silk Road, Italy was an important link in the trade route that began in Chang'an in the East and ended in Rome in the West, linking China with central Asia and Europe during the Roman Empire. Today, following the win-win development of the "Belt and Road" initiative, more frequent and intensive economic and cultural exchanges have become a common aspiration for Italy and China. Italy is currently one of the most popular destinations for Chinese tourists, with opera, football, cinema and gastronomy widely appreciated by the Chinese. As the cooperation between Italy and China grows, the two sides will continue to promote cooperation in academic exchanges, cultural performances, sports competitions and tourism. The Belt and Road Initiative will not only remove commercial and investment barriers between Italy and China, but it will also open the way for a civilisational interchange between the two nations. Collaboration in the economic and commercial spheres has deepened since the creation of a comprehensive strategic partnership between Italy and China, while cultural exchanges and cooperation have been pushed in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative. The growing acknowledgement of culture as one of the major pillars of bilateral ties has characterised the evolution of relations between Italy and China thus far, with a "two-pronged" approach to economic and cultural collaboration. A more solid connection between the two nations has resulted from the "two-pronged" strategy of culture and economy. During the Roman Empire, Italy served as the western terminal of the old Silk Road, which connected China with Asia and Europe. It began in Chang'an in the east and

finished in Rome in the west. More frequent and extensive commercial and cultural connections have become a common aim for China and Italy as a result of the "Belt and Road" initiative's win-win growth. Today, Italy is one of the most popular tourist destinations in China, with the Chinese appreciating opera, football, movies, and food. Academic exchanges, cultural performances, sporting contests, and tourism will all be promoted as the partnership evolves. Not only will the project stimulate commerce and investment, but it will also usher in a new era in the civilizational interchange between Italy and China.

On June 15 local time in Italy, at the well-known Strozzi Villa in Florence, Shanghai & Florence-Sino Italian Design Exchange Center held the opening ceremony of the celebration for its 5th anniversary. It is reported the celebration will last from June to the end of the year. During this period, a series of contests, forums, exhibitions and celebrations, including a series of exhibitions titled "Shanghai Saloon", a global design contest and innovation forum titled "iDreamer", a painting exhibition titled "The Trail of the Silk Road", will be held at Piazza della Repubblica Firenze, Piazzale Michelangelo and Sino Italian Design Exchange Center (Florence Base). By combining "coming in" and "going out", Shanghai & Florence-Sino Italian Design Exchange Center has created a new pattern for Shanghai and Florence to have cooperation and exchanges in creative and design industries, built a partnership between China and Italy on multiple levels in a broad field, promoted in-depth cooperation between China and Italy in creative and design fields, carried out the strategy of "driving multiple points by one point" in the European market. The project will add fuel to China's in-depth cooperation with Italy in design, culture and business. since it was established, Sino Italian Design Exchange Center has hosted nearly 150 cultural and creative events in different fields, of different types. The International Contemporary Chinese Calligraphy Biennale "Calligraphy Worth Collecting", Wu Changshuo's Shanghai Style Art Exhibition, as well as other cultural and art exhibitions were held here. Apart from cultural and art events, the construction of the "Belt and Road" and the Eurasian Economic Belt also have brought new opportunities for Sino-Italian

economic exchanges and trade. Therefore, Sino Italian Design Exchange Center also organized Sino-Italian Cultural and Economic Exchanges in the “Belt and Road” Tour Project, the 1st Shanghai Style Art and Design Innovation Forum during “Shanghai & Florence—Creative Twin Cities”, as well as other exchanges and forums. All kinds of colorful cultural events and exhibitions have given a unique oriental touch to Strozzi Villa, the ancient building that witnessed the most glorious times during the Italian Renaissance.²² In March 2018, the 55th International Children’s Book Fair was held in Bologna, where Italian students visited original Chinese children’s books, which means that Chinese culture and art have really entered Italy. This also means that Chinese culture and art have really entered Italy and Europe, and that public diplomacy between Italy and China has been very effective.

