



Master's Degree in International Relations

**“The fragile balance:
the new era of Italo-Chinese relations in the aftermath
of the BRI.**

**Redefining the China partnership while strengthening
the European and American alignments”**

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Introduction

The beginning of the XXI century has undeniably witnessed a fundamental shift of the equilibria in the international scenario, characterized by the ascendance of China as a global power. As a matter of fact, through its rapid economic expansion and ambitious foreign policies, Beijing has been capable of positioning itself as a central player on the world stage, challenging the theoretical and pragmatic role of the USA hegemony. The Rise of China represents therefore one of the most recent significant transformations of the global scenario: occurred in a relatively short period of time, it has not just pictured a development of the economic and political significance of Beijing, but it has fundamentally reshaped the paradigm of the international politics in a highly significant manner.

In this framework, the **Belt and Road Initiative** (BRI) represents one of China's most revolutionary projects. With the declared ambition of infrastructure development and trade connectivity between Asia, Europe, and Africa, this program rapidly became a pillar of Beijing's foreign policy. While more than 140 countries embraced the project with enthusiasm, others, especially the United States and the G7 members, expressed strong skepticism about it. Nonetheless, with the big surprise of its traditional allies, in 2019 Italy became the first and only G7 country to adhere to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative.

Dating back to ancient times, despite the vast physical distance between them, Rome and Beijing have historically shared significant interactions. As the two most influential Empires of their era, the Romans and the *Seres* engaged in indirect trade through intermediaries, with Rome already experiencing a notable trade deficit in the II century A.D. Over time, economic exchanges fostered cultural connections, especially as Italian merchants, explorers, and Christian missionaries travelled eastward, producing mutual curiosity and understanding. As a result, the peoples of the Italian Peninsula were among the first westerners to establish contacts with the Chinese Empire. This historical tradition has become one of the modern arguments for strengthening the ties between Rome and Beijing, setting the stage for the contemporary cooperation between the two nations in the BRI.

By signing the famous *Memorandum of Understanding* (MoU) in March 2019, Italy officially joined the Belt and Road Initiative. This decision, driven both by national political and economic considerations, positioned Italy at the center of a controversial partnership, balancing economic national benefits and external political concerns by its traditional allies. Initially celebrated as a symbol of renewed national pragmatism, Rome's membership to the BRI soon became an international political issue, bringing the new Italian governments to reconsider the question in the

succeeding years. In fact, in 2024, the country formally withdrew from the agreement, concluding officially the Rome-Beijing BRI cooperation. The termination of the MoU consecutively opened the door for broad political and economic uncertainty on the future of Italo-Chinese cooperation, calling for an urgent reconsideration of this relationship. Later in the year, with the will to redesign their critical ties, Rome and Beijing inked an Action Plan, a document that, according to this thesis, inaugurated a new phase of the Italo-Chinese partnership.

This new spirit of the Rome-Beijing relations is exactly at the center of the thesis; in fact, at the heart of this research lies the interrogative: **why and how has the Italian approach vis à vis China changed through time?** To answer to this question, the analysis will focus on a deep understanding of the reasons and the means behind Rome's changing stance on Beijing. From the rationale of the signature of the Memorandum until the visit of Meloni in China and the inking of the new Action Plan, the thesis will analyze the main motivations and tools used by both governments to reshape their cooperation towards more advantageous terms. In this sense, the five years of the Memorandum will also be scrutinized in light of the complex situation of global economic, health and political instability that characterized the 2019-2024 era, considering also the potential effects of these events on the will of the parties.

Moving to 2024, this thesis has also the ambition to signify the new Italian approach to China, asking: **how can the renewed Italo-Chinese relations be defined in the global context?** This sub-research question will help the thesis to deepen further into the topic of the current Italo-Chinese relations, grasping the complexity of the presence of external drivers on its decision making. In this sense, the study will be then finalized with the attempt to assess the future of these relations, providing a comprehensive view of contemporary Italo-Chinese ties within the broader international political landscape. Therefore, as a final element of attention, the study will also explore the prospects and trajectories of these relations in today's evolving global context.

With all these ambitions, this thesis will therefore be structured as follows:

Firstly, in “*Shifting global equilibria: The Rise of China and the new World Order*”, the study will focus on introducing the concept of the Rise of China, exploring the historical relations between Washington and Beijing and examining the evolving theoretical discussion on the new global order. Subsequently, space will be dedicated to the analysis of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), with the aim of explaining the geopolitical and economic significance of this pioneering policy and emphasizing the relevant major western criticisms. Secondly in “*Bridging Opportunities: Italy in*

the Belt and Road Initiative”, the attention will shift to the understanding of the Italian choice to access the BRI in 2019. The chapter will open by observing the European Union’s stance on China at the time, highlighting the increasingly skepticism of western countries towards Beijing. It will then address the benefits of the Italo-Chinese partnership and analyze the key reasons that led Rome to accept Beijing’s proposal. This will be followed by the analysis of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), unveiling the terms of the Italo-Chinese cooperation. Thirdly, after five years of challenging partnership, “*Untangling the ties: Italy’s withdrawal from the BRI*” will delve into the consideration of the key drivers behind Italy’s decision to terminate the MoU with China, assessing both external and internal political factors as well as concerns over the economic profitability of the initiative. The process of withdrawal and the reactions of both parties will be then discussed, providing a comprehensive understanding of Italy’s decision-making process at the time. Lastly, in “*Redefining the Italo-Chinese relations in the global perspective: Italy’s renewed balance of interests*”, the study will move towards the analysis of the new Action Plan signed between the Italian and Chinese governments in 2024. The analysis will be extended until the contemporary geopolitical framework, evaluating the American, European, Chinese and Italian ambitions in light of the evolutions of the global chessboard. In so doing, the final chapter will offer a snapshot of the very current state of the Italo-Chinese relations and more in general of the broader international landscape. In its conclusion, the thesis will synthesize the key findings of this study, providing an answer to the research question and offering a final picture of the future prospects of the Italo-Chinese relations.

By the completion of this thesis, the reader will acquire a comprehensive understanding of the evolution of the Italo-Chinese relations, from the period of initial alignment during the MoU signature, to the subsequent redefinition of ties through the Action Plan. Ultimately, this thesis aims to provide a broad perspective of the shifting nature of Italy’s foreign policy vis à vis China, while also presenting a conceptual framework to interpret the future evolution of this pivotal relationship.

Finally, this thesis has the ambition to contribute to the broader research on the issue of Italian foreign policy, by proposing a comparative study of the two most significant bilateral agreements signed in recent years between Rome and Beijing. By showing Rome’s changing approach and evaluating the underlying factors driving this transformation, this research will provide valuable insights of the dynamics of contemporary international relations and the currently evolving geopolitical chessboard.

Chapter 1

Shifting global equilibria: The Rise of China and the new World Order

Since the beginning of the XXI century, the Rise of China has represented a significant transformation in the field of international politics. As today's second most populous country and second-largest economy, China's increasing participation in the global political chessboard has been capable of redefining regional and international power dynamics, challenging the American unipolar dominance and shaking the long-established liberal order and values. In this current framework, the first chapter is targeted to deeply explore today's evolving global dynamics, specifically by opening the discussion on the central US-China relations, and progressively shifting to key implications of Chinese growing influence worldwide, focusing on the revolutionary policy of the Belt and Road Initiative.

In its first section, this chapter will introduce an historical overview of US-China relations, describing the links between Washington and Beijing since the end of the Chinese Civil War. Tracing the evolution of this relationship and considering the influence of relevant actors such as the USSR, the section will conclude in the 80s, the era of the US-China first true diplomatic engagement. In its second section, the discussion will be dedicated to the new millennium trends, highlighting the phenomenon of the Rise of China and its practical implication on global order, offering a detailed analysis of US-China relations in the contemporary era. Furthermore, the thesis will provide a specific discussion about the impact of Beijing's pulse into the global order, offering different perspectives on the state of the art of the current world order. The third section will then be specifically dedicated to the study of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the pillar policy of China's global strategy. The text will provide a detailed examination of the policy, shifting then to the analysis of the BRI under the lens of the major International Relations theories. This research is designed to comprehend the specific consequences and dangers of the initiative, reflecting the national success into the framework of global trade and influence. Lastly, the fourth section addresses the main criticisms of the BRI, discussing the theories of the Chinese debt traps, Beijing's allegations of neo-colonial tendencies and the growing sustainability challenge of the imitative.

At the end of this Chapter, the reader will possess all the necessary background elements to contextualize the discussion of the following chapters of this thesis.

Section 1.1

US-China relations: from Chinese Civil War to Strategic Engagement

Since the end of the Chinese Civil War and the foundation by Mao Zedong of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the relationship between Washington and Beijing represented a pivotal element for the strategic equilibrium of the whole East-Asian region. Due to their different models of economy, society and politics, and the relevance of these two actors, the United States of America (USA) and the People's Republic of China (PRC) acquired a pivotal role in the current world order. For this reason, understanding the historical relations between the USA and the PRC represents a critical topic of research to comprehend the present and the future of Chinese global ambitions, political strategies, and economic policies in today's allegedly western-aligned world.

At the end of the second phase of the Chinese Civil War (1945-1949), the forces of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) successfully defeated the Kuomintang, the Chinese Nationalist Party. The former, after conquering almost the totality of continental China, installed their government in Beijing; while the latter settled in the island of Taiwan, with Taipei as its capital. During the conflict, the United States had sided with the Kuomintang: Washington never actively intervened in China but supported the Nationalists by delivering more than \$2 billions in military and economic help and granting them political and military advice, until the moment which *“their cause became hopeless and could not have changed the outcome of the civil war”* (Rosinger, 1949 p.206). This quotation, from the *China White Paper* documenting the US position on the ongoing conflict in China, explains the limits of the American role in the Chinese Civil War and shows that an active participation of the US in the conflict would not have changed the outcome. According to General David Barr, head of an American military advisory group in China in fact, Kuomintang's defeat was not due to the lack of support of Washington on the battlefield, nor because of the scarcity of equipment, but due to the *“world's worst leadership and many other morale destroying factors that lead to a complete loss of will fight”* (Barr in Rosinger, 1949, p.206).

At the end of the war, Washington recognized the Republic of China (Taipei) as a legitimate government, while it did not assess to Beijing's People's Republic of China the same credit. At the same time, one year later, the USSR and China signed a 30-year *“Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance”*, which tied the two states politically and economically. The treaty also provided the promise by the Soviet Union of a \$300-million credit to China, to be repaid in raw materials (Office of the Historian, 2024).

In the meantime, the new tensions of the Cold War were growing, gradually modifying the international panorama towards a global division between the ideological rivalry of liberal western values, headed by the United States, and communist principles represented by the Soviet Union. Lucky enough, this antagonism never led to a global war, instead, the parties opposed each other through "*Proxy Wars*", defined by Barsimantov as a "*substitute for a direct confrontation between the major superpowers*" (Barsimantov, 1984, p.2). In this view, governments do not confront each other with weapons on the battlefield, instead they instigate other states and entities into armed conflict. In this sense, the Korean War represented one of the best conceptualizations of this notion.

The conflict started in 1950 and resulted in the division of the Korean Peninsula as a consequence of the opposing interests of the US and the USSR in the region: once allied, Washington and Moscow were now facing each other, supporting the two antagonist Korean states in a conflict that caused more than 800 000 casualties. The signature of the Panmunjeom armistice in 1953 did not put an end to the conflict, but permitted to terminate the hostilities; hence, the two Koreas are technically still at war today. In this scenario, the newly born PRC helped the North Korean-Soviet axis, by sending troops. The Chinese decision to support Pyeongyang did not just originate from ideological solidarity, but it came out majorly from the necessity to avoid US predominance in the area (Kim, 2011). In fact, due to US support to the Nationalist army and the necessity not to leave the Korean Peninsula under the American control, Mao famously stated "*If the American Imperialists are victorious, they will become dizzy with success, and then be in a position to threaten us*" (Mao in Shen, 2012, p.140): as a consequence, Mao sent 260,000 Chinese troops to fight in Korea (Crocker, 2002), making what it is now recognized by Chinese historians as a rational decision. As a matter of fact, later research showed that Beijing's intervention in the Korean War was finally advantageous: it secured the Chinese northeastern borders, but it also reinforced the relation with the Soviet Union and finally permitted North Korea to resist, hindering US strategy in East Asia (Li, 2014). Therefore, it is generally agreed that, at that moment, Beijing acted as a major military power for the first time since the creation of the PRC (Li, 2014).

In the meantime, Mao paid an official visit to the USSR: in that occasion, the two communist states signed the Sino-Soviet alliance treaty. This formalized Kremlin's commitment to secure East-Asia from falling under the US influence by supplying military equipment and financial loans to support China in exchange for Beijing's intervention in the Korean War (Kim, 2011). After Mao's decision to support Pyeongyang, Washington froze all Chinese assets in America and prohibited its citizens from traveling in China. At the same time, China confiscated American assets and started a campaign to eradicate American cultural influence (Li, 2024). Moreover, military tensions on Taiwan escalated

during the Taiwan Straits crisis of 1953–1958, between the United States and China. Like during the Korean War, the US sent the navy to defend Taiwan despite having first proclaimed their neutrality. Additionally, a Sino-American Mutual Defense Treaty was signed in 1954 between Washington and Taipei, strengthening the tension between the two sides of the strait.

On the other front, some months before the end of the Korean War, the Soviet Leader Iosif Stalin had died. After a period of power struggles, Nikita Khrushchev emerged as the new Soviet Leader. This transition of power represents a significant moment for the USSR: Khrushchev operated a substantial change in Soviet political framework, known as the period of the “*Destalinization*” (Jones, 2005). As a matter of fact, the new leader’s policy was aimed at drastically changing the previous national approach to Communism, reducing the factors of terror, regimentation and cult of personality, by giving a new vision to the socialist ambitions (Jones, 2005). One of the most explanatory sources of this moment was the famous “*Secret Speech*” of 1956, named “*On the Cult of Personality and its Consequences*” delivered by Khrushchev in a closed party session of the 20th party congress. In this discourse, the new leader underlined the severe abuse of power perpetuated by Stalin, mentioning the mass repressions, the excessive cult of personality and the mistakes in foreign policy operated by his predecessor. In Khrushchev’s words “*Stalin showed in a whole series of cases his intolerance, his brutality, and his abuse of power*” (Khrushchev, 1956). With these premises, the Soviet Leader enacted significant reforms of the socialist practice, leading to the “*Peaceful Coexistence*” policy, according to which the Socialist bloc could peacefully coexist with the Capitalist West (Windt, 1959).

