

China, Italy and COVID-19: Benevolent Support or Strategic Surge?

by Francesca Ghiretti

The bilateral relationship between Italy and China is back in the spotlight one year after the signature of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on China's Belt and Road Initiative. To date, Italy is the second hardest hit country by COVID-19 pandemic after China. Despite strict measures in place to limit the crisis, numbers keep rising, placing the national health care system under severe strain.

In these uncertain times, prompt and decisive responses are needed and expected. One can argue on the circumstances, the hidden motivations and the numbers, but nobody can deny that China has provided prompt and direct support to Italy in its time of need.

In return, Italians' have been grateful, perhaps not as much as some Chinese media would like their home audience to believe, but China's effort has indeed been appreciated. Following Italy's request, China sent medical supplies and staff, receiving much media and

political attention in Italy.

Two elements have contributed to the success of the Chinese aid campaign: the lack of alternative support in the early stages of the crisis and a savvy media promotion strategy.

China's activities gained attention in light of the slow reaction by actors on which Italy has traditionally relied. As per an all too familiar playbook, the EU took too long to respond, fellow member states displayed counterproductive initial reactions, such as blocking exports of face masks to Italy, and the US was preoccupied with its own affairs. The situation has now changed, and all of the above actors have been contributing to the Italian struggle in one way or the other.¹ However, in a

¹ "Riprende l'export di mascherine verso l'Italia: Germania e Francia costrette a piegarsi alla Ue", in *QuiFinanza*, 15 March 2020, <https://wp.me/p6tFBd-1w2d>; "Germany Treats First Italians As Coronavirus Care Crosses Borders", in *Reuters*, 24 March 2020, <https://reut.rs/2xoXnSY>.

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crisis where prompt responses matter, this delay may have come at a heavy price.

The lack of an efficient and pervasive communication strategy represents another shortcoming in Europe's response. Even when EU partners came to help, this was not communicated either extensively or adequately. For example, a video of the President of the Commission attempting to express the EU's support for Italy is unlikely to either compensate for the lack of initial responses or be enough to win over the trust of the population. However, the EU's mistakes are no doubt dwarfed by the almost complete lack of solidarity from the US Trump administration, particularly in the early stages of the crisis.

Chinese communication, on the other hand, has been relentless. The account of the Embassy of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in Italy has been posting videos, vignettes, slogans and messages non-stop. The Ambassador himself has been releasing interviews and personal messages of support to the Italian population.²

The narrative is simple: we understand what Italy is going through and are here to help. To this, a touch of benevolent reciprocity has also been added: as Italy helped us in 2008 after the earthquake in Sichuan, we are helping you now. The message is that China does not forget those who assist her, thus contrasting expressions of Chinese gratitude and reciprocity to a supposed selfishness of

² See the official Twitter account of the Embassy: <https://twitter.com/AmbCina>.

other Western actors.

Chinese propaganda is often described as "cheap"; one can see right through it. Nonetheless, thanks to the favourable environment created by the health crisis and by the initial lack of support by other actors, it appears to have struck the right chord with many in Italy. Social media posts by the Chinese Embassy in Italy have received messages of gratitude by Italian users. Some of these may be bots, but most are sincere expressions of gratitude.³

A different type of reasoning is however required to comment on Chinese efforts to target politicians and decision-makers. Recently, and for the first time, the magazine *Cinitalia* has been sent to all Italian MPs.⁴ Arguably, this has been done to sweeten their views on China. Here, however, lies an excellent example of ineffective propaganda.

Firstly, the content of such magazine can generally be summarised as full-blown propaganda.⁵ Secondly, the

³ See, for example: Ambasciata Repubblica Popolare Cinese in Italia, Forse te ne sei dimenticato, ma noi ricorderemo per sempre, Twitter post, 17 March 2020, <https://twitter.com/AmbCina/status/1239246287280771081>.

⁴ Gabriele Carrer, "Bastone (a Gasparri) e carota (a tutti gli altri). La Cina all'assalto del Parlamento", in *Formiche.net*, 20 March 2020, <https://formiche.net/?p=1280885>. *Cinitalia* is a bimonthly magazine edited by the Italian section of China Radio International and GBTimes Italia and is the only official bilingual magazine for Chinese and Italian institutions covering topics such as culture, economy, politics, customs, gastronomy and travel from both countries.

⁵ Usually, *Cinitalia* issues include only positive information on both Italy and China – i.e. Confucius Institutes are positive for Italian universities, there is growing economic reciprocity between the two countries, China

magazine has been around for a while, but it had never been sent to MPs before. This sudden gift has therefore triggered suspicion among some recipients. Efforts like this are thus likely to backlash and do not represent an effective means to influence opinions.