Cooperation in education and tourism between Italy and China is an important component of humanistic contacts between the two nations and a new driving force for Italy’s and China’s economic and social growth. As of 2019, Italy has 12 Confucius Institutes, with tens of thousands of people studying Chinese there, making it the fourth most popular destination for Chinese students. The Marco Polo and Turandot programmes have also been created by the Italian Ministry of Education to encourage Chinese students to study in Italy. At the same time, 22 Chinese universities provide Italian language courses, with some colleges adding Italian as an elective course. Italy and China have started a number of educational exchange activities as part of the "Belt and Road" initiative, and in March 2019, deans from several Italian universities visited Changjiang College in China for a seminar on international education between Italy and China, and an agreement on international educational exchange and cooperation was signed between the two countries. Italy and China signed a "Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in Language Education" in

²² Zhan, S. (2017, June 18). *Han Zheng Attends the Celebration for the 5th Anniversary of Sino Italian Design Exchange Center’s Establishment, DoBe Supports Chinese Enterprises to Go Out*. Dobe News. <https://www.dobechina.com/en/news/detail.aspx?id=1323>

May of that year, with the support of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Education, and opened the first "Sino-Italian Cultural Cooperation Class" with an accurate Italian language programme at Xiangyang XXIV Middle School in Hebei Province, as a model for Italy and China in the field of education. Cooperation and exchanges between Italy and China in the field of education are quickly expanding, with beneficial collaboration between the two countries in the introduction of international students, inter-school exchanges, and language teaching. Italy and China have close connections through project collaboration and staff exchanges. Further than 20 Chinese universities and research institutes, including Tsinghua University, have formed collaboration and exchange agreements with Italian universities, allowing for more engagement between the two countries.

Italy and China announced a plan of action in 2017 to improve economic, trade, cultural, and scientific ties, with tourism as one of the essential parts. Both sides emphasised the two governments' goal to increase visitor flow in both directions, which is critical for stimulating economic growth and improving mutual understanding between the two peoples. Italy has been one of the most popular tourist destinations in Europe for Chinese visitors in recent years, as the number of Chinese visitors continues to rise. According to official Italian statistics, the number of Chinese visitors visiting Italy increased to 1.5 million in 2017, while the number of Italian tourists visiting China increased as well. In order to promote tourism cooperation between the two countries, the Italian government has implemented a number of new policies for Chinese citizens visiting Italy, including the installation of Chinese explanations and signs at Italian airports, stations, and many tourist attractions; Italy added 11 visa centres in China in 2016 and implemented a system of issuing visas within 36 hours; and Italy has strengthened its cooperation with China to ensure the safety of Chinese tourists. Italy has strengthened its security cooperation with China by forming a joint Italian-Chinese police patrol unit to safeguard the safety of Chinese tourists. CITS and the Municipality of Milan held a tourism cooperation conference in Beijing in September 2019 to promote cooperation

between the two countries, and the 2026 Winter Olympic Games, which will be held in Milan, will also promote cooperation between Italy and China by increasing interaction between the two cities of Milan and Beijing. In-depth cultural collaboration between China and Italy not only creates a unique bridge between the two peoples, but it also serves as a catalyst for the entire growth of bilateral relations. The creation of the Eurasian Economic Belt and the "Belt and Road" project have also opened up new chances for cultural exchanges between Italy and China, bringing the two governments and peoples closer together. The administrations and peoples of the two countries are becoming increasingly close. The mutual nutrition of culture and trade between Italy and China continues to strengthen their relationship. Mutual interactions benefit civilisations, and the two countries, linked by the ancient Silk Road, are anticipated to cooperate together to expand tourism cooperation prospects through the modern "Belt and Road" programme.

3.2 Analysis of the adjustment of the Italian government's policy towards China

At a time when the Italian government is faced with the important task of enhancing its international standing and reviving its economy, China, with its rapidly growing economy, is an important target for Italian cooperation. Therefore, the Italian government has chosen to ride the Chinese wave in order to gain access to development opportunities.

3.2.1 Italy is overly dependent on the EU and the US to the detriment of its own interests.

Italy's status as a defeated country after WWII unavoidably resulted in a reduction in international standing and debate. Italy's foreign policy relied primarily on the European Union and the United States as cultural rather than political powers. The emergence of Eurosceptic populism was blamed on the EU in 2013, owing to the debt crisis, Italy's high unemployment rate, and the economic imbalance between the rich and poor in the north. The populists blame

the EU's "indifferent" austerity policies and the fact that Italy, which is located in southern Europe, is left to bear the brunt of the immigration crisis alone. Italy's long-standing dissatisfaction has resulted in a "rebellious mentality" and a refusal to "do as the EU tells it." Furthermore, the US's attempts to join Italy in placing sanctions on Iran and Russia alarmed the Italian government, setting the stage for a new approach to Italian foreign policy that would allow for more policy flexibility in order to preserve the country's interests. Since the establishment of the Five Star Movement, whose leaders have pushed for a reduction in reliance on the United States and the European Union, successive Italian governments, led by Prime Minister Renzi, have been more friendlier to China.