The new Soviet ideology was not warmly welcomed by Beijing: according to the Chinese leader in fact, it was necessary to continue the struggle against western imperialism, defending a more traditional Stalinian approach. According to Lüthi, this ideological dispute inaugurated a period of crisis between Moscow and Beijing at the beginning of 1960’s. These tensions grew stronger after the discussion on economic and industrialization policies and the broken promise of sharing nuclear technologies, entering in a pure diplomatic crisis known as the Sino-Soviet Split. (Lüthi in Roberts and alt, 2010).

Because of these rising tensions, long-standing border disputes between China and USSR gained political momentum, leading to the explosion of the Sino-Soviet border conflict in 1969, in the region of the Wusuli river in Manchuria. As Sino-Soviet tensions had heightened in the 1960s, the possession of river islands along the Ussuri became an issue of harsh dispute: the original Treaty of Peking of 1860 was considered unfair by China due to the historical weakness of the Empire compared to Tsarist Russia at the time of the signature (Gerson, 2010). The conflict was significant as it represented a

struggle between two nuclear powers, as China was finally able to access nuclear technology in 1964: consequently, the two states avoided a complete escalation of the conflict, in order to evade the risk of using nuclear weapons, in line with the Nuclear Taboo theory by Nina Tannenwald (Tannenwald, 1999). The conflict had also important significance in the international shift of power balances as it defensively marked the detachment between Moscow and Beijing and unlocked a moment of political instability between the two strongest communist states, which was promptly used by Washington to start a dialogue with Beijing.

As a matter of fact, the 1970s was marked as the time of appeasement between the USA and China: this process begun with the famous Ping Pong Diplomacy. With this expression, academics refer to a series of visits occurred after the World Table Tennis Championships in Nagoya, Japan, in 1971, between the American and Chinese teams. The two developed a particular relation that brought to the proposal to the American team from Chairman Mao to visit China; after the approval by US President Nixon, the American team visited Beijing, representing the first unofficial American delegation to visit China after 1949. The following year, the Chinese ping pong team was received in the US in the spirit of reciprocity (Eckstein, 1993). This event represented a pivotal moment in the US-China relations, as it “*was undoubtedly a great diplomatic success leading to a breakthrough in relations between two hostile countries*” (Kobierecki, 2016, p.314), setting the basis for normalization of US-China reciprocal recognition and paving the way for the establishment of diplomatic relations. As a consequence, US-China relation started to become more active. In these years, China was the destination of two important visits made by US officials: the first, in July 1971 by the US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, a secret trip during which he met the Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai. Together, they discussed the basis for a political *rapprochement* between the two states, opening new channels of communication and preparing the future visit of the US President. In fact, some months later, in February 1972, the US President Nixon came to Beijing to meet Chairman Mao and the Chinese Prime Minister Zhou Enlai, with which he signed the famous “*Shanghai Communiqué*”. This document represents a pivotal element in the history of US-China relations, as it sets the basis for improved US-Chinese relations: the most significant element was the Taiwanese question, in which US declared its intention for a peaceful settlement of the issue, affirming that the US military withdrawal from the island was an objective. Instead, on the “One China Policy”, the situation revealed more blurred. Since Nixon’s visit, the exchanges between the two countries flourished and China increasingly became a central topic of US foreign policy: as a matter of fact, the new US President Gerald Ford visited Beijing in 1975, meeting Mao and Zhou Enlai, to reaffirm the intention of the US to cooperate with China (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.a).

The real turning point of US-China relation was embodied by the 1st of January 1979, the day of the official establishment of China and United States's diplomatic ties. Previously, in December 1978, the two governments published a *joint communiqué* declaring the official intention of US President Jimmy Carter and Chinese Premier Hua Guofeng to fully recognize each other's governments and to proceed towards the reciprocal opening of embassies in their respective capitals. With this document the two states "*ended nearly three decades of abnormal relations*" (Kim and Hammersmith, 1986, p.1). In opening the relations, Washington had to fully recognize Beijing's One-China policy and renounce to official diplomatic ties with Taiwan, also ending the Mutual Defense Treaty between Washington and Taipei signed in 1954. Additionally, Washington recognized to Beijing the Most Favored Nation status (MFN) (Kim and Hammersmith, 1986). Since this moment, the new relation between Beijing and Washington was therefore defined as a *strategic and economic engagement* (Paulson, 2008).

In the same year, in April, the American Congress approved the Taiwan Relations Act (TRA): this document stated that the "*United States will make available to Taiwan such defense articles and defense services in such quantity as may be necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability*". (TRA, Sec III, a): therefore, as a matter of fact, the US continued the commercial and cultural relations with Taiwan, kept mainly through the American Institute in Taiwan, without officially going against One-China policy. Moreover, during the Reagan Presidency, the US published its "*Six Assurances*" to Taiwan: a document of six points safeguarding US-Taiwan bilateral relations by securing arm trade and the non-revision of the TRA, promising not to cover the role of the mediator between Beijing and Taipei. At the same time, Reagan signed in 1982 a communiqué with China, reaffirming the U.S. commitment to the One-China policy. During the Cold War, Reagan visited China in 1984 and allowed Beijing to purchase US military equipment.

Despite this period of optimism, US-China relations rapidly worsened in the aftermath of the Tiananmen Massacre in 1989: because of this event, the US President Bush froze military sales to Beijing, blocked military personnel exchanges, suspended new World Bank loans to China, and banned other high-level exchanges. At the same time, the US President did not fulfill the request of some Congress members to suspend to China the Most Favorite Nation status. This act has long been at the center of the political discussion, proposing to readmit it just in case Beijing would have progressed in its human rights situation, but at the end it was never approved (Boudreau, 1991). Additionally, visas for Chinese students in the United States were extended, and at the same time, China expelled two American journalists (Hyer, 1996). According to some scholars, the period

immediately following the Tiananmen Square tragedy represents one of the tensest moments in the US-China relations since the reestablishment of the relations (Panda, 1995).

In conclusion, this first part of the chapter analyzed the historical narrative of the US-China relations, until the creation of the diplomatic and strategic engagement between Washington and Beijing. This section was essential in the thesis as a groundwork to introduce their current complex relations. The beginning of the strategic engagement between Washington and Beijing, punctuated by clear moments of tensions, portrays the modern double dynamic of cooperation and competition between the two states, opening for the discussion about contemporary shift of concrete paradigms.

Section 1.2

New Millennium trends: the Rise of China and the new World Order

The second section of this thesis will delve into the analysis of US-China relation in contemporary times, analyzing in depth the phenomenon of the Rise of China and underlining the consequences of the inclusion of Beijing in the club of the global order shapers. Furthermore, the study will propose a discussion on the challenges of the current state of the international affairs, proving how history lessons continuously shape this crucial bilateral relation.

1.2.1 The Rise of China: a Positive Peaceful Rise

One of the most relevant topics to be considered in this part is the Rise of China. The latter represents one of the most discussed and studied phenomena of contemporary international politics. Many reasons can be attributed for this topic's special interest. Firstly, a purely economic relevance given by the exceptional speed and significance of China's economic progress (Morrison, 2019). Secondly, a more political significance, caused by the Chinese ability to shake the basements of today's global political system (Ikenberry, 2008). Since then, the paradigm of the Western Liberal Order as the only opportunity of growth has started to be jeopardized, resulting in a drastic transformation of the US-China relations. This section is therefore aimed at analyzing the consequences of the Rise of China and the role of Beijing in destabilizing the unipolar world order of the after Cold War period.

“What we may be witnessing is not just the end of the Cold War, or the passing of a particular period of postwar history, but the end of history as such: that is, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government” (Fukuyama, 1989, p.4).

This wording composes one of the most famous quotations of the after-Cold War period: they are written in Francis Fukuyama's influential work, “The End of History”. In his paper, the American Japanese scholar identifies the American liberal democratic model as the supreme stage of socio-cultural and political human development, defining the Cold War as the last big conflict of world history. In fact, this historical moment, characterized by the bipolar balance of power and ideological struggle between the liberal and the communist blocs, had concluded with the victory of United States. The US triumph inaugurated a period of adjustment towards the creation of a unipolar world order, where Washington detained the role of the hegemonic power. In this scenario, Fukuyama's optimism derived from the convictions rooted in the liberal theory of the *Democratic Peace*, according to which democracies hardly go to war against one another (Doyle 1986). Consequently to the American success against the Soviet Union, Washington was capable of creating a new world order based on the liberal concepts such as democracy. Through a snowballing effect, this global optimism triggered also the “*Third Wave of Democratic Transition*”, in which 30 countries completed their transformation into democracies (Huntington, 1991). The new world under the American control will have therefore been permanently unipolar, stable and safe, since countries would have not dared to rise war against the hegemon, neither fight each other. However, in practice, this equilibrium resulted definitively less eternal than Washington and Fukuyama were convinced of. As a matter of fact, the United States have progressively become aware of the growing importance of China at the international level and this American perception has been publicly shown since 2009, year in which the newly elected American President Barack Obama declared: “*The relationship between the United States and China will shape the 21st century*” (NBC, 2009). These strong words were mentioning the awareness that the US status of prominent hegemonic power could be challenged by Beijing, due to the perceived Rise of China, which could eventually concretize in different types of scenarios.

At this point, it is important to acknowledge that the rise of a country can occur mainly in two ways: by war or by economic growth. In the past world's history, war was the main strategy of rising for a state, since fighting and winning over an enemy meant economic gains in terms of resources, taxes, territory and population. The idea is that war, armed conflicts, and the use of violence have always represented a way to increase states' economic and political power: for Buzan and Cox, this approach is defined as “*Warlike Rise*” (Buzan and Cox, 2013, p.112), referring to a situation in which a country

increases its economic and strategic power thanks to victory in war. Secondly, a state's rise can also happen in a peaceful context, in this scenario, two cases are involved: the "*Positive Peaceful Rise*" and "*Negative Peaceful Rise*" (Buzan and Cox, 2013, p.112). The latter happens when a state imposes itself in the international arena in a scenario of high and perpetual threat and suspicion, which however never materializes into an open real armed conflict between the parties. A situation of this typology can be associated with the Cold War period, in which the United States had a chance to prevail over the Soviet Union despite never having fought a true armed war against it. The last scenario is instead the Positive Peaceful Rise, where a state is able to impose itself into the international arena in a moment in which the global political environment is friendly and there is not a clear sense of threat. In this sense, this analysis will be therefore dedicated to the conceptualization of the contemporary Chinese situation and the definition of the type of rise China has undergone until recently.

With this aim, it is firstly necessary to analyze the phenomenon of the Rise of China as a purely economic event: as a matter of fact, China presented a huge financial development starting in the 1980s. At that time, precisely in 1978, China was still in a poor economic condition: according to the World Bank data, Chinese GDP was around 150 billion American dollars, reaching the 5% of the total GDP of the United States. Social poverty was a great problem in China, with 88% of the population living on less than two dollars per day. However, in forty years, China succeeded in completely changing its economic conditions: in 1978 the share of Chinese GDP was 1.8% of the global economy; instead, in 2018, it became the 18.2% (World Bank, n.d.a). Therefore, China was doubtlessly capable of increasing its national wealth, and one of the main reasons for such rapid development has been a pack of reforms proposed by Deng Xiaoping, the Chinese leader since 1978 (Naughton, 1993).

In this sense, the most notorious reforms of Deng Xiaoping are the "Four Modernization Policies" and the "Reform and Opening Up", aimed at modifying the framework of Chinese economy laid out by the Communist approach of Mao Zedong. The first refers to the four modernization goals focused on domestic factors, mainly on agriculture, industry, defense, science and technology enacted to increase the volume of production and to modernize the systems of manufacture. However, the most relevant for this chapter's purpose is the Reform and Opening Up policy: this economic tool permitted to internally reform China's economy, while opening it up externally, also allowing foreign countries and businesses to invest in China. In practice, it led also to the creation of special economic zones, where free market provisions could be applied, and foreign investment could be received. This period

fostered a diplomatic openness in the country that enabled China to develop a network of cooperation with western countries. As an example, the United States were one of the first destination of Deng's institutional visit, organized to meet President Carter (Naughton, 1993). The whole set of reforms permitted China to advance from Maoism, the strong communist ideology developed by Mao Zedong, to the system named "Socialism with Chinese Characteristics" whose main feature was its particular economic system, the so-called "Socialist Market economy". As explained in the article "What is a Socialist Market Economy," the rationale "*it is not the market that determines the social system, it is, on the contrary, the socio-economic system that determines the type of market*" (Horvat, 1989, p.233). However, it is important to state that nationally, Deng Xiaoping's work has been considered in two opposite ways: positively because it opened China's economy and triggered the phenomenon of the Rise of China, but also negatively, since it had subverted the original Chinese Maoist Communism approach. For this reason, it is necessary to refer to a part of the speech delivered by Deng Xiaoping in 1962, answering said critique "*It doesn't matter whether the cat is black or white, as long as it catches mice*" (Deng in Xue, 2009, p.43). This sentence shows Deng's willingness to reach the aim of developing China, no matter the economic ideology, showing his rejection of conceptual purity and the will to embrace pragmatism. Consequently, today's Chinese economy is referred as a "Socialist Market Economy", the only one of this kind (Horvat, 1989).

As shown in this section, the Rise of China represented a significant shift in global power dynamics, in a situation in which the US represented the only superpower in the unipolar global order. This primacy was challenged by Chinese fast economic rise, driven by Deng Xiaoping's reforms, which, as it will be shown later in this chapter, will shape the economic global landscape and introduce new complexities to western dominance. Therefore, so far in the analysis, the Chinese Rise can be resembled to the notion of Positive Peaceful Rise.

1.2.2 New US-Chinese relations: from Positive to Negative Peaceful Rise

This second sub-section explores the recent evolution of China's role in international political dynamics, arguing for the emergence of a new global trend influenced by the phenomenon of the Rise of China. Additionally, based on the theoretical assumptions of the previous section, this study will examine also whether Beijing had adjusted its rising approach over time, shifting from a Positive to a Negative Peaceful Rise.

The new Chinese trend of perceived economic liberalization convinced the US to start cooperating and investing in China in the framework of the American attitude of Liberal Triumphalism (Mearsheimer, 2021). Washington and Beijing therefore engaged in a system in which the United States helped China to develop in the framework of the Liberal optimism: the American intention was to let China grow within the liberal values of peace and prosperity, *de facto* favoring the Chinese integration in the Western system by promoting its access into the most significant liberal organizations, like the WTO in 2001. President George H. W. Bush's intentions regarding China were clear: addressing to China the *Permanent Most Favored Nation* status (PMFN) to facilitate the creation of a democratic transformation in the country (Mearsheimer, 2021). PMFN status refers to an economic situation of permanent preferential business, in which, China will receive the best trade terms from its economic partner, the US. This pragmatically translates into lowest tariffs, smallest trade obstacles, and biggest import quotas. Arguably, this approach would fit with the idea of Positive Peaceful Rise, as China would grow and slowly imposes itself at the international level without any threat or violence against the global community. Another important aspect to be taken into consideration is the fact that the United States, under Clinton's administration, were adapting their liberal engagement ideology to nudge China as a newcomer of democracy. In fact at that time, China could not be considered a threat: it was much less powerful and rich than the US. However, the situation begun to change in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis (Buzan and Cox, 2013), opening a period of serious transition in the US-China relations.