Moreover, China is walking on very thin ice. If Beijing wants to keep capitalising on its communication campaign, it should avoid making conjectures on the presence of the virus in other countries – in this case Italy – before it appeared in China.⁶ While such statements are not as heavy handed as the theories circulating on Chinese media that accuse the US army of bringing the virus to Wuhan, it is prone to create uneasiness in Western countries.

That said, it is important to bear in mind that the first concern of President Xi and more generally of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is regime survival. Thus, a lot of the Chinese propaganda we see in the West is actually aimed at domestic audiences in China (and its diaspora). This element is often silent in the many recent analyses, particularly in the West, and yet is fundamental to understand the goals and type of communication China is using.

Now, the elephant in the room must be addressed, what is the scope of all of

will always be open for Italy (and vice versa), plus praises of the CCP and its initiatives.

⁶ See, for example: Global Times, *According to NPR: Doctors in Italy remember having seen very strange pneumonia in December and even November*, Twitter post, 22 March 2020, <https://twitter.com/globaltimesnews/status/1241616284271300608>.

this? Is China genuinely helping its friends in distress, or is there more than meets the eye?

According to some, China is exploiting this moment to reshuffle the cards of the international order and craft a special position for itself and its soft power vis-a-vis other countries, particularly in the West.⁷ It is difficult to picture with precision what China's end game is. However, we can safely assert that the country is trying to make great lemonade out of some very sour lemons.

Crises are always a great opportunity for change. Xi Jinping now has the chance to once again try to project the image of a benevolent and solidary China, rising peacefully.

According to these narratives, Italy is the weak link of the West, the first EU country that signed a MoU with China, thus opening the gates of Europe to China's geopolitical plans, as if Beijing was not already active on the continent. Months of work to reassure its Atlantic partners that Italy stands squarely within the contours of its traditional alliance system have been nullified by the arrival of COVID-19 and the resumption of speculation on a supposed Rome-Beijing connection.

Let us therefore reassure our friends and allies. Italy is not selling its soul to China nor is about to endanger Europe or the Atlantic alliance. A few elements

⁷ James Kynge and Hudson Lockett, "From Cover-up to Global Donor: China's Soft Power Play", in *Financial Times*, 24 March 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/efdec278-6d01-11ea-9bca-bf503995cd6f>.

should be considered: the extraordinary situation and how China views Italy.

People sometimes seem to forget that a health crisis is occurring, that Italy, but not only Italy, needs medical supplies and that most of this production takes place in China.⁸ It is indeed difficult not to play geopolitics when China is in the picture and it is right to raise concerns and to call for more awareness on the situation. However, to interpret the purchase and reception of medical assistance from China as another example of Italian naiveté or, worse still, as being complicit in Beijing's geopolitical aims, is a step too far.

If the worry is that China could buy Italian enterprises in distress or offer a loan to Italy and push the country into an alleged debt-trap,⁹ this is very unlikely to happen for two reasons. The first is that China's economy is not doing great itself and long gone are the days of double-digit GDP growth. Nowadays, China is very unlikely to invest in anything that might not bring returns, and failing Italian enterprises are a dangerous bet. Secondly, Italy is already preparing to further strengthen its ability to protect enterprises from external acquisitions.¹⁰

Moreover, it is likely that for China, Italy is nothing more than a market opportunity to sell medical supplies and a testing ground to see whether its new communication strategy works. As things develop, China has already moved on, offering similar support to other countries.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic comes at a time where geopolitical considerations have returned to centre stage and the debate on China is highly polarised and politicised. The fact that Italy is currently the Western country with most cases and thus in need of support and that this support came from China strengthened old conjectures as to the Italy-China relationship.

Global partners, however, should stop considering Italy as a weak link and understand that while circumstances made Italy the first country to receive Chinese aid, it will not be the last. We are facing a global health crisis and if we want to overcome it, we should all adopt a more pragmatic approach. This does not mean being blind, but it also does not mean refusing vital aid for political or ideological reasons.

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⁸ The COVID-19 pandemic has further strengthened concerns regarding the implications of the centrality of China in the global value chain and in the production of goods, including medical supplies.

⁹ Gabriele Carrer, "Bastone (a Gasparri) e carota (a tutti gli altri)", cit.

¹⁰ Cesare Milani, "Italian COVID-19 Law Decree Suspends Terms of All Administrative Procedures", in *Latham.London*, 19 March 2020, <https://www.latham.london/?p=4245>.

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