The "Belt and Road" plan, on the other hand, is the present international focus, combining the themes of economic integration and community of human destiny. The Italian government has a political affinity with China and recognizes the concept of a community of human destiny, believing that all countries should collaborate for global progress based on mutual benefit and respect, and that cooperation should be mainstreamed as a result. To help ease Italy's continuously high unemployment rate, the Italian government has long planned to revitalize the country's ports and create more jobs through port development and operation. The "Belt and Road" initiative is a critical opportunity for Italy to not only reshape its international position, but also to boost the development of the Italian maritime sector by exporting more "Made in Italy" products to China at lower transport costs, thereby alleviating the country's economic weakness. However, the United States has expressed significant opposition to Italy's decision to join the Belt and Road Initiative, and the Italian government is under pressure to maintain its foreign policy autonomy.

3.2.2 Economic stagnation amidst multiple challenges

Italy has always been an economic powerhouse, but it has trailed behind the eurozone average and has been unable to be propelled by the development of the European Union as a whole due to various crises. China's economy, on the other hand, has risen significantly as a result of rapid technological advancements.

Tables 3 Comparison of GDP between Italy and China (2010-2020)

Year	Italy		China	
	GDP (USD)	% of the world	GDP (USD)	% of the world
2020	1,888,709,443,687	2.2286%	14,722,730,697,890	17.3726%
2019	2,009,383,867,307	2.2947%	14,279,937,467,431	16.3072%
2018	2,091,932,426,266	2.4247%	13,894,817,549,380	16.1054%
2017	1,961,796,197,354	2.4153%	12,310,409,370,894	15.1560%
2016	1,877,071,687,633	2.4597%	11,233,276,536,744	14.7200%
2015	1,836,637,711,060	2.4450%	11,061,553,079,871	14.7257%
2014	2,162,009,615,996	2.7169%	10,475,682,920,597	13.1645%
2013	2,141,924,094,298	2.7658%	9,570,406,235,659	12.3580%
2012	2,086,957,656,821	2.7711%	8,532,229,986,993	11.3292%
2011	2,294,994,296,589	3.1152%	7,551,500,124,197	10.2502%
2010	2,136,099,955,236	3.2122%	6,087,163,874,510	9.1536%

(Source: https://www.kylc.com/stats/global/yearly_per_country/g_gdp/chn-ita.html)

According to the figures in the table, Italy's domestic GDP will decrease between 2010 and 2020. Italy has been deeply in debt and its economy has stagnated since the eurozone debt crisis, wreaking havoc on the country's overall development. With public debt mounting, Italy's economic progress has been hampered even more by the country's unpredictable political environment.

Italy is a country dominated by SMEs, who, despite their distinctive skills, rely heavily on exports to fund their operations. Furthermore, infrastructure development is critical for SMEs, and by strengthening import/export relations with China and joining the Belt and Road Initiative, Italian SMEs can gain access to Chinese investment and infrastructure development assistance. China is a significant new export market for Italy, which is largely reliant on international trade.

The main cause of the refugee crisis, on the other hand, is the displacement and forced movement of people in Africa as a result of war and the region's poor development. The influx of refugees has not only exacerbated the refugee situation in Europe, but it has also resulted in the deaths of a high number of refugees in transit due to the perilous circumstances of the Mediterranean Sea. Italy, as a southern European country, has been one of the hardest hit by the refugee crisis, which has exacerbated Italy's already slow internal economy. As a result, the Italian government has realized that the core causes of the refugee crisis must be addressed. Since Prime Minister Renzi took office, the Italian government has renewed its focus on Africa, and Chinese investment in the region has contributed to the region's stable economic development, which will help lift African societies out of poverty and reduce the number of migrants to Italy and Europe in general. As a result, the Italian government's plan to engage with China to establish collaboration in third-party markets, namely in Africa, represents a historic opportunity for international cooperation between Italy, China, and Africa.