According to IR theories, periods of crisis are exceptional times in which international equilibria can be reshaped and the world order can undergo a process of change (Gilpin, 1981). In this sense, the 2008 economic crisis represented a key moment in contemporary global history: it pragmatically proved the strength of the Chinese economy and the ability of Beijing to face the economic consequences of the crisis better than the US (Bottelier, 2010). Moreover, in September 2008, China became the largest holder of U.S. debt, surpassing Japan: as a matter of fact, the interdependence between the U.S. and Chinese economies became stronger (Sharma, 2010). The prevision by Bottelier revealed true, as according to him "*The crisis will almost certainly accelerate and Chinese economic and political rise and enhance its prestige [...] in contrast, US credibility in the economic and financial area has suffered significantly*" (Bottelier, 2010, p. 126). In fact, in 2009, China showed for the first time its strong economic potential, performing a 9.4% growth of its national GDP in the aftermath of the crisis, despite the American recession of -2.6%. (World Bank, n.d.b; World Bank, n.d.c). The resistance of the Chinese economy was not luck, but systemic: this was later reconfirmed by the Covid-19 crisis. In fact, China was one of the few countries registering an increase in GDP at

the peak of the Pandemic in 2020 (2.3%), presenting just one month of negative growth; at the same time, the US had lost -3.6% of its GDP (Kärnfelt, 2021). As the Chinese economy began to outperform the American one, Beijing started to be perceived as a threat from the hegemonic power: in fact, a drastic change of policy towards China was evident, especially in the aftermath of George W. Bush 's administration.

Under the Obama Presidency (2009-2017), Washington started to adjust its approach towards Beijing. At the beginning of his mandate, President Obama followed a first phase of “Clintonism” in which he kept on cooperating with China. However, starting from 2011, the Obama Presidency enacted the famous and divisive “Pivot to Asia” policy, intended to enhance the American presence in East Asia and to reshape the balance of power in the area of the Indo-Pacific, especially due to the North Korean threats and the South China Sea disputes. This made Obama gain the appellation of “The Pacific President”, related to the focus the President reserved to the Pacific area in respect to its predecessors (Lieberthal, 2011). The policy was interpreted in different manners: on the one hand, following the American point of view, this effort was deemed to reinforce the US presence in a region of great transformation, which would have become always more critical to US interests. As a consequence, Washington worked to develop a strong network of US allies in the region, by increasingly participating to multilateral talks such as with the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and East Asia Summit (EAS), trying also to implement trade questions. Moreover, US worked also to strengthen its security in the area, by confirming the American military presence in South Korea, Japan and Guam, and the strengthening of US marines in Australia. Additionally, to show that such policy was not deemed to counterbalance China's increasing power, Washington welcomed Beijing to participate in different bilateral talks and initiatives (Davidson, 2014; Lieberthal, 2011). On the other side, Beijing saw this new policy with suspicion, considering the activities of the United States aimed at containing its regional ambitions. Progressively, it became clear that the two regional actors had just a few points in common, while several diverging interests: Beijing wanted to extend its influence into the South China and the East China Sea, while the United States wanted to preserve the peace and balance of power in the region (Kaplan, 2012). At the same time, a year after the appointment of the new Chinese President Xi Jinping, Obama invited him to a shirt-sleeves summit to cooperate on pressing bilateral, regional, and global issues, including climate change and North Korea. On that occasion though, Obama refused the Chinese reclamations, opposing to any further militarization of the disputed South China Sea. Furthermore, in 2015, Obama clearly stated his intentions towards Washington-Beijing relations *“since I have been President, my goal has been to consistently engage with China, [...], to minimize our differences, and maximize our opportunities of*

cooperation” (Obama, 2015). At the same time, China had inaugurated in 2013 its Belt and Road Initiative, project which will alter the economic and arguably also political relations of China with an abundance of states. This topic, given its centrality to this thesis, will be broadly discussed in the next sub-chapters.

Major changes in US-China relations occurred after the end of the Obama Presidency. Later, President Donald Trump (2017-2021) became the first American leader to clearly voice on the necessity of opposing China. The Republican President aimed to pressure Beijing by dramatically declaring tariffs on Chinese goods. Trump thought that these will have canceled the trade imbalance, increased domestic manufacturing and generated a large number of jobs for US citizens, under the slogan of “*Make America Great Again*” (Hass, 2024). As a matter of fact, Trump was successful in narrowing the trade imbalance with China on a bilateral basis: US deficit with China was \$311 billions in 2020, a significant decrease from the previous pick of \$419 billions in 2018. Trump's tariffs on China however had little effect on reducing the nation's total trade imbalance. Throughout Trump's four years in office, the US trade imbalance increased significantly, due to a large increase in imports from Vietnam, Mexico, Thailand and South Korea (Hass, 2024). Moreover, he actively worked toward the failed attempt to ban Chinese social medias such as TikTok and on the ostracization of Chinese enterprises, such as Huawei, in the name of American national security. Additionally, Trump challenged the One-China policy by speaking on the telephone with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-Wen. In 2018, Trump heavily imposed tariffs on Chinese goods, to answer the alleged Chinese theft of U.S. technology and intellectual property; as a consequence, China imposed its own measures in early April on U.S. products, triggering a real tax war escalation (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.a). In this framework, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence declared that the United States would have used tariffs to put competition ahead of collaboration. Along with criticizing China's rising censorship and persecution of religious groups, he also denounced what he sees as China's growing military aggression, particularly in the South China Sea (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.a). Later, in 2020, after the diplomatic escalation which resulted in the closure of the Chinese Consulate in Houston due to espionage threat and the Chinese reaction of the shutting down of the US Consulate in Chengdu, the U.S. Secretary of State Pompeo announced a significant change in U.S. foreign policy. He stated that engagement with the Chinese Communist Party was concluded, due to its aggressive actions in the East and South China Seas, unfair trade practices, theft of intellectual property, and violations of human rights in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, stating that “*the kind of engagement we have been pursuing has not brought the kind of change inside of China that President Nixon had hoped to induce*”,

suggesting the failure of the American approach towards Beijing and the necessity of a drastic change of vision on the matter (Pompeo, 2020).

At the Presidential election of 2020, the outgoing President was defeated by the Democratic candidate Joe Biden (2021-2025). At the beginning of his mandate, despite the significant difference in party ideology, President Biden stood on the same track of his predecessor by “*embracing containment and has been as hard-nosed toward China [...] he was pledging extreme competition with China*” despite his latter support of the engagement policy as chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee under the Obama administration (Mearsheimer, 2021, p.15). In contrast to Trump's isolationism, Biden has instead established Washington on the international scene as the coordinator of the US's long-standing friends, at the same time also eager to work with China. Reiterating Washington's leadership in the face of China's aggressiveness, Biden has aligned US partners in the Indo-Pacific to confront Chinese military presence and aggression in the South China Sea, with the creation of the AUKUS, (US, UK, Australia), a strategic-military partnership for security in the Indo-Pacific that includes close collaboration in areas such as cybersecurity and artificial intelligence, and the sharing of naval defense technologies to counter Chinese growing military in the area (De Luca, 2021). Additionally, Biden has also stated that US would have defended Taiwan in the event of a Chinese attack (Shi, 2024). On the other side, Biden has actively engaged with China, setting up high-level talks to reduce political and economic tensions between the two countries. This includes encounters with Chinese President Xi Jinping, even in the face of sporadic obstacles like the Chinese surveillance balloon that flew over the American territory at the beginning of 2023 (Shi, 20204).

Back to theory, the evolution of the Chinese approach seems not to align any longer with the concept of the Positive Peaceful Rise, but resembles more to the Negative Peaceful Rise, since tensions between the US and China have increasingly risen. This change of position by the United States leaders in relation to China is attributable to the fact that the two countries' interests appear now, more than before, increasingly opposite. As already stated, a scenario of Peaceful Negative Rise can be associated with an historic period as the Cold War, given the environment of insecurity and war threat. Analyzing the current situation, some scholars such as Brands and Gaddis put forward the idea of a new US-Chinese Cold War (Brands and Gaddis, 2021): following this idea, it is possible to state that the Chinese type of approach to international politics has therefore shifted from a Positive to a Negative Peaceful one (Buzan and Cox, 2013), despite the Chinese traditional slogan of the “Peaceful Rise” (Mohan, 2004; Bijian, 2005).

The evolution of the US-China relations from cooperation in the name of liberal triumphalism to competition marks a significant shift in global politics. As China continued to rise, US response moved from facilitating China to counterbalance Beijing's influence, showing the deepening of the strategic rivalry between the two. In the next section, these relations will be projected in the international order, assessing the possibility of a real shift of global order at current times.

1.2.3 Perspectives on a new Global Order

Making sense of the current US-China relations represents an indispensable element to understand the present and the future of the international order: therefore, it is now necessary in this study to focus on the analysis of the changing global order with the support of the International Relations theory. Authors in this field try to explain the world by using theoretical models: there are useful to better clarify the progression of events and the possible future course of certain situations. However, by definition, International Relations theories are models, hence simplifications of a more complex reality, therefore they must be used as the basis for further and deeper analysis. This third sub-section will therefore analyze the Rise of China through the lens of the theoretical models of the international relations.

In general, it is possible to argue that China's rise has been a hugely debated concept in the IR sector and, consequently, a number of articles and books have been written on the topic. As a matter of fact, it is necessary to note that there is an overall division among scholars on the phenomenon. Firstly, on the US-China bilateral relations, realists like Mearsheimer are more likely to believe in the real and concrete possibility of foreseeing a warlike rise scenario in the future; for them, China will rise unpeacefully, and the most evident element of conflict will be the Taiwanese question. Instead, on the other side of the coin, Liberal and Constructivist theorists share a greater propensity towards the belief that US-Chinese tensions will be far from escalating in an armed conflict, believing Beijing to walk the path of the Peaceful Rise. However, it is necessary to observe the US-China relation in a more global perspective, understanding the consequences that the opposition between these two states will lead to the global order. Therefore, to detect the future of US-China relations, it is firstly necessary to conceptualize the current global order, understanding whether today's world resembles more to a unipolar, bipolar or multipolar system. Done these premises, it will then be crucial to assign to the term "rise" a new meaning. This word has been used so far with the general meaning of "reach a higher level or position", but now it assumes a new specific political meaning, referring to the will to modify the current world equilibrium.

At first sight, according to Brooks and Wohlforth, it is possible to argue that today's world is still in a unipolar order guided by Washington. Since the end of the Second World War in fact, the United States is still the most powerful country in the world, and it created a system of western values and institutions, allowing other states to take part in this mechanism (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2023), rendering the majority of them “*satisfied*” in Organzki's terms (i.e. included in the system). At the moment, the USA represents in fact the first economic power in the world due to its GDP at the official exchange rate (World Bank, n.d.d), but also the first world power in military capabilities based on current available firepower (GFP, 2024), and it enjoys a system of numerous allies which is difficult to compare to anyone else's. Therefore, despite the undeniable Chinese and Russian increasing influence in the last years, it is possible to classify the US as the only global hegemon, underlining the power gap between the US and the existing rising powers (Brooks and Wohlforth, 2023).

However, at the same time, it is incontestable that China is deemed to keep on rising: most of the theories about the future of US-Chinese relations take as assumption the fact that China will generally continue its economic progress. Different predictions, such as the one made by the Global Times, show that Chinese GDP in official exchange rate is doomed to surpass the American one in a ten-year's time (GT, 2024). Therefore, according to some scholars, this scenario can be associated with the historic period of the Cold War, given the environment of insecurity and war threat, recalling a bipolar order. Following the argument that some scholars such as Brands and Gaddis put forward, a cold war consists in a “*protracted international rivalry*”, leading to the idea that “*It is no longer debatable that the United States and China, tacit allies during the last half of the last Cold War, are entering their own Cold War*” (Bands and Gaddis, 2021, p.10). Mearsheimer agrees on this view, stating that the Cold war II is already ongoing (Mearsheimer, 2021). These authors are not the only ones supporting the idea that China and USA are now facing each other in a new Cold War scenario, as a mention to the work of Hung Tran “Is the US-Chinese strategic competition a Cold War?” (Tran, 2021) and Martin Jacques's “If US-China competition is not a new cold war than what?” (Jacques, 2021). On the other side, the metaphor of the new Cold War may not result too adequate: if, on the one hand, both China and USSR can be easily compared due to the strong responsibility given to the Communist party, the role of absolute enemy assigned to the US and the will to influence regional and global dynamics, on the other hand, some differences need to be underlined. Firstly, at the time of Cold War, United States and USSR had a totally different economy, both ideologically and quantitatively: the USSR was characterized by a planned economy, totally independent from the

American one and comparatively less strong. Today instead, Beijing represents one of the most important and integrated trade partners for Washington. Secondly, American military capability was superior to the Soviet, and it is still currently superior to the Chinese. However, as in the case of economy, Chinese military capabilities are likely to increase in the future, surpassing the US. Thirdly, in an era of global challenges, China can prove its authoritarianism to be more efficient than western democracies in tackling global issues, such as global warming. Consequently, taking into account all these differences, it is possible to claim that today, the United States are facing a completely different enemy: China is economically richer, militarily stronger and globally more engaged than the Soviet Union in the past (Westad, 2019). At the same time, the current US have weakened, resulting in a much more dysfunctional, economically dependent, and politically polarized country, allegedly unable to guide the liberal system. Such a trend is so strong, that some scholars foresee the transformation of the old American hegemonic system into a new type of dynamics, characterized by the emergence of regional hegemons and the general weakening of the American global influence (Westad, 2019).

As a matter of fact, it is currently always more common to refer to the New World Order as a Multipolar system: referring again to Organzki's wording, the future of the world order will depend on the clash between the satisfied and the unsatisfied powers (i.e., the liberal aligned world and the non-liberal allied world). Consequently, while the plausibility of a "Hegemonic War" between US and China (Gilpin, 1988) can be arguably dismantled due to economic interdependence of the actors (Nye, 2021) and deterrence by the Nuclear Taboo (Tannenwald, 1999), instead it is always more evident that a new wave of polarization, between satisfied and unsatisfied states, is growing, leading to the development of the third option, the multipolar one. After the collapse of the bipolar order of the Cold War, the world initially assumed a unipolar system dominated by the United States. However, this dominance started to wane, as new numerous expanding centers of power emerged during this moment of transition such as new governments, international organizations and security-related institutions, reflecting a shift towards a more complex global landscape (Izhak, 2016). Arguably, it is not uncommon to consider today's world as multipolar: according to the easiest definition of the concept: in a multipolar order, the power is shared by more than two states. This order does not require the subjects to burden the same amount of power, instead, it requires that significant power is concentrated in more than two actors (Ashford and Cooper, 2023). Hence, this scenario puts emphasis on emerging powers, on regional hegemons and alliances, which as a matter of fact, share today much more influence than in the past. This is not a new academic concept, but the definition of "*unbalanced multipolarity*" by Nilsson (Nilsson, 2021). On the contrary, other

scholars such as Haass, argue that the post-Cold War era cannot be defined as a multipolar, preferring the wording “Nonpolar” (Haass, 2008). In this type of world order *“It is hard to deny that the USA, the EU, China, and Russia are poles, but they do not have absolute influence”* (Haass, 2008, p.34). Additionally to them, new non-state actors such as businesses, non-governmental groups, corporations, even unrecognized governments have their growing spheres of influence and occasionally express a clear desire to emerge as new poles. Nonetheless, traditional poles are still relevant: in the sense they serve as links between spheres of influence, but their role is less influential than before (Izhak, 2016).

As a matter of fact, the creation of a new multipolar order does not remain just a theoretical concept, but it revealed to be increasingly pragmatic as today’s dissatisfied powers are generally on the verge of mobilizing themselves to feed their ambitions: few examples can be made. As first, during the meeting between the Russian President Vladimir Putin and the North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un in June 2024, the two leaders defined the cooperation between Moscow and Pyongyang as the engine to create a new multipolar world, signifying the creation of a stronger front against the American hegemony (Casanova, 2024b). Secondly, it is possible to mention the numerous Sino-Russian initiatives to promote their own vision of “multipolar world order”, which was reaffirmed in the event of the 75th anniversary of the diplomatic relation between the two countries, reiterating the will of Beijing and Moscow to cooperate in opposing western alliances in the Indo-Pacific and their effort to create a more stable and multilateral world order (Seiwert, 2024).

In this framework, according to some scholars, Chinese President Xi’s objective is to influence the creation of a new global order, opposing the western values; in this world vision, many dissatisfied countries can be potentially integrated. China's success lies in presenting itself as an agent of change and in showing the Americans as defenders of a status quo that no longer reflects the actual balance of power. USA has alienated the support of many countries, from which China can profit to propose alternatives debouched from Washington, to enact a modification of the current international system (Economy, 2024). Clear examples of the enactment of these ambitions are, on the political sphere, the BRICS and the SCO; and it is not a coincidence that both of these entities recently enlarged. In the first case, in 2023, BRICS became BRICS+, admitting four new members to the club: Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates. This new membership, which brings the group to account for more than the 37 % of world GDP, can be considered a clear signal of the will of the group to increase its global influence, despite the increased potential of internal divergence (European Parliament, 2024). Moreover, the recent accession of Belarus into the Shanghai Cooperation

Organization (SCO) indicates the modification of strategy and enlarges the scope of the group until territorial Europe, based on the growing ambition of China and Russia. Considered by Moscow as a tool to gather support out of its international isolationism and by Beijing to oppose US-led security organization, SCO has recently shown the intentions to shift its nature from a security organization to a proper geopolitical device, enlarging its original membership far beyond central Asian states (Seiwert, 2024). In a similar way, on the economic side, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) are critical tools demonstrating Beijing and Moscow 's ambitions to influence global investments and trade. The first practically represents a significant challenge to western dominated financial institutions, such as the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Nguyen, 2020); the second builds *“an international organization for regional economic integration to promote stable development in order to raise the living standards of the nations of the Member-States”* (EAEU website); finally, the BRI is a plan for connecting Asia, Africa, and Europe via land and marine networks, with the primary aim of promoting regional integration and increasing trade and economic growth, providing Beijing with global economic power and political capacity (Zeynalli, 2024). At the same time, increased security cooperation between NATO and key U.S. allies in East Asia has been registered. In the specific, on July 2024, NATO held a meeting to discuss the strengthening of the dialogue between the Atlantic Organization and its Asian allies, in light of the growing security threats posed by Russia, China and North Korea in the region of the Indo-Pacific. NATO's worries are not unfounded: as a matter of fact, the ties between these countries are getting tighter. China and North Korea supported the war in Ukraine through trade and arms supplies; likewise, China and Russia stopped to formally oppose North Korea's nuclear development at the UN Security Council. In light of this, Washington has made no secret of its willingness to promote greater alignment between NATO and its Asian allies. Beyond the failed proposal by NATO's former Supreme Allied Commander James Stavridis suggestion to include AP4s states into NATO, there is the perceived need to engage more closely in the Indo-Pacific. At the same time, this move can potentially materialize in an aggravation of the already existing tensions, strengthening the Beijing-Moscow-Pyongyang axis. (Park and DerSimonian, 2024).

Therefore, this thesis accepts as an assumption that the current global order is shifting towards a multipolar dynamic, where states are still majorly divided between satisfied and dissatisfied groups. This division drives them to join strategic alliances with entities whose interests match their own's, aiming to increase their regional influence. In practice, current trends envisage, on the one hand, the US still in a position of supremacy, leading the coalition of satisfied states, while China leads the

dissatisfied powers. On the other hand, there is also a progressive tendency towards regionalism, where states seek to gain influence in their own areas. Therefore, to this thesis, today's global order is represented by an hybrid between bipolarism and multipolarism, where polarization is always more pressing, and regional power dynamics are constantly more relevant. This idea matches the argument of Ferrari, who states that *“the competition between the United States and China [...] penetrates much less into the various regional arenas [...] therefore leaves much more scope for other players able and willing to act within their own region”* (Ferrari, 2020, p.9), arguing therefore that *“the competition between the United States and China therefore needs to be broken down into its different dimensions and different regional contexts”* (Ferrari, 2020, p.10).

It is therefore undeniable that the phenomenon of the Rise of China and the consequent increasing presence of Beijing on the global stage have undeniably disturbed the post-cold war equilibrium. By providing an alternative to the liberal model of development and highlighting the shortcomings of American hegemony, China has offered hope to dissatisfied states (Zhao, 2023). This shift in power dynamics is even more evident today, in the light of the recent violent events, such as the war in Ukraine and the conflict in Gaza. Coupled with the relative American inertia in these areas, this has led traditional actors like the European Union, Egypt and Turkey, as well as non-state actors such as para-military organizations, private military contractors (PMCs), multinational companies and NGOs to play increasingly significant roles.

In conclusion, this section explained how current global trends are experiencing a clear change of equilibrium, characterized by increasing polarization and fragmentation, with both traditional and non-traditional actors vying for influence in a multipolar global landscape.

Section 1.3

The new Chinese Foreign Policy: the BRI and IR theory

As already affirmed in the previous section, the Rise of China and its consequential affirmation in the global arena had significant impacts both on the economic and political matters. Due to its new policy of Belt and Road Initiative, Beijing was able to force itself into the international community as a symbol of fresh challenge for the western-aligned world. Some scholars consider the BRI a pillar element of Chinese politics, advancing the hypothesis that the initiative could embody the new

Chinese Foreign Policy: is it really the case? Is it therefore possible to consider the BRI as a major tool of the Chinese foreign policy? To answer this question, this section will first analyze in depth the initiative from the historical, economic and political points of view; successively, it will also examine the policy under the lens of International Relations theories, in order to assess the perceived nature of the initiative.

1.3.1 BRI: the dawn of the new Chinese Foreign Policy

Since Deng Xiaoping's "Reform and Opening Up Plan" in 1978, China has inaugurated its path to become one of the world's most powerful economies; starting from its heavy investments in domestic manufacturing, the country is today capable of challenging the American economic hegemony. As a matter of fact, this progress permitted China to quickly transform its economy, becoming the most important exporter of manufacture in the world. This trend still continues today, especially after 2012, a fundamental moment in Chinese political history. In this year, during the 18th National Party Congress, Xi Jinping was appointed as General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC) after Hu Jintao. Later, on March 2013, he was officially appointed President by the National People's Congress (NPC). Since the beginning of his mandate, Xi focused its policies on the aim to pursue the Chinese dream, with the first aim of "rejuvenating" China; in Xi's words, on November 2012: *"We must make persistent efforts, press ahead with indomitable will, continue to push forward the great cause of socialism with Chinese characteristics, and strive to achieve the Chinese dream of great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation"* (Xi in BBC, 2012). The meaning of this policy can be explained in the adoption of an effective political and economic strategy, based on the *"economic development with a nationalist construction of Chinese-ness"* (Tsai, 2019, p. 244). Due to the success of his government, President Xi was not just appointed for a second mandate, but he was at the center of a Constitutional Amendment in 2018 that allowed him to be reappointed for a further third term. In fact, the two-mandates limit for the presidency was deleted from the Chinese Constitution, permitting Xi to hold his third period, which started in 2023, and *de facto* eliminating any sort of time limit to the position. This event is pivotal, as in the history of PRC, the only leader who was able to govern for more than two mandates was Chairman Mao Zedong. It is a shared common sense in the academia that President Xi promotes a new governmental approach in China, applying a centralization of powers and concentrating the decisions closer to his hands (Choi and Givens, 2021). On the base of this phenomenon, some scholars have defined Xi's presidency as a sort of "Third Revolution", consisting into a more authoritarian domestic system and a more ambitious foreign policy (Economy, 2018).

For the sake of this thesis, it is now important to deepen the focus on the analysis of a specific policy enacted by President Xi, exactly during his first year in power: the Belt and Road Initiative. This policy was announced in 2013 in a speech of President Xi at Kazakhstan Nazarbayev University. During his intervention, the Chinese President mentioned the will to strengthen economic ties in Eurasia, by reestablishing the old Silk Road: according to him, this initiative would have oiled regional cooperation through an increase in policy communication, road connectivity, trade facilitation, monetary circulation, and people-to-people exchanges (Xi in Belt and Road portal, 2013). Since the speech, Beijing has worked to enact these ambitions: previously known as the One Belt one Road, renamed in 2016 as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), this project refers to a global development policy, whose goal is the development of China's economic engagement with the world, particularly with the Global South, improving regional connectivity and embrace a brighter economic future by developing infrastructure and expanding commercial linkages between Asia, Africa, and Europe. The idea of the project focus on resurrecting the symbolic Ancient Silk Road, one of the most important trade routes of the past, connecting the Chinese Empire to the Middle East, until continental Europe. For ages, this has been the principal trade route between the East and the West of the world, and it has assisted in fostering both economic and social integration between civilizations (Xinhua, 2015a). The novelty of Xi's New Belt and Road Initiative includes the addition of a bigger number of European states in the project, as well as the incorporation of sea routes, creating in total six economic land corridors and two major maritime routes: more in depth, the first will stretch from China's coast to Europe, while the second will reach the South Pacific Ocean (Hu, 2020).

Despite the political aims, the driving motivation for Beijing to enact the Belt and Road was majorly economic, specifically linked with the 2008 financial crisis. To deal with these catastrophic economic times, the Chinese government adopted a huge financial stimulus to increase industrial production and avoid the worsening of the crisis in the sector. As a consequence, China successfully navigated the emergency but at the same time entered a period of industrial overcapacity. To solve this issue, the government ideated the opportunity to enact a sort of "Chinese Marshall Plan", in order to kick off the world economy and lead in infrastructure investment in developing countries while solving its issues with overcapacity (Hu, 2020). Some secondary, but still relevant reasons, are to be found in the will to maintain peripheral regions under control, such as Xinjiang, by promoting localized economic growth and stability, and the necessity to build stronger ties with neighboring countries, trying also to positively address global concerns about the Chinese rise (Hu, 2020).

However, the absence of any sort of normative basis relative to the BRI raised doubts inside the international community: the initiative was in fact built on political promises and soft law. Documents such “*Visions and Action Plan on the framework underpinning OBOR*” in 2015 by the National Development and Reform Commission, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Commerce of the People’s Republic of China, describe the initiative as a flexible, open and inclusive cooperation platform, characterized by a pragmatic approach aimed at enabling different states to cooperate on an equal footing for mutual benefit (Bonelli, 2017). Therefore, the major aim of the project can be simplified in establishing a system to facilitate trade between nations and encouraging countries to coordinate with each other. Of course, despite this, at the basis there is still the national Chinese interest to facilitate its exports in old and new markets, such as the European Union and Africa.

Despite the true political will of some states to join the projects, clear infrastructural limits were not to be underestimated: not every nation was owning the required infrastructures. For this reason, Beijing’s BRI provided also the opportunity to economically and operationally support contracting states to realize these infrastructures to economically contribute to the improvement of the Road. In the framework of the BRI, Chinese enterprises have the duty to support the design and realization of railways, highways and ports, with a quota of local workers and materials, in order to trigger the development of the necessary infrastructures to increase the volume of goods to be transported daily. Infrastructure diplomacy represents a pivotal element of the Chinese BRI: quoting President Xi’s opening speech at the BRI Forum in Beijing in 2017 “*Infrastructure connectivity is the foundation of development through cooperation [...], we should improve trans-regional logistics networks and promote connectivity*” (Xi, 2017). In this sense, some of the major China-financed key infrastructure projects under the BRI were: the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway, the China-Laos Railway, the Hungarian-Serbian railway, the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor, and the Kenyan Railway (Xinhua, 2023a).

Today, ten years after the enactment of the initiative, the BRI counts almost 150 participating states, representing the 40% of the global GDP: each of them signed a Memorandum of Understanding to formalize their participation to the BRI (Green, 2024). In economic terms, this means that from 2013 until 2019, trade between Beijing and states participating to the initiative exceeded \$ 7.8 trillion, direct investment abroad approximated to \$110 billions, and the value of new projects touched \$ 800 billions (CCICED, 2022). Indeed, according to more recent estimates of 2023, “*cumulative BRI engagement breached the USD 1 trillion mark, with about \$634 billions in construction contracts,*

and \$419 billions in non-financial investments” (Wang, 2024). Additionally, in development terms, the BRI has been acknowledged with the potential to significantly increase the income of participating countries: according to the World Bank, BRI can expand trade in participating nations by 9.7% and foreign direct investments by 7.6%, resulting in a positive 3.4% gain in citizen’s wage. Finally, BRI is presumed to increase the international living standards: again, according to the World Bank, the initiative is able to bring global growth by up to 2.9% as a result of the BRI (World Bank in Petri and Plummer. 2016).