3.2.3 Cultural exchange as a support of strengthening mutual trust between Italy and China

Cooperation is based on exchange and communication, and while political and economic cooperation are crucial for preserving bilateral relations between Italy and China, cultural cooperation is also based on these elements. Cultural cooperation is becoming a vital support for economic and commercial

cooperation between the two countries in a complex international context, and cultural interchange and cooperation is becoming an important factor in international cooperation. Cultural cooperation and exchange play a critical role in promoting political and economic cooperation between Italy and China, and the Italian government has been strengthening cultural exchanges with China and expanding the areas of cultural cooperation with China under the auspices of the "One Belt, One Road" initiative and the cultural cooperation mechanism between Italy and China, with the goal of improving mutual understanding from various perspectives. The Italian government has been strengthening cultural exchanges with China and expanding areas of cultural cooperation with China, with the goal of improving understanding between the two countries from various perspectives, reducing the distance between China and the West due to cultural and ideological differences, and laying the foundations for cooperation in a variety of fields, building a road of peace and friendship based on cultural exchanges.

The Italian government has concentrated on strengthening collaboration between the two nations in the domains of education and tourism in order to improve relations between the government and the people of both countries, using the One Belt, One Road programme as a platform for interchange. Young people are the backbone of their countries' future development, and by taking educational courses in each other's countries, young people from Italy and China will gain a better understanding and knowledge of each other's traditions and cultures, which will help to alleviate the suspicions that exist between the two countries. Tourism cooperation will aid in the promotion of more people-to-people contacts, and exchanges of visits between the two countries will not only strengthen friendship between the two countries but also expand interaction in the field of services, promoting practical economic cooperation between the two countries. As a result, cultural cooperation and exchange will play an increasingly important role in the two countries' foreign relations.

3.3 Summary

Since the start of the Belt and Road Initiative, Italian governments have made a number of changes that have given the initiative a new look. Italy has explicitly "gone against the EU" twice on the refugee crisis in 2018, indicating the Italian government's plans to gradually reduce its reliance on the EU and obtain national diplomatic autonomy. Plans of the Italian government to gradually reduce Italy's reliance on the EU and attain national diplomatic autonomy. Simultaneously, the Italian government has pushed for cooperation with China through the "One Belt, One Road" programme. However, due to Italy's political volatility, political parties' attitudes toward China have not been uniform. While the Five Star Movement has progressed from "indifference" to a "profitable" pro-China stance, former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi has maintained a united front with the US. As a result, the government's stance toward China is unknown due to the divergent views of the Italian major parties. In terms of economics, the "Belt and Road" Memorandum of Understanding has boosted Italy and China's willingness and motivation to cooperate like never before, and both sides have continued to leverage their complementary strengths to expand import and export cooperation for mutual benefit, as well as connect with third-party markets in Africa. Cultural cooperation, along with economic and trade cooperation, has become an important pillar of Italy's policy toward China, and the twin wheels of economic and cultural cooperation have expanded relations between the Italian and Chinese governments and people. Furthermore, Italy is putting a larger focus on educational and tourist exchanges and collaboration in order to improve both peoples' understanding.

4. The impact of the Italian government's policy adjustment towards China

The adjustment of Italy's policy towards China will not only have an important impact on the relationship between the two countries, but as the third largest economy in the European Union, it is also likely to have an impact on the development of China-Europe relations. Italy's accession to the Belt and Road Initiative not only enhances the close ties between Italy and China, but also dispels the negative attitudes of some European countries towards the Belt and Road Initiative.

4.1 Implications for relations between Italy and China

Sino-Italian relations have grown closer since the "Belt and Road" initiative was announced, and the two countries have continued to implement their leaders' accord and enhance their mutual political confidence. Simultaneously, Italy and China have been expanding their economic and commercial relations, with political trust serving as a fundamental pillar. The cultural cooperation and exchange mechanisms between Italy and China have enriched cultural contacts.

4.1.1 Strengthening mutual political trust between Italy and China

Italy and China are sincere partners who respect and trust one another, and the two countries have maintained a good pace of high-level interactions with frequent visits since the foundation of their comprehensive strategic relationship and the development of the "Belt and Road" initiative. Prime Minister Gentiloni attended the inaugural Belt and Road Summit in 2017 and reaffirmed his enthusiasm for the initiative. The Italian government established a "China Task Force" led by Geraci in 2018. Geraci, in particular, was extremely vocal in supporting closer relations with China and Italy's involvement in the BRI. Just before his appointment, he had written a controversial piece on Italy-China relations for the blog of Five Star Movement leader Beppe Grillo, where China

was uncritically presented as a model for Italy in several fields (including the management of public security). Once in power, Geraci assumed a highly visible role in Italy's China policy, for example by establishing at the Ministry of Economic Development a working group of China experts tasked with promoting relations with China—the so-called "Task Force Cina" (Dossi, 2020). This is the first time the Italian government has established a specific working group for a specific country, and it is also a first in Europe, strengthening the political foundation of Italy-China relations and reflecting Italy's resolve to promote growth with China. Italy and China have continued to carry out their leaders' agreement and are dedicated to elevating their bilateral relations to new heights.