After having explicated the key historical and economic questions relative to the BRI, the next subsection will focus on the analysis of the initiative through the different outlooks of International Relations theories, in order to attempt to briefly signify the unproven political significance of this revolutionary policy.

1.3.2 The Belt and Road Initiative under the lens of International Relations theory

Generally, the majority of western scholars argue that the Belt and Road Initiative is not solely focused on enhancing China's international connectivity and integration through infrastructure, trade and development. Allegedly, it also has the aim to extend China’s influence in culture, energy, finance and politics, ultimately transforming it into a comprehensive foreign policy instrument. (Amighini & Sciorati, 2019; Hua, 2020). However, to truly understand the multifaced nature of the BRI, it is essential to analyze it through the major International Relations theories: Realism, Liberalism, Constructivism and Marxism. Each of these approaches provides unique lens, offering deeper insights into the strategic motivations and implications of the BRI.

As a first approach, the Realist point of view emphasizes the competitive and anarchic nature of states’ interactions: states are the primary actors of global politics and they are moved by the will to pursue their own national survival, power and security. In this sense, Realism considers politics as a zero-sum game, that must end up with winners and losers, making conflict inevitable and cooperation a non-viable alternative. In this perception, the Belt and Road Initiative is generally considered a tool to increase Chinese global influence and power. With this view, the project’s aim can be considered the one to secure crucial resources to Beijing, to establish economic dependencies and to counterbalance the dominance of the American system and model through economic investment and infrastructure development. As a matter of fact, the BRI embodies the vision of Beijing’s world order,

a Chinese-led one. Realism sees BRI as an offensive institutional balancing mechanism: instead of simply cooperating with the US liberal institutions, China has finally emerged with its own methods, and BRI works against the US structure to spread an alternative to US developing recipe. More simply, BRI shows China's revisionist rising ambition, which can be fully considered a strategy challenging the US-led liberal order (Ayferam, 2022). As a final stage, according to Realism, China aims at creating a network of states that profit from the BRI, in order to enhance its global importance and to promote the shifting of world equilibria from the unipolarity. To sum up, according to Rolland, *"Xi's long-term vision is to create a world order in which Western-style rule of law and democracy promotion are replaced by deference to Chinese interests and the international application of Chinese stability maintenance techniques"*. (Rolland in Andrew, 2018, p.208); in this sense, the BRI can be simply described as *"the Chinese move on the global chessboard to shape the future international balance of power"* (Magri, 2017, p.11).

The second theory, the Liberal one, highly considers the role of international institutions, economic interdependence and cooperation among states in the global arena. This approach considers cooperation as a "win-win", where states are always able to gain if fairly collaborating. Peaceful relations are not given from power disparities, but by political and economic values such as democracy and free trade, which permit reciprocal gain and growth. In this view, states can overcome the anarchic nature of the global arena by creating solid structures of cooperation that will prevent states from fighting each other. From this perspective, it is clear that the Belt and Road Initiative can be interpreted as a prodigious opportunity to enhance global cooperation and economic integration between states. In this view, the initiative is capable of bringing a number of different countries together towards the sole objective of increasing trade and infrastructures, bringing mutual benefits in a clear win-win situation. More in depth, this interdependence can bring states to regional stability and prosperity, avoiding the peril of war and promoting friendly relations. In practice, these ideas confirm what Montesquieu had already written in the first half of the XVIII century in the XX book of *"De l'esprit des lois"*: *"The natural effect of commerce is to bring peace, two nations that negotiate between themselves become reciprocally dependent, if one has an interest in buying and the other in selling"*. (Montesquieu, 1748, k. 20, Ch. 2). This notion is also supported by Simmons in the article *"Pax Mercatoria and the Theory of the State"* (Simmons, 2003), as, according to him, it is possible to notice a positive relation between trade and peace: states in the globalized world need each other due to the gradual division of work, and this cooperation relation is beneficial to both, more than rivalry. However, some other scholars, such as Robert Gilpin, have a less optimistic vision about trade and peace. In his view, trade must not be considered as the savior of international peace: it is usually true

that no trade means war but considering trade as the decisive element is highly reductive (Gilpin, 1987). A final interesting argument is given by Copeland, who supports the Theory of Trade Expectations. This idea would recognize that current trade has just relative importance in a peace-war scenario; indeed, it is not the status quo that matters, it is the future expectation that does. The state in this sense would act following the more rational path: if trade is expected to be satisfactory, there is no need to wage war; if it is instead expected to be unsatisfactory, the war option may be considered (Copeland, 1996).

On the topic of the BRI, some authors were also able to synthesize the Realist and Liberal approaches, as Ayferam: according to him, the BRI bears the potential to challenge the current global order and China will be disrupting the existing system with its dual approach. In fact, on the one hand, the BRI is a tool aimed to disrupt the unipolar liberal system guided by the US, transforming it into a multipolar global order guided by regional hegemons; on the other hand, the BRI works on a liberal basis, as the main principles underlying the project stem from the liberal philosophy, calling for comparative advantage and development between states. Therefore, BRI can be somehow considered as liberal initiative contrasting the US-led unipolar world order, pointing at a more inclusive and innovative system, with the aim to pursue more influence for regional hegemons, such as China (Ayferam, 2022).

Unlike Realism and Liberalism, Constructivism focuses on the assumption that relations are socially constructed: instead of focusing just on material factors, Constructivists emphasize the importance of ideas, beliefs and identities in shaping global affairs. This means that identities and interests of states are not given *per se*, but they are socially constructed through practice of interactions: as a consequence, state action is the result of collective norms that emerge from previous exchanges. These ideas are magisterially expressed by Alexander Wendt in his article “*Anarchy is what States Make of it*”, explaining the process of the creation of power politics through social construction (Wendt, 1992). This leads to the hypothesis that changes in ideas can result in a shifting of state’s priorities and behaviors. With this framework in mind, the Belt and Road Initiative can be understood as a component of the bigger Chinese ambition of the “Chinese Dream”: the latter moves towards the creation of new policies, institutions (like the AIIB) and initiatives (like the BRI), aimed to concretize what Xi Jinping calls the “*Community of shared destiny*” (Callahan, 2016). The goal is to establish a Sino-centric network with neighboring countries and to promote their new vision of global governance. In his article, Callahan stresses also the links between ideas, institutions and diplomacy, demonstrating how Xi's vision of China as a moral power in the “*Community of shared destiny*”

explains Beijing's ambitions for its new strategy (Callahan, 2016). Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that, in the Constructivist view, apart from economic and political gain, the BRI "*serves as the means to the much larger end of promoting China's new vision of global governance*" (Callahan, 2016, p.239). This approach may not sound too different from the Realist one at first sight as both of them similarly argue that China aims to control the new global order, but the difference is the process through which Beijing is trying to gain its global influence: in the first case, it was merely through power, in the second, ideas.

The last approach to be analyzed is Marxism: originally steaming from the works of the Prussian philosopher Karl Marx, this IR approach emphasizes the role of economic factors and class relations in shaping international politics. According to the theory, global order is dominated by capitalist states that exploit developing nations leading to global inequalities and underdevelopment. In Marx's words: "*The totality of relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness.*" (Marx, 1859, preface). Therefore, it emerges that non-territorial power is also strategically important for states, as they also tend to compete for markets and economic opportunities across the globe (Cox, 2002). Consequently, it is possible to argue that states' behavior stems from ruling-class interests, mainly economic ones, representing the essence of national policy-making (Cohen, 2014). In the Neo-Marxist point of view, the economy represents the engine of national policies, and in this view, the Belt and Road Initiative represents a strategy to increase Beijing's economic global dominance and to address domestic overcapacity issues. For Marxists, the fundamental question is whether the BRI can truly promote fair and sustainable development, or if it would exacerbate already existing inequities, by rising problems of dependency and reinforcing the exploitative capitalist systems, until reaching accusations of Neo-imperialistic tendencies. On this issue, it is important to take into consideration one of the most important Neo-Marxist theories, the Dependency Theory. Applied to the BRI case, the theory highlights the possibility of tying economic dependencies between China and the participating countries, by creating a dynamic from which the capitalistic core state (China) would benefit at the expense of the participating nations, the periphery, whose gains from this relation could remain limited, compared to the core's ones. In this context, Beijing's dialectic on the double profitability of the BRI must be proven and not just mentioned. This issue will be further analyzed in the next section, taking into account the different criticisms moved against the Belt and Road Initiative.

Therefore, it is possible to conclude that the Belt and Road Initiative is, firstly, a development strategy designed by Beijing with a strong global impact. Secondly, and most importantly, seen the political implications that this project brings, it would be fair to argue that BRI represents “*the centerpiece of China’s economic diplomacy, if not of China’s diplomacy tout court*” (Magri, 2017, p.8). Exactly for this reason and the proven relevance of the policy, despite Chinese government continues to keep the wording “initiative”, BRI should be considered more as the “*country’s new opening-up strategy, developed in response to changing domestic and international circumstances*” (Magri, 2017, p.11), emphasizing and ultimately confirming the hypothesis that the Belt and Road Initiative can be fully considered an element of Chinese Foreign Policy.

Section 1.4

The major criticisms of the BRI: Economic, Political and Environmental issues

After the analysis of the consequences of the Rise of China on the global order, the investigation of US-China relations and the examination of BRI through the lens of IR theories, it is now necessary to shift the attention to the major criticism of the policy. This initiative of Chinese foreign policy, as defined earlier in the previous section, truly retains the potential to produce social development and economic benefits to the participating states; at the same time, BRI has been usually described as dangerous and potentially destructive for a series of reasons.

With the awareness of this perceived double nature, this thesis aims to highlight the three most relevant criticisms that were moved against the initiative from a western perspective. The aim of this sub-chapter is therefore to present these issues and to critically assess them, in order to finally understand whether the BRI effectively represents a threat. The three criticisms which will be analyzed are: the Debt Trap Diplomacy accusations, the political Neo-Colonialism tendencies, and the sustainability issues of the BRI. In this discussion, it is essential to acknowledge the presence of a clear western bias in these criticisms, however, the thesis will attempt to deal with it and approach the topics neutrally.

1.4.1 Debt Trap Diplomacy

The first topic to be discussed is therefore the perceived Debt Trap Diplomacy by China and the ways in which BRI countries deal with this situation. As previously stated, BRI promises significant developing opportunities for contracting states; at the same time, these ambitious projects can trigger substantial risks for the countries' finances, particularly impacting on their economic situation by creating or worsening national debt. Before delving into the economic analysis of the issue, it is important to report that BRI has been described by some scholars as a program lacking in transparency: according to Horn, Reinhar, and Trebesch in their "China's Overseas Lending", the authors emphasize how the 50% of China's overseas loans to developing countries are not reported to the World Bank or the IMF records (Horn and alt. 2020). Moreover, additional suspicion is added due to the already mentioned lack of normative basis of the initiative (Bonelli, 2017) and the ambiguous decision-making process, characterized by opaque contracting, limited public oversight, top-down elite method and strict nondisclosure agreements (Xue, 2023).

Apart from transparency-led matters, the main issue is represented by the contested dynamic of the Chinese debt trap diplomacy: this expression itself is a neologism, coined by Chellaney in 2017. This concept, concretized originally in the act of purchasing substantial amounts of debt to increase the political leverage in the area, would make China a strategic economic player in world politics (Chellaney, 2017). This wording has then acquired major importance as it has been used by high political officials, like the Former US Vice-President Mike Pence to denote the Chinese strategy of infrastructure-building adopted in the framework of the BRI. Especially, Pence referred to the Chinese practice of charging countries with excessively high-interest loans, making them inexorably exposed to Beijing's coercion (Brautigam & Rithmire, 2021). Truth be said, he has not been the only to criticize this behavior; former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's numerous criticisms on the topic are renowned, "*China peddles corrupt infrastructure deals in exchange for political influence*" (Pompeo in Wintour, 2019) and also the famous attack of the "*bribe-fuelled debt-trap diplomacy*", fearing that Chinese predatory funding may result in undesired financial consequences, leading to an increase in Beijing's global influence (Reuters, 2019). Beijing's responses to these criticisms were not late, as Geng Shuang, the spokesman of the Chinese Foreign Affairs Ministry expressed that Chinese government was "*fed up with that*" and that the "*vote of support and confidence reposed by the international community on the BRI is the best reply to what the US has said and done*" (Geng in The Economic Times, 2019).

The debate on the existence of a debt trap diplomacy can be transported from the political dynamics to the academic dimension: as a matter of fact, debt trap diplomacy represents a critical topic of discussion in the academia. Scholars from both poles tried to explain the phenomenon through case studies, proving the negative financial and social consequences of the initiative, but also the impressive economic and public achievements that the initiative concretized. First, according to its inventor Chellaney, debt trap diplomacy can be considered a proper economic tool of foreign policy: through this strategy, Beijing is capable of making use of its economic power to acquire influence on the contracting parties, gaining access to commodities such as raw materials or trade benefits (Chellaney, 2017). Moreover, Mark Green, an American Diplomat, argues that debt trap diplomacy represents a risk both for committing parties and global relations, as Beijing's loans are not in line with globally recognized, sustainable and transparent norms by the World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF), resulting potentially harmful for the stability of the system (Green, 2024). As a matter of fact, many critiques are based on the fact that Chinese loans seem somehow diverse from those offered by western states, but is this really the case? The answer to this question is affirmative: it is important to acknowledge that interest in Chinese investments are frequently lower and more favorable than those granted by western states and organizations, notably the EU, the IMF or the UN; moreover, the latter usually attach certain political conditions to deblock the funds, with the final aim of imposing a certain governance model (De Freitas, 2023). Moreover, it is possible to admit that Chinese investments are allegedly supposed to be braver, in the sense that, they are less focused on the fast profitability or the durability of the investment, as they majorly focus on developing countries where financial issues are already existing and repaying possibilities have lower guarantees (Himmer and Rod, 2022).

Previously to the BRI, China operated development investments by occasionally requesting states a certain form of insurance in order to assure loan repayment, known as the "Resources for Infrastructures" (R4I). In this type of contract, especially adopted for investment in Africa (Angola, Nigeria, Ghana, DRC...), in case of financial inability to repay the loan, the African states guarantee to repay debts in the form of future exports or concessions in raw materials from the continent. This strategy favored China with a double guarantee: on the one hand, even if debtor states did not own enough resources to repay the investment, China will receive such amount by other means, allowing Beijing to still profit from the transaction (Konijin, 2014). Therefore, according to the author, this approach is unquestionably beneficial to China, while the profitability is highly debated for African states, because, as in the event of a financial emergency, they must continue to provide China with resources at relatively low prices, obstructing the proper functioning of the national economy and

development in the long run. According to Konjin however, *“the developmental impact of R4I swaps depends on the capacity and willingness of African governmental institutions to harness the opportunities and mitigate the risks”* (Konjin, 2014, p.4).

Today instead, in the time of the BRI, the real concern of western countries is that China will supposedly create debt traps by providing unrepayable loans to developing countries. As a consequence, this strategy would increase Chinese influence and create dynamics for which states, instead of paying money, would grant Beijing significant concessions for the use of infrastructures or raw materials at no cost. In this sense, it is significant to mention two relevant case studies: the first is the construction of the Hambontota Harbour in Sri Lanka started in 2008. Despite being not relevant as a proper BRI example, due to time issues, this case perfectly embodies the dangers that BRI might pose. After an initial investment by the Chinese company CMPort of more than \$1.1billion, a too optimistic business plan, and a few years of activity, it was clear that the revenues of the Hambontota Harbour could never be capable to repay China on time. Therefore, the government of Colombo proposed in 2017 the debt-for-equity swap through which CMPort acquired the 70% of the infrastructure's stake, resulting in the Chinese administration of the port for 99 years. What practically occurred is, due the national impossibility to repay its debt, Sri Lanka had to propose an alternative to the agreed payment. Therefore, the real problem may not lie in the debt itself, as more than 80% of the entities contracting with China already tend towards indebtedness; instead, the concern should focus on the sustainability of the latter debt and the resulting risks it poses on the population (Dollar, 2019). On the issue, other authors such as Himmer and Rod do not consider this case study as a relevant example for the debt trap diplomacy, as it lacks the factor of the “malice character of Chinese behavior”; however, they still recognize the Chinese responsibility in the lack of proper assessment of the situation in supporting unsustainable projects with low possibility of profit, acknowledging that China is not innocent for the worsening of Sri Lankan economic situation. Additionally, they also criticize the period of 99 years, as it is considered too long and not reciprocally profitable (Himmer and Rod, 2022).

The second case study instead focuses on Laos, more in the specific on the China-Laos railway, officially opened to the public in 2021. This infrastructure should have helped the country to boost its national exports, building an infrastructure to facilitate exchange with China and Thailand. However, as the railway was terminated, Lao enterprises were still not capable of providing sufficient commodities to foreign markets due to low production, so that almost the totality of the goods currently transported on the infrastructure is constituted by Chinese imports entering Laos. At the

same time, the country is still not capable of repaying the loans to China. As a matter of fact, today Laos' economic situation is challenging, as its public debt equals its yearly GDP, and China owns half of the country's public debt. However, despite these evident problems, Vientiane agreed with Beijing the financing of supplementary projects for hydroelectric centrals, even if Lao economy still does not permit to repay the debt. So, instead of asking for more loans, Laos has negotiated some debt reliefs, promising Beijing some concessions for agricultural land and trade facilities. Therefore, because of the impossibility of Vientiane to pay the debt, the two states agreed that the Chinese enterprise CSG would have assigned the majority share (90%) of "Electricité de Laos", the national agency responsible for national electricity transmission, meaning that China now detains a significant portion of Laos' energy industry. (Bhatt, 2023; Himmer and Rod, 2022). Due to the conditions preventing public release and scrutiny of the BRI loans, it is today impossible to clearly understand the nature of this relation: however, two views are to be highlighted. On the one hand, Bhatt argues that Laos *"may not be caught in the Debt Trap, but it is certainly in trouble"*, mentioning the already existing financial difficulty of the country, the gain from infrastructure and tourism that have been overestimated and Chinese interest to not make Laos fail due to international pressure (Bhatt, 2023). On the other side, Himmer and Rod, in their already mentioned comparative analysis, do not exclude the possibility of Debt Trap Diplomacy in Laos, due to the assumed debt -for-equity swap. Laos represented already a fragile economy, investments there are challenging: therefore, China should have somehow expected this scenario to occur, rendering the investment, maybe, more instrumental than it could appear (Himmer and Rod, 2022).

After the analysis of the two case studies, back to the academia. According to other scholar's criticisms, debt trap diplomacy is unfounded: these case studies prove that China tried, within the limits of feasible, to restructure the debts of developing states and there is no evidence that China attempted to obtain assets from indebted countries, which were out of the original agreed contracts. Moreover, the concept of debt trap diplomacy does not take into consideration one important aspect: the independent decision-making power of states that agree to engage with China. It is true that states are free to choose, and they have the political will to get involved in these financial arrangements (Parrish, 2024). Furthermore, it is also important to consider that, according to some Chinese scholars, *"Labelling the BRI as a debt trap is both factually wrong and exaggerated. In fact, even before the launch of the BRI, some countries that joined the BRI were already facing rising debt levels"* (Yu, 2023). He stresses the idea that such countries had debt already previously to committing with China and it is up to the national governments to decide whether to engage in accords with Beijing or not. At this point, once the agreement is done, China simply expects its loans to be repaid, as normally

occurs, as the BRI is different from charity (Yu, 2023). Therefore, it is not the question of Beijing to apply a debt trap, instead it is up to states to consider whether it is profitable or not for them to engage in the initiative and to evaluate the political, economic and social consequences. For this reason, China cannot be blamed for the mistakes of foreign governments in managing their debts (Yu, 2023).

Therefore, in conclusion of this sub-section, it is possible to state that China's Debt Trap Diplomacy represents definitively a controversial issue. While providing development opportunities, Chinese investments are also keen to promote debt risks for participating countries. The lack of transparency and the opaque contract compliance complicates the situation. Criticisms from western countries stress the potential for increased Chinese influence, while Beijing defends the legitimacy of its initiatives and the choice of states to engage in business with China. While academics have different perspectives, it is undoubtedly necessary to carefully consider the long-term implications of such actions in order to avoid dependency and future economic vulnerability.

1.4.2 Neo-Colonialism

The second topic to be analyzed in this sub-chapter is the criticism about the Chinese Neo-colonialist attitude attributed to the BRI. To deal with this subject, the relevant case study will focus on the perceived increasing Chinese influence in the African continent, and the resulting consequences in the framework of the relations between Beijing and the major African states. Chinese investments in the field of BRI were able to satisfy African needs and to propose an alternative to the classic western approach to development; however, through these policies, China may be intended to win the hearts of African people and governments, proposing a win-win cooperation strategy that in reality would satisfy Beijing's alleged Neo-colonialism tendencies.

Over the past decade, it was not a secret that China grew its influence everywhere across the African continent, including significant countries like South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, and Angola. This tendency can be also verified through economic data: Africa represents the geographical area receiving the greatest economic support from China, accounting for 44.6% of the total Chinese development funds between 2013 and 2018 (Madzoke, Wu, 2024). Moreover, the trade relation between China and the African countries has increasingly grown in the last decades, especially since 2009, the year when China became officially the largest trading partner of African states (Madzoke & Wu, 2024). Sino-African growing ties are also evident in political and diplomatic fields: except for Eswatini, Beijing has now developed diplomatic relations with every African state, and the greatest

impediment to collaboration between the two is to be found in Mbabane's recognition of Taiwan as an independent entity from China. (Hioe, 2023).

China's will to cooperate with the African continent formally stems from their perceived common identity and shared history of cooperation, synthesized in the "South-South development" formula. The latter embodied one of the pillars of the "African Policy Paper of 2006", the document that introduced the stable economic cooperation between the two, facilitating Chinese investments in Africa. According to this document, mutual benefit and equality represent the basis of Sino-African cooperation, opening also for further strategic partnerships based on "*political equality and mutual trust, economic win-win cooperation, and cultural exchange*" (Xinhua, 2015b). However, despite diplomatic formalism, it is clear that China is not acting in Africa just because of a question of identity. Instead, according to Wan Yan Chan, scholars signify Beijing's interest in the African continent for three main reasons: firstly, the abundant presence of natural resources and raw materials; secondly, the continent's growing market as a prospective platform for Chinese imports and business; thirdly, the more political reason is that Africa, with Beijing's support, can potentially offer to the international community an example of alternative development model, different to the western approach, enhancing Chinese soft power and influence (Wan Yan Chan, 2018).

China's current diplomatic and political ties with African countries are regularly updated and improved, thanks to the formation of the so-called "Forum on China-Africa Cooperation" (FOCAC). These meetings are conducted every three years, once in Beijing and once in African capital cities, to allow multilateral coordination of the members' actions and to promote the parties' economic advantage. According to official numbers from the FOCAC summit website, there is an increasing trend of African nations and representatives attending these summits on a regular basis (FOCAC, n.d). In contrast to the broad excitement of African states for Chinese collaborations, western countries, particularly the European Union and the United States, are concerned about a few aspects.

First, Dollar warns that China may be intended to export its authoritarian paradigm in Africa, with the supporting argument that "*major loan recipients have dismal histories of democracy and human liberties*" (Dollar, 2019, p.2). More crucially, western scholars have long characterized China's growing interest in African countries as a Neo-Colonial attitude instead of a win-win scenario. The concern is that, as a result of its expanding economic and soft power, China may be able to erode the sovereignty of African states: according to Langan, China is using trade to persuade African elites to support its mercantilist ambitions, and Zambia offers a perfect explication of this tendency. In fact,

President Sata's initial opposition towards Chinese businesses during its political campaign in Zambia was then totally reshaped in 2011, when he obtained the power. Once appointed, he drastically switched sides, abandoning all his anti-Chinese ideas and projects, reinforcing Langan's conviction of Chinese power to influence national politics in Africa (Langan, 2017). Furthermore, according to a section of the paper by Balasubramanyam, the whole system of investments, commerce, and raw material export to China mimics the " *colonial investments in the past designed to exploit African countries*" (Balasubramanyam, 2015, p.11). Other scholars argue that Chinese investments impacted the diplomatic ties between African nations and other world powers, with the result of a change in alliances and power structures in the region. If on the one hand, China's apparent non-interference approach in internal African matters has been praised by African governments themselves, on the other side, criticisms for disregarding corruption and violations of human rights have grown (Madzoke and Wu, 2024). The trend of shifting political and economic ties towards Beijing can be interestingly studied by observing the current growing tendency among African countries on China's One-China Policy against Taiwan. As a matter of fact, this trend can be interpreted as an indicator of Chinese influence in African's political decisions. In fact in the last decades, several African governments who had previously tied diplomatic relationships with Taiwan progressively agreed on Beijing's One China Policy, *de facto* stopping to recognize the independence of the island, in order to pursue closer relations with China: Burkina Faso in 2018, Sao Tomé and Príncipe in 2016, and Gambia in 2013 are among the most recent cases. As a consequence of this novel support, the majority of African countries that decided to support China saw a sharp increase in trade with China in the aftermath of their choice (Kironksa, 2023). Therefore, based on this trend, it is possible to argue that Chinese economy is so developed that it is capable of affecting African nations with its financial strength and influencing their behavior.

However, on the other side, not everyone perceives Chinese increased presence in Africa as an issue, with many concentrating instead on the enormous benefits this relationship provides. Firstly, the previously mentioned "African Policy Paper" from 2006 embodies the approach of the win-win cooperation : it is true that mutual benefit and equality are critical ideals for Chinese-African economic collaboration, in fact, African BRI cooperation is targeted at mutual benefits for both parties. Strictly economically, it is true that total exchanges between China and Africa are every year more consistent: they went above 282 billion US dollars just in 2022. However, it is also important to state that Chinese exports in Africa counted in 2022 as the 58,6%, while the whole African continent to China weighted just the 41,4% of the value (Madzoke and Wu, 2024). These data make China, by far, the more beneficial component of this trade partnership: numbers plainly show that

China might not be interested in reaching the ideal win-win situation in which all parties profit equally. Secondly, African governments truly value the speediness of Chinese investments and the freedom to choose their own development path rather than being bound by western imposed guidelines. With this approach, African governments can benefit from Chinese plans, resulting in uneven commercial connections between them but still beneficial. Thirdly, according to Madzoke and Wu, different types of improvements can be found in African countries following the integration with Chinese allies, such as the improvement of infrastructures, a bettering of living conditions for citizens, trade of low-cost Chinese goods, creation of jobs, and improvement of the general trade and economy. All of these positive elements contributed to the economic and social development of various African countries. Therefore, as stated in their comparative analyses, Madzoke and Wu argue that, in Africa, “*Chinese ODA-like aid has a positive effect on socioeconomic development, and its component dimensions*” (Madzoke and Wu, 2024, p.1). Finally, according to the findings of a survey conducted in 2021 in 36 African countries about African attitudes toward China by Afrobarometer, Beijing is positively perceived by African citizens, with only 15% of respondents being totally dissatisfied. According to African countries, China's favorable attitude is shown in infrastructure projects, low-cost Chinese products, and investments in African businesses (Selormey and alt. 2021). This trend therefore tends to corroborate the words of the President of Senegal, Abdoulaye Wade, in 2008 stating that: “*The battle between the West and China is not Africa’s problem [...] China’s approach to our needs is simply better adapted than the slow and sometimes patronizing post-colonial approach of European investors*” (Wade, 2008). This speech clearly shows the general satisfaction of African countries with the economic development brought by the partnership with China, stressing the fact that they don’t intend to take a position in the new war of hegemony between the Asian power and the West. According to the President, politics and development are different domains.

Therefore, if on the one hand, it is not possible to deny the fact that China “*exhibits some Neo-Colonial tendencies and has the potential to undermine African State’s sovereignty*” (Wan Yan Chan, 2018, p.4) which means that the Asian state has the potentiality of succeeding in shaping African nation’s foreign policy, on the other hand, “*African states have enjoyed some degree [...] of economic and infrastructural development*” (Wan Yan Chan, 2018, p.4). This recalls the idea of an unbalanced win-win situation, which is still acceptable, given that African states are generally satisfied with their growth. Furthermore, the same author concludes the paper by stating that China has organized this project with the clear intention of improving its national trade, but also playing a geopolitical game to maximize its global influence, not simply economically, but also politically, due to the spread of its soft power. This assumption can be considered true, as it is impossible to deny the fact that China

gained soft power in Africa during the last decades; in this sense, the number of foreign students eager to study in China for university might be a key indicator of this tendency. According to Development Reimagined estimates, the number of African students attending university in China increased by 258 percent between 2011 and 2017. France, on the other hand, still has the highest total enrolment of foreign students, but it has decreased by 2% between 2011 and 2017. While the US's 30% growth rate is impressive, it comes nowhere close to what has been happening in China: between 2011 and 2017, the number of African students studying in China increased at a rate roughly nine times that of the US (ICEF, 2021).