The Italian government is facing a "double whammy" by joining the Belt and Road Initiative, with heavy pressure from the US administration and warnings from opposition parties such as Deputy Prime Minister Salvini, who have expressed questions about the Belt and Road Initiative's strategic goals. The strategic objective of the "One Belt, One Road" plan will continue to be questioned. The signing of the Belt and Road Cooperation Memorandum of Understanding also sparked a "big discussion" in the Italian government over China, which impacted the continuity of Italian policy toward China, but the Italian government surmounted the barriers to sign the Memorandum of Understanding. In the history of Italian-Chinese relations, the year 2020 was particularly memorable, as the two countries worked together to win the war against epidemics, setting a new example of mutual assistance and cooperation and enriching the friendship between the Italian and Chinese peoples, further consolidating and strengthening their political trust. Political trust, on the other hand, is critical for economic and trade cooperation between the two countries. As a result, China and Italy will continue to strengthen mutual political trust, uphold the spirit of seeking common ground while respecting differences, strengthen their comprehensive strategic partnership, and strive for greater accomplishments under the "Belt and Road" initiative to benefit the people of both countries, as well as collaborate to make the due contribution of a great

power to world peace and development. We will work together to maximise great power contributions to global peace and development.

4.1.2 The economic and trade relations between Italy and China have been expanded

Political trust between countries is a prerequisite for economic and trade cooperation, and since the start of the "One Belt, One Road" programme, political trust between Italy and China has grown, resulting in a gradual growth in economic and commercial collaboration. Italy and China are strategic partners who work together to achieve mutual benefit and win-win outcomes, and their economies are very complimentary. For China, Italy serves as a major gateway into the EU. In particular, Italian ports such as Venice, Genoa, Trieste, and Ravenna present strategic access points to shipping routes along China's 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, the major maritime axis of the BRI. For Italy, the Chinese redevelopment of the Greek port of Piraeus shows the promise of what could happen with its ports. Under the Chinese, Piraeus has become the busiest port in the Mediterranean, and this in turn has led to significant job creation for the local economy.²³ Trade cooperation has traditionally been a cornerstone of the two nations' relationship, and the "Belt and Road" programme has increased Mediterranean shipping trade between Italy and China due to their complementary resources. Italian and Chinese companies are collaborating closely through mergers and acquisitions, joint ventures, and in 2015, Italy became the first country to join the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and economic and technological collaboration between the two countries has been quickly growing since 2017. Furthermore, Italy took part in the first high-standard China International Import Expo, bringing more Italian-made goods to the Chinese market, and both parties announced that Italy will be the guest of honour at the second China International Import Expo.

https://www.esteri.it/en/sala_stamp/archivionotizie/comunicati/2013/10/2013

²³ Lim, A. C.-H. (2019, May 16). *The Sin- Italian Relations Under the BRI*. WORLD GENERATIC INSIGHTS. <https://wgi.world/the-sino-italian-relations-under-the-bri/>

1030_comun_ita_cina/

The establishment of the Italy-China Governmental Committee and regular high-level dialogue between the two nations, on the other hand, have established a solid institutional foundation for collaboration and have increased their economic connections. Italy and China have achieved progress not only in economic and commercial cooperation, but also in corporate investment, which has emerged as a new highlight of the two countries' economic collaboration, fueled by the "One Belt, One Road" project. China increased its investment in Italy by 7.8 billion euros in 2015, making it the most attractive EU member state for Chinese investment. At the same time, the quantity and value of Italian investment projects in China has grown, with total Chinese investment in Italy surpassing €13.5 billion by the end of 2018 (Sun, 2020), and total two-way investment between the two nations surpassing \$20 billion. As 2020 marks the 50th anniversary of the establishment of bilateral diplomatic relations, China and Italy will further deepen political mutual trust, adhere to the spirit of treating each other as equals and seeking common ground while reserving differences, respect their respective development paths, and jointly build a closer comprehensive strategic partnership.²⁴

4.1.3 Deepening the cultural exchange between Italy and China

In recent years, cultural cooperation between Italy and China has maintained a strong momentum, particularly since the two governments established the Sino-Italian Cultural Cooperation Mechanism in 2014, which has enriched cultural exchange activities and expanded the scope and level of cooperation between the two countries. Both countries have pledged to collaborate in the battle against cultural heritage theft. China has also taken part in major Italian cultural events such as Milan Fashion Week. Chinese opera has also performed at smaller events in Italy and got positive feedback. Simultaneously, Italy is taking

²⁴ Li, R. (2019, March 21). *Strive for a better future for China-Italy relations*. People's Daily. <http://en.people.cn/n3/2019/0321/c90000-9558991.html>

part in the Shanghai International Arts Festival and the Beijing International Music Festival. The demand for Chinese language and culture studies in Italy is steadily increasing, thanks to the growth of the "One Belt, One Road" programme and increased cultural interchange and collaboration between Italy and China. Many universities and research institutes have formed exchanges and collaboration, and the Chinese National Committee for the Study of Italian is gradually increasing its financing for Italian language studies in Italy. The tourism collaboration between Italy and China has also achieved significant dividends, with Italy being one of the most popular European destinations for Chinese tourists, as well as an increase in the number of Italian visitors to China. In the realm of cultural heritage protection, the two nations have achieved significant progress, with Italy's repatriation to China of over 700 cultural artefacts in 2019 serving as a model. Furthermore, Italy proposes expanding cooperation in film, television, and multimedia to fulfil the needs of both Italians and Chinese people, allowing both countries to understand each other in new ways.

4.2 Implications for European and Chinese relations

The evolution of relations between China and Europe, as two great world powers, has received a lot of attention. The adjustment of Italy's attitude toward China has had an impact on Sino-European ties, and the prominence of Sino-Italian relations is likely to be a major contributor to Sino-European relations' development, notwithstanding the US's relatively minor role.

4.2.1 Advancing relations between Europe and China

Since the outset, the bilateral relationship between Italy and China has been in the forefront of European-Chinese relations. Following the reshuffle of the Italian government in 2018, the ruling party has gradually concentrated on China's policy, and the two nations have maintained high-level interactions, with frequent visits. The Italian government is working to develop economic

and trade ties with China, with bilateral trade and the number of tourists and international students visiting the two nations on the rise. At the level of people-to-people exchange, mutual understanding and trust should be enhanced to eliminate misconception and prejudice.²⁵ The "One Belt, One Road" project has resulted in more frequent meetings between Italian and Chinese leaders, as well as increased cooperation in fields such as education, industry, business, and tourism. On the 40th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Italy and China, Italy also held a "Year of Chinese Culture," demonstrating that Chinese culture has been successfully promoted in Italy and that both sides aspire to strengthen their cultural understanding of one another. Both Italy and China might seek new development prospects in this environment. Italy's attitude toward China is critical for the development of relations between Europe and China as a core member of the European Union.

"Europe and China, as the two great forces, two important marketplaces, and two major civilisations in the world, are of global significance, regardless of what they stand for, oppose, or collaborate on," Xi Jinping once declared. There is no geopolitical confrontation between Europe and China in their fundamental interests. Cooperation between Europe and China is expanding as China develops and the EU's crisis worsens, yet competition and disagreements cannot be erased, and ideological prejudice against China exists among EU member states. From a values-based perspective, some EU member states are more willing to interfere in China's internal affairs, such as Tibet and Taiwan, than from a pragmatic perspective, and have even expressed reservations about the "Belt and Road" initiative and the "16+1" cooperation mechanism in Central and Eastern Europe. Both are seen as China's attempts to "split Europe". Faced with the European debt crisis, populism, and the refugee crisis, the EU has grown more pragmatic and mercantilist in its approach to China, believing that it is in charge of its own destiny in the face of China's rapidly growing economic

²⁵ Men, H., & Jiang, P. (2020). The China-Italy Comprehensive Strategic Partnership: Overview and Pathways to Progress. *China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies*, 6(04), 389-411.

and technological might. Despite the fact that Europe and China share mutual interests, they will need time to acclimatise. Italy's importance in China has made it a significant contributor to the development of European-Chinese relations.