To sum up, residents in Africa generally see China favorably, and evidence indicates that public opinion is prepared to maintain dialogue with China. As a result, the fact that African countries profit from dealing with China is indisputable. Is this a win-win scenario? Definitely so. Is it balanced? Absolutely no, as numbers proved that China's advantages are more constant and plentiful than those of African countries. Data suggest therefore that China-Africa relations are connected by an unequal win-win scenario, explained by China's primary goal to defend its national interests. African states still receive a relative advantage from this situation, lower than the one perceived by China, but still consistently significant. Furthermore, it is plausible to argue that China is attempting to influence African countries' foreign policies in order to obtain worldwide support.

In conclusion, mentioning the point of view of Wan Yan Chan about the Chinese foreign behavior, China should not be labeled as a Neo-colonialist state, since Beijing would be simply "*acting like any other emerging power would do*" (Wan Yan Chan, 2018, p.4). Arguably, China is purely profiting of the advantageous unbalanced win-win situation to satisfy its national interest, and at the same time, it is creating a new network of friendly states, which will likely support its action in the international community. Therefore, to sum up, China sought both economic gain and political support, and the Belt and Road Initiative was perfectly capable of providing both.

1.4.3 Sustainability issues

The last major critique against the Belt and Road Initiative is represented by the sustainability issues resulting from the numerous Chinese projects and investments. If on the one hand, it is undeniable that BRI was capable of contributing to the economic and social development of its partners, on the other hand, such progress came at the cost of environmental consequences. As a matter of fact, at the beginning, the Chinese initiative was focused on economic development, downguarding issues such as sustainability. As time passed, the topic gained more importance and Beijing saw the momentum to adhere to this global trend towards environmentalism, transforming its project into a "Green Belt

and Road” (GBRI). However, this sudden change of strategy by China raises a number of questions, first of all, the one regarding the real nature of the GBRI or the perceived greenwashing practice behind it and the effective commitment towards this new tendency.

Given the relevance of the topic, the Belt and Road Initiative and its presumed severe impacts on natural ecosystems have been the focus of different studies. These works were particularly focused on the perceived damaging ecologic consequences of the Chinese-financed infrastructure projects, creating issues such as natural habitat isolation and fragmentation, ecosystem disturbance, proliferation of invasive species, and endangering animal lives (Politi, 2021). According to some scholars, the old version of the BRI can be described as a transmission channel for pollutants: aware of these challenges, the Chinese government has matured the necessity to balance and economic development with environmental protection and sustainability (Lin, 2020). In other words, there is now the will to transform the development model from a *"polluting first and then treating"* approach to a *"developing while treating"* method. In this framework, as the leader of the BRI, Beijing has the possibility to reconstruct a new narration by shifting the country's priorities and communication on environmental issues (Lin, 2020).

In the original BRI projects of 2013, there was not a clear reference to the protection of the environment or sustainability: the main goals were in fact centered on the boosting of trade cooperation between countries, enlarging the number of exchanges and ameliorating the quality of infrastructures (Teo and alt, 2020). Another important element to be considered in this sense is the ecological damage produced by the BRI: according to Zhou and Sheperd, the total carbon emissions of the countries participating in the BRI have shown a strong increase since 2013. According to some estimates, BRI business could have caused an increase in the 0.3% of global carbon emission, bringing low industrialized states to increase up to 7% of their pre-BRI carbon emission (Zhou and Sheperd, 2020). Therefore, the BRI could be considered as beneficial for the economy of the partners but damaging in ecology and sustainability terms. However, since sustainability became progressively a global topic and China started successfully to achieve its economic results, a change of perspective was enacted. This part of the thesis is therefore dedicated to analyzing President Xi's new approach to the initiative, aimed at relancing the image of China, not just as an economic giant but also as a technological and ecologic winner. To do so, since China started successfully to achieve its preliminary economic results, Beijing attempted to adapt its BRI to the contemporary sustainability challenges. However, criticisms are behind the corner, as this change of policy of Beijing was

interpreted by some scholars as a simple act of greenwashing, given China's international vulnerability on the topic (Hillman, 2020).

On a historical perspective, the first step towards a green BRI was represented by the famous speech held by President Xi at the Legislative Chamber of the Uzbek Supreme Assembly in Tashkent, in 2016. During his intervention, Xi mentioned the necessity to adopt a new perspective for the BRI, making it more “*green, healthy, intelligent and peaceful*” (Xi in Xinhua, 2016). With this formula, the Chinese President expressed the aim to make ecology a distinctive characteristic of the BRI, rendering it a Green BRI (GBRI). According to Manca, in the article published by ISPI, the Green Belt and Road Initiative, as its predecessors, does not have any specific well-defined guidelines: instead, the project evolves over time, consistently with the international context, following China's global aspirations and domestic needs. In fact, according to the author, apart from the global demand, green projects gained centrality also in China, as Chinese citizens were increasingly demanding for better environmental guarantees (Manca, 2023b).

In 2019, during the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing, (BRF) in the *Joint Communiqué*, a new Plan of Action was drafted: this strategy provided three new aims: “*The principle of Extensive consultation, join efforts and shared benefits*”, the approach of “*Open, green and clean cooperation*” and the “*Pursuit of high-standard*” (Xinhua, 2019). Later in the same year, a report by the Advisory Council of the BRF for International Cooperation, in cooperation with the Secretariat of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, published a report on the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs website where they defined the Belt and Road Initiative as a “*highly valuable vehicle for accelerating implementation of the 2030 Agenda*” arguing that “*it has proven effective in bridging a number of gaps in implementation. It is up to all stakeholders in the BRI and the SDGs to make full use of that vehicle and generate momentum for the achievement of the SDGs by 2030*” (BRF, 2019, p.69). This report highlighted that, despite the obvious differences, the BRI and the UN 2030 agenda are potentially capable of truly facilitating global development thanks to the implementation of some measures to reach increased global coordination and synergy (CCICED, 2022). In the specific, BRI can influence states on environmental protection through synergetic actions in the implementation of relevant SDGs, by promoting high environmental standards, while striking a good balance among economic growth, social progress and environmental protection (BRF, 2019). Therefore, China owns the opportunity to influence the global community by imposing higher ecologic standards, which would be likely to create a positive change for the environment: in fact, according to Politi, it would be auspicious for Beijing to present more stringent

environmental standards for BRI projects. This would be concretized in global higher compliance and benefits for Beijing as a global green leader. However, some of the main problems in establishing clear guidelines globally are represented by the diversity of involved countries, the difficulty in coordination between them and the political significance of this action (Politi, 2021). These are the major elements that still today block Beijing in adopting clear and strict guidelines for the BRI project.

Coming back to the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing, a new project was launched for the occasion, the BRI International Green Development Coalition (BRIGC). According to the website of the United Nations Environment Program, (UNEP), the coalition is an *“open, inclusive and voluntary international network which brings together the environmental expertise of all partners to ensure that the Belt and Road brings long-term green and sustainable development to all concerned countries in support of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”* (UNEP, 2024). Moreover, according to the official website of the BRIGC, the main aim of the group is *“to promote international consensus, understanding, cooperation and concerted actions to realize green development on the Belt and Road, to integrate sustainable development into the BRI through joint efforts and to facilitate BRI participating countries to realize SDGs related to environment and development”* (BRIGC website, 2024). Actively, more than 130 partners are included in the groups, among those, 26 Ministers of Environment of UN member states, national and international organizations such as the WWF, Tsinghua University and the UNEP (BRIGC website, 2024). Put simply, the aim of BRIGC is to integrate a sixth element of the already mentioned BRI five priorities, the concept of sustainable development, declined in the areas of environmental sustainability, international standards and best practices (UNEP website, 2024). Later, surprisingly enough, in late 2020, China announced its commitment to become carbon neutral in 40 years' time, with the promise to reach the zero emission in 2060. (Hillman, 2020). On the same wavelength, another important event on the Green BRI was the COP15, held in 2021-2022 between Kunming and Montreal. During this meeting, the Kunming Declaration on Ecological Civilization was signed. This concept of “Ecological Civilization” might sound new to the international community, but in reality, it was already introduced in the Constitution of the Communist Party in 2012. Therefore, Kunming Declaration permitted to globalize the Chinese Concept of the *“lucid waters and lush mountains are invaluable assets”* (CCP Constituion, 2022).

Since then, it is possible to argue that China changed its approach, at least in words: on the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of China, held in late 2022, Xi remarked China's economic paradigm shift: the focus is no longer on quantity but on the quality of growth (Manca, 2023b).

Moreover, more recently in July 2024, at the occasion of the third plenum, the Chinese President declared that Beijing will “*improve the mechanism of green and low-carbon development*”, adding that “*ecological and environmental protection still has shortcomings*”, reconfirming Beijing’s interest towards improving on the topic (Xi in Patel, 2024). Despite the undeniable effort made by PRC to show its interest towards a change in direction, it is also important to take into consideration what China did in practice, in order not to fall in the greenwashing accusations. After a deep analysis of the phenomenon, it is possible to spot the existence of a sort of Chinese double- approach: on the one hand, due to its domestic experience with the negative consequences of poor environmental policies, such as climate change, increasing pollution, developed health risk, frequent natural catastrophes, Beijing has now urged to address these issues by genuinely imposing stricter national legislation on sustainability. On the other hand, at the external level, the BRI’s is still guided by a soft governance instead of specific regulation, leaving BRI countries freer to adopt or not the guidelines (Coenen and alt, 2020). As a matter of fact, this remains problematic, as “*despite the narrative promoted by the Chinese government of a “Green Silk Road”, the environmental impact of many BRI-related projects continues to cause controversy*” (Politi, 2021, p.2). China's reputation is today damaged by BRI unsustainable projects abroad that contribute to global warming, given that “*most Chinese investments in energy infrastructure still flow to environmentally unsustainable projects*” (Martin and Van der Putten, 2020), while, nationally, Chinese environmental laws were more stringent for local investments than for foreign ones (Martin and Van der Putten, 2020).

On this topic, an article by Wang analyses two clear critical cases, explaining Chinese BRI approach to the environment, criticizing Beijing for the lack of sufficient assessment and sustainability of the projects abroad: the Bar-Boljare Highway in Montenegro and the Batang Toru Hydropower in Indonesia, both currently under construction. (Wang and alt, 2023). These two cases equally showed the potential negative impact of BRI project on natural ecosystems and demonstrated the still dominant lack of clear standards and guarantees on the issue. On the first case study, the Bar-Boljare Highway in Montenegro was in fact built adjacent to a UNESCO protected natural site, the Taro river gorge. After the initiation of the works in the area, some analyses have reported that the river was “*effectively dead*”, due to the disappearance of wildlife and the abundance of debris (Muller, 2024). In the same way, the second case study, the Batang Toru Hydropower in Indonesia, presents the consequences of the construction of a hydropower plant located in an area inhabited by one of the rarest species of hominids, the Tapanuli orangutan: the project caused severe floods due to increasing deforestation (Politi, 2021). This project has been labeled as potentially risky for local biodiversity, and also the World Bank, acknowledging this aspect, put a veto on the subsidy of this initiative;

despite so, China continued to fund the project (Wang and alt. 2023). Consequently, according to some scholars, notably Politi, these situations clearly demonstrate a challenge of transparency in the Chinese approach: Beijing's BRI represents therefore an alternative model of development, different from IMF or WB's values and constraints, based on lower audits, no public disclosures about investments and environmental impact assessments, creating problems in terms of limpidity and sustainability of the investments and infrastructures and they realize (Politi, 2021).

Hence, if on the one hand, it is undeniable that China is trying to impose itself globally as a green superpower, on the other hand, ambiguities and contradictions in its approach arise. As a matter of fact, it is important to admit that China progressed a lot domestically in its commitment to environmental targets. At the same time, externally, the situation is different: according to Manca, China's projects related to fossil fuels account today for more than 50 percent of those active or still under construction. At the same time, China might be truly changing its future approach, since most of the upcoming projects in the planning stage are relying on low-carbon energy sources (Manca, 2023b).

Moreover, despite the vagueness of the project of the Green Belt and Road Initiative, it is possible to find some objectives which are perfectly in line with BRI original aims. Through GBRI, China is perceived to aim to *“correct internal disequilibria and expand the economic influence and therefore the geopolitical one of Beijing”*, (Manca, 2023b). As a matter of fact, China owns already a comparative advantage in this field, as the country is globally responsible for more than 70% of the world's production of solar panels. Therefore, it is not impossible to state that Beijing will use the GBRI as a tool for boosting its manufacturing, until influencing and possibly monopolizing the sector (Manca, 2023b). Additionally, Chinese government realized that an ecologically sustainable BRI will be likely to improve the relations between Beijing and international players. As a consequence, it is possible to argue that China engaged into the GBRI both in response to criticisms and with the goal of increasing collaboration on climate change and growing its global influence.

However, with so many players involved, the BRI's top-down structure has created coordination problems: in spite of the internal directives from the government, externally less ecologically virtuous investments continue, but at a lower range than before. Therefore, as already stated, in order to fully achieve the promise of the Green Belt and Road Initiative, better compliance systems and uniform green finance norms are necessary, and it is the role of current and future global leadership to pursue them.

Therefore, in conclusion, the BRI represents a meaningful opportunity for Beijing to expand its global economic and geopolitical influence. This occurs with a number of ecological and social criticism, as the ones criticizing the BRI for habitat fragmentation, pollution and low ecological standards. Over time, Beijing indeed realized the critical importance of incorporating environmental sustainability to the BRI, and as a matter of fact, China advanced the GBRI, both internally and externally. However, some criticalities emerged, such as the excessive flexibility of Chinese soft governance tools: these in fact allow states to choose their degree of adoption of environmental guidelines, actively breaking ecological standards. Luckily enough, this trend is however slowly changing its path. Therefore, on the one hand, it is incorrect to accuse China of greenwashing, given the existence of ameliorations in terms of sustainability by Beijing; however, on the other hand, to completely fulfill these promises, it is necessary for Beijing to adopt a stricter and uniform compliance system of green finance norms. Current and future global leadership must commit to these goals, ensuring the BRI contribution to a sustainable effort and enhancing cooperation on environmental issues; otherwise, it will be possible to label Chinese behavior as a greenwashing strategy.

Chapter 2

Bridging Opportunities: Italy in the Belt and Road Initiative

The signature of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between Italy and China on March 2019 represented a critical moment in the bilateral relations of the two countries. Through this agreement, Rome and Beijing revealed their intention to strengthen their coordination in a variety of sectors, opening for intensified cooperation and partnerships. On the Italian point of view, the agreement would have boosted trade relations between the two, making Italian export more competitive in China and attracting significant investments in the country. On the Chinese side instead, the partnership would have acquired an alleged political meaning, confirming Beijing's economic reliability and enlarging the influence of China in the circle of EU and G7 states. Thus, the second chapter is designed to analyze the Memorandum under different points of view, explaining the reasons and the criticisms to the agreement, with the intention to dig deep into the question of the signature.