Italy was one of the first Western European countries to recognise the new China, and following Brexit, it became the EU's third largest economy, therefore its objective position and voice in the EU cannot be overlooked. Italy and China have decided to enhance their relations since Renzi took office as Prime Minister of Italy. At the same time, Italy has indicated its desire to support the strengthening of China-European collaboration and to play a significant role in the development of bilateral relations. With the exception of Central and Eastern European nations that have already joined the initiative, the EU has always been sceptical and sceptical of the Belt and Road Initiative. The majority of these countries remain on the fence. The admission of Italy, led by the Conte government, was the first to dispel some EU countries' reservations about the Belt and Road Initiative, boosting cooperation between other EU member states and China under the Belt and Road framework. Chinese enterprises have created a considerable number of jobs in numerous European countries. As a result, EU countries are increasingly seeking to be China's EU partners. The complementarity and mutual benefit shared by Italy and China over the years has also acted as a model, drawing the EU and China closer together and creating more favourable chances for cooperation. At the same time, the expansion of cooperation between the two sides has boosted EU-China relations, strengthened the Eurasian connection, and is likely to push cooperation between the EU and China to new heights in the "Belt and Road" framework (Sun, 2020).

4.2.2 Dilution of the US factor

The world is concerned about the course of the relationship between China and the United States, which is marked by disparities in history, culture, and social

systems. While cooperation between China and the United States can help the world achieve peace and development, the United States has long viewed China as a threat. The US has consistently pushed the "China threat theory" and other rhetoric in an attempt to undermine collaboration between China and the CEE countries since the establishment of the "16+1" cooperation mechanism between China and the CEE countries. The EU and China are collaborating too closely, causing a problem in the United States. For the United States, competition is significantly more important than cooperation, and the trade war has brought the relationship to a "freezing point." Whether it is the blatant involvement in China's domestic affairs, the deliberate suppression of Huawei, or the smear campaign against China during the epidemic breakout, the growth of friendly relations between China and the United States has been severely harmed. The US-China relationship has been at a crossroads since Biden assumed office, with new opportunities and difficulties. While the call between the US and Chinese presidents showed that the US will review its relationship with China, implying that relations could be improved, a White House spokesman stated that the US would remain tough on China while reorganising its domestic economy. The future trajectory of bilateral relations between the United States and China may be less unpredictable, but it remains uncertain, which will have an impact on the EU-US relationship as well as the EU-China connection.

Since World War II, Europe has forged a special transatlantic relationship with the United States, and the European region's reliance on the US has grown. The growth of China's relations with the EU has been influenced by the ups and downs in relations between Europe and the United States over the decades. The Biden administration is the election outcome that Europe expected, and the US would return to multilateralism, with the connection between Europe and the US as the primary priority. On the one hand, it is difficult to agree on the EU and US strategic objectives, which have always been more focused on competition with China, and part of the reason for repairing relations with the EU is to find "allies" to jointly contain China's development, whereas the EU is

more concerned with internal economic development and an unstable neighbourhood, so the EU will not easily give up its own interests in favour of the EU. As a result, the EU will not easily abandon its own interests in order to serve the US. The EU, on the other hand, is continually pursuing "strategic autonomy" in the hopes of achieving parity with the US, but the US has yet to reciprocate. The EU and the US are always at odds in the Middle East and Africa, and the US may not assist them. As a result, the EU still requires China's assistance in some areas.

The United States has always been a key player in the EU-China relationship. Unilateralism and hostility to European integration have converted the EU's over-dependence on the US since World War II into despair since Donald Trump assumed office. When it became evident that Italy was considering joining the Belt and Road Initiative, the US cautioned that it was a debt trap and a neocolonial project, and that joining it would not solve Italy's domestic economic issues but would rather exacerbate them. Joining the Belt and Road Initiative would undermine Italy's international image rather than help it solve its own economic challenges. On the other side, Italy has defied repeated US warnings and publicly proclaimed that China is its most important and crucial strategic partner, as well as signing the Belt and Road Memorandum of Understanding, implying that the US is pursuing a "new Cold War" with the EU. This also means that the "new Cold War" or "anti-China alliance" that the US is attempting to wage with the EU has a gap. Furthermore, the EU and China share a great deal in common, and through mutual trust and cooperative efforts, they may find common ground while retaining their distinctions and mutual benefits. As a result, while the US has always been a significant factor in the EU-China relationship, the EU's engagement policy with China will not be abandoned as a result of US intervention, especially as the EU's internal and international environments have changed, and the US's long-standing influence in the EU-China relationship has weakened.

4.3 Summary

The reorientation of Italian policy toward China is critical for Italy as well as China's bilateral relations with the European Union. With the advancement of the "Belt and Road" programme, high-level contacts between the Italian and Chinese governments have been increasing. The Italian government established a China-specific working group as a first European effort, strengthening the political underpinnings of China-Italy ties. The "One Belt, One Road" programme has enriched economic, trade, and cultural exchanges between Italy and China, bringing relations between the two countries to new heights. The expansion of bilateral relations between Italy and China, on the other hand, has acted as a model and has resulted in more favourable chances for cooperation between the EU and China, giving the EU-China relationship a boost. The signature of the "Belt and Road" Memorandum of Understanding goes against the US's long-held policy of isolation from China, and it indicates that the US's influence in relations between Italy and China, as well as between China and Europe, is steadily eroding.

5. Conclusion

Italy and China have had diplomatic relations for 51 years now. The world situation has changed dramatically during this time, but Italy and China have always weathered the storm together, deepening their relationship and collaboration based on mutual respect, tolerance, and mutual gain. On the political front, the "One Belt, One Road" programme has increased the number of visits between Italy's and China's leaders, contributing to the development of amicable relations between the two nations. On the economic front, Italy signed a Memorandum of Understanding with China in 2018 as the first EU and G7 member state on the construction of the "Belt and Road," which not only continues the friendship between Italy and China, but also revives the history of the "Silk Road." It also paves the way for stronger ties between China and European nations. In terms of humanistic interactions, Italy and China both have a rich cultural legacy, and since the start of the "One Belt, One Road" programme in 2013, the two countries have held various cultural conferences to promote cultural exchanges and engagement. According to former Italian Prime Minister D'Alema, the number of young Italians learning Chinese is on the rise, which was unthinkable just a few years ago. China has opened an increasing number of Confucius Institutes in Italy as relations between the two countries have improved. More Confucius Institutes in China are welcomed by Italy, which hopes that more Italian students will learn Chinese on a long-term basis, as well as more Chinese students studying Italian. There is more room for future development between Italy and China under the Belt and Road Initiative. The signing of the "One Belt, One Road" Memorandum of Understanding has resulted in significant achievements in the third-party market, cruise ship production, and energy, laying the groundwork for both sides' long-term prosperity. Furthermore, Italy's geographical advantage, particularly its ports, will continue to strengthen bilateral cooperation in the fields of ports and maritime transport. Second, cultural exchanges between Italy and China have been extensive and varied, strengthening mutual understanding, and the 2020 Sino-Italian Year of Culture and Tourism has inaugurated a new chapter in these

exchanges. Finally, the evolution of the relationship between Italy and China will have a positive impact on the relationship between the EU and China, as the US's influence in the EU-China relationship will gradually fade, and the EU-economic China's and trade development will reduce China's long-standing reliance on the US.

On the other side, the new epidemic's abrupt emergence has created unprecedented economic, political, and social concerns around the world. In the face of the epidemic, Italy and China have aided each other as allies. Italy was swift to provide supplies to China to combat the pandemic at the height of the epidemic. China, on the other hand, was the most active in supporting Italy during the outbreak, sending three medical teams to the country with enormous amounts of medical supplies. The disparity between China's active aid and the European Union's "indifference" has prompted Italian Prime Minister Conte and his Five Star Movement party to express their heartfelt thanks for China's unwavering cooperation and to denounce misleading statements made against China. It is expected that Italy's and China's relationship will improve in the future. China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi paid his first visit to Europe following the outbreak, and Italy was the first G7 country to sign a Memorandum of Understanding on Belt and Road collaboration. During the visit, the two nations signed two new trade agreements, bolstering the Sino-Italian relationship even more. Furthermore, the Italian government emphasised its desire to see fresh progress in cooperation projects within the Belt and Road Initiative, as well as to deepen bilateral collaboration in areas such as commerce and economics, energy, and global governance. The meeting between Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and Italian Foreign Minister Di Maio not only summed up the 50 years of diplomatic relations between the two countries, but also laid out a plan for the next 50 years of bilateral relations between the two countries, with the promotion of the "Belt and Road" as a major driving force in the development of relations between the two countries. The friendship between Italy and China has thus far weathered the test of time, with both sides putting aside personal interests and politics to lend a hand. Rather than harming the connection

between Italy and China, this sudden outbreak has strengthened it, and the two countries' friendship will grow as a result. The positive growth of relations between Italy and China will have a significant impact on the development of EU-China relations.



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