Therefore, the chapter will be organized as follows: the first section will be dedicated to the analysis of the EU-China relations, by going into detail on the question of the EU-China partnerships and to assess the quality of the interactions between these two influential global actors. Italy is firstly an European power, therefore, to fully understand the background of the Italian access into the BRI, it is necessary to comprehend the relations between Brussels and Beijing. The second section will be then dedicated to the study of the Italo-Chinese relations: starting with their diplomatic historical ties, the discussion will be shifted on the debate on both state's reasons to cooperate in the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, concluding with the comparison between the signature and the traditional Italian foreign policy. The final section will be then dedicated to the formal examination of the Memorandum of Understanding, explaining the different areas of cooperation; the latter will be sided with examples of other EU countries' relations with China and criticisms about the real necessity of signing the Memorandum with Beijing.

At the end of the chapter, the reader will have a clear idea on the form and content of the Memorandum of Understanding, its economic implications, and its strategic consequences; moreover, he will understand the complex situation of the Italian decision-making system at the time, the singularity of the agreement compared to other states' and the reasons for its criticisms. This all will be fundamental for the research, as the next chapter will delve into the decision of Italy to step back from the partnership with China, and the assessment of the results of the 2019-2023 period.

Section 2.1

EU and China: partners, competitors, rivals

Before entering in the discussion on the Italo-Chinese relations, it is pivotal to briefly analyze the policies of the European Union on China. As a member of the Union in fact, Italy is highly influenced by Brussels; consequently, it is not unreasonable to firstly discuss the European Union's policies to understand the general framework of action of the Italian government. Of course, Rome's priorities are not always perfectly aligned with Brussels', but studying EU-China relations will offer to this thesis another important outlook to comprehend the Italian bilateral relations with China at the macro-level.

Despite the EU's alleged difficulty in shaping a common foreign policy, due to internal complexities, differing interests of member states and lack of unified strategic culture (Dempsey, 2021), Brussels cultivated a solid tradition of dialogue with Beijing. In fact, from an initial economic-based cooperation, the relation between EU and China has evolved throughout the years towards a more political one (Casanova, 2024a). Given the powerful influence of the two actors in the international arena and the significance of their economic relations, Brussels and Beijing are today obliged to interact continuously, despite the alleged difference of their two visions and values.

For their bilateral relations, 2019 represents a critical moment: on March, the European Commission had published its "Strategic Outlook on EU-China relations", elucidating Brussels' strategy on Beijing and displaying its consideration on China. This document became easily one of the most influential on the topic, as it contains the debated and maybe "*drastic*" statement on EU's vision on China, (Herrero, 2023, p.1), underlining the complexities of this relation. In the latter, the EU Commission stated that:

"China is, simultaneously, in different policy areas, a cooperation partner with whom the EU has closely aligned objectives, a negotiating partner with whom the EU needs to find a balance of interests, an economic competitor in the pursuit of technological leadership, and a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance. This requires a flexible and pragmatic whole-of-EU approach enabling a principled defense of interests and values" (European Commission, 2019, p.1).

This sub-chapter will be therefore dedicated to the analysis of EU-China relations, in light of the distinctions drawn by the abovementioned quotation. Additionally, it will terminate with an overview on the Chinese perspectives on the matter, with the aim to briefly make sense of these tortuous “*roller coaster relations*” (Herrero, 2023, p.1). The sub-chapter does not aim at deeply describing the current European policies towards China, instead, it is designed to offer a general overview on the strengths and weaknesses on EU-China relations.

2.1.1 Partners for cooperation

China was defined by the European Commission as a “*cooperation partner with whom the EU has closely aligned objectives*” (European Commission, 2019, p.1). EU and China have in fact long recognized the importance of their cooperation in a variety of topics, especially those related to global challenges such as climate change, circular economy, and technology and innovation. Given the influence these two entities have in the global arena, this cooperation is considered vital for the international equilibria, permitting global actors to go beyond national differences and to cooperate on a number of topics.

First, one of the most important fields of cooperation between the two is climate change and environmental protection, crucial topics also in the field of global governance, in which the two actors are promoting clean energy and green transition (Chen, 2024). Focusing on their bilateral relations, Brussels and Beijing boast a tradition of long cooperation, especially collaborating on specific topics like carbon pricing and methane reduction. It is important to mention that, before COP28, EU and China organized “*The EU-China High Level Dialogue on the Environment and Climate*”, where they decided to strengthen collaboration in combating the climate crisis and collaborate to secure a favorable outcome for the upcoming conference (EEAS, 2023).

Second, another important element of cooperation between the two is circular economy: despite recent disagreements on the manufacturing of electric vehicles, which will be addressed in the final chapter of the thesis, the subject remains central in the bilateral relation between Brussels and Beijing. In fact, in 2023, EU and China have instituted the “*High-Level Dialogue on Circular Economy*”, in so doing, a new space for China and the EU to exchange on the topic was opened. In this spirit, Brussels and Beijing recently agreed on a Memorandum of Understanding on the topic, specifically on plastics, batteries and remanufacturing, encouraging both sides to increase their communication and exchange of good practice on numerous related industrial issues (Chen, 2024). Former European Commissioner for the Environment, Oceans and Fisheries, Virginijus Sinkevičius, expressed

satisfaction for the agreement, stating that: "*Closer and continuous engagement with China is key to achieving not only our circular economy, but also other shared environmental ambitions*" (European Commission, Directorate General for Environment, 2024).

Third, EU and China increasingly cooperate in the field of technology and innovation, especially on the development of digital governance, the coordination on regulating emerging technologies such as the artificial intelligence (AI) and the establishment of clear standards for Information and Communication technologies (ICT). In this sense, on September 2023, EU and China organized the second edition of the "EU-China High-level Digital Dialogue", with the aim to specifically address these topics and to ease communication on the compliance of European companies with Chinese regulations (EEAS, 2023). Specifically on the topic of the regulation of the AI, the two parties have also signed in 2023 the "Declaration of Bletchley Park", acknowledging the "*potential for serious, even catastrophic, harm*" posed by IA, basing the foundations for a cooperation on the issue (Casanova, 2024a). This understanding of the severity of the subjects serves as a basis for further cooperation and coordination on the topic between the parties, which, given their importance at the global level, will be able to shape the future of the issue.

Fourth, EU-China cooperation also includes the topic of development, aimed at discovering and enacting innovative means of collaboration between EU and China. Specifically in China, EU programs like the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and the Civil Society Organization–Local Authorities (CSO-LA) provide support to civil society organizations in the field of advocacy and support on disabilities, women's empowerment, gender equality, child victim of abuse and migrants. (Delegation of the European Union to the People's Republic of China, 2021).

Finally, European Union and China are also important economic partners: this relation is highly debated, and it will be majorly discussed in the following sub-chapter. However, in this case, it is important to mention the Annual "EU-China Summit" to enhance policy coordination on the most important issues, including trade, and the "EU-China High Level Economic and Trade Dialogue" (European Commission, DG Trade, n.d.).

In synthesis, EU-China cooperation is necessary, especially in the field of global challenges: climate change, technology and circular economy are central issues that need to be internationally discussed. In today's increasingly complex world, it is necessary that influential powers, despite their intrinsic

differences, keep on dialoguing on these important topics, driving meaningful progress that benefits the global community on international challenges.

2.1.2 Economic competitors

As a second element of the multifaced approach to China, the European Commission defined the country as an “*economic competitor*” of the Union, (European Commission, 2019, p.1), tracing the limits of the collaboration with Beijing. If, on the one hand, Brussels and China are currently two of the three principal economies in the world, their cooperation results mainly limited to global challenges, making trade, production, and exports some of the more critical fields of EU-China competition.

To explain the economic competition between the two actors, it is firstly necessary to define the state of art of their trade interactions. The economic relation between EU and China is highly significant: Beijing is EU’s second largest trading partner for goods after the United States. Despite such classification, their net trade is shrinking: in fact, 2023’s data affirms that the value of economic exchange between the two amounted to 739 billion euros; however, this value represents a decrease of 22% from the previous year’s data. This decline is caused by a reduction of Chinese exports to the EU markets (Casanova, 2024a). As a matter of data, Sino-European economic relations result highly imbalanced: the EU detains a strong economic deficit in trade in goods compared to China, for a value of 292 billion euro in 2023. This does not represent the worst value registered in the EU-China relations, as in 2022, bilateral deficit in goods reached the record of 396 billion euros as “*EU exports to China grew by 3.2% in sharp contrast to the 32.3% growth of EU imports from China, representing a 58.2% increase from 2021*” (EEAS, 2023, p.1). Instead, on the field of services, in 2023, EU detained a surplus over China of €14.1 billion euros. (European Commission, DG Trade, n.d.). However, Beijing still remains the biggest partner of EU in terms of net imports, while it is Brussels’ third partner in terms of exports (Casanova, 2024a). According to some scholars, the trade deficits just described and the unbalanced economic relations between EU and China are to be considered not just a problem *per se*, but they are an evident symptom of the breakdown status of Brussels-Beijing relations (Strack in MERICS, 2024).

Due to a mix of economic imbalances and outer factors such as external shocks, EU-China economic relations are marked by two important tendencies: on the one hand, the EU wants to apply a policy of the so-called *de-risking*, while, on the other side, Brussels laments a disrespect for fair competition

practices for EU imports in the Chinese market. Regarding the first topic, after the traumatic experiences of Covid-19 Pandemic and the War in Ukraine, the EU pressed to reduce the critical dependencies and vulnerabilities of its supply chains, applying a policy of de-risking. This term, coined by European Commission's President Ursula Von der Leyen, describes the will of the European Unions to reduce its critical dependencies and over-reliance on certain non-EU countries, by strengthening the internal production of the EU members, protecting the national markers and diversifying their source of imports. This issue gained a pivotal importance in the first Von der Leyen Commission, and it is likely to represent a central pillar of the new trade relations with China in the Von der Leyen II, clarifying that competition in the field of green technologies will represents the new core of the Union's policy (Schape, 2024). This term in fact refers to the EU's intention of reducing external critical dependencies and vulnerabilities, including the EU supply chains, and diversifying where possible: therefore, the EU recognizes the importance of maintaining its trade relations with China, but it also aims at seeking to diversify its economic partnerships to mitigate risks linked to overreliance on a single country (European Commission, DG Trade, n.d.). Technological overreliance on China created big opportunities but led also to critical vulnerabilities (Arcesati in MERICS, 2024). Exactly because of Chinese dominance in the field of green technology and the current centrality of the sector, the EU has bolstered its internal research and production on the field, inaugurating its "Global Gateway Initiative", by financing projects in developing countries to start investments and to better diversify its economic relations and supply chains. Moreover, Brussels begun to limit Chinese imports of electric vehicles and solar panels through anti-subsidy and forced labor motivations. The first refer to the fact that Chinese enterprises, funded by national funding, may be not in line with fair competition, risking overshadowing other producers; the second is more linked to the human rights violation in Xinjiang, where an important quantity of solar panels is produced (Schape, 2024). These topics will be later addressed in the Chapter 4, however, the new Von der Leyen Commission is likely to continue on this direction, increasing the assertiveness of the EU on these topics.

On the other hand, according to the EU-China Relations Factsheets of the EEAS, economic relations between the two are marked by "*concerns about the deteriorating business environment in China for EU companies, persisting and new trade barriers*", lamenting the Chinese alleged reluctance to adhere to fair competition practices (EEAS, 2023, p.1). Since 2014, the EU had already started negotiations with China to deal with this issue through the "EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment" (CAI). This agreement was highly desired by the EU as it would have guaranteed easier access and smoother conditions for European investments in China. More in specific, the CAI

“address key challenges of the regulatory environment such as transparency [...] establish guarantees regarding the treatment of EU investors such as the protection from inequitable treatment, [...] support to sustainable development initiatives” (Gringer, 2024, p.1-2). Moreover, in the CAI, Beijing agreed to increase labor standards, to ratify ILO convention against forced labor and to effectively implement the Paris Agreement; at the same time, Brussels agreed to some restrictions for European NGO’s and European law firms operating in China (McElwee, 2023). According to some scholars, the agreement is *“innovative and of considerable systemic significance”* (Dadush and Sapir, 2021, p.14), as CAI deals with the same preoccupations that US nourishes towards China, *de facto* also promoting US economic interests. In theory, once disagreements on human rights, environmental and labor policies would be resolved, Brussels and Beijing will be capable to derive huge economic benefits from their investments, increasing the scenario of the promotion of an open world trade. (Dadush and Sapir, 2021). However, high EU criticisms towards Chinese human rights and rule of law issues may represent a main problem, as these differences of visions are likely to increase EU-China discrepancies (Anthony and alt. 2021).

As a matter of fact, CAI has been formally completed in December 2020 and it has been sent to the European Council and Parliament for approval and consensus. However, the process is today still pending, given the fact that the European Parliament (EP) adopted the Resolution 2021/2644(RSP) of 20 May 2021 on “Chinese countersanctions on EU entities and MEPs and MPs” affirming that the EP will not give its consensus on the agreement as long as China will not revoke its countermeasures (European Parliament, 2021). The latter refer to the Chinese sanctions towards EU officials, in reaction to previous European sanctions over Chinese officers related to human rights abuses in Xinjiang. Therefore, despite the fact that the formal agreement is already set, the process of approval of the CAI in the European Union is blocked, and so it will remain for a long time, according to Politi (Politi, 2023a).

Therefore, the CAI, a cooperation tool drafted to resolve competition issues, is currently blocked by a fundamental question of rivalry on values. This situation is truly eloquent since it reveals the profound differences between the funding principles of EU and China. Both sides attempt to collaborate on the surface, but their underlying ideologies are in an evident net contrast. This tension underscores the efforts of aligning the different visions, creating different problems to EU-China current relations. In the next sub-chapter, this alleged “systemic rivalry”, will be analyzed.

2.1.3 Systemic rivals

Authors like Cameron have identified a shift in EU approach towards China caused by the perceived economic and political failure of EU-China policies, but also due to the pressure of the US President Trump and the greater emphasis of Von der Leyen on strategic autonomy (Cameron, 2019). As a matter of fact, apart from partners and competitors, the European Commission defined China as a “systematic rival”, indicating the impossibility to completely engage with Beijing in the totality of the topics under discussion.

According to the EU-China relations factsheet drafted by the European External Action Service: *“EU-China relations have become increasingly complex due to a growing number of irritants. China has become less open to the world and more repressive at home, while taking a more assertive posture abroad, resorting to economic coercion, boycotts of European goods, and export controls on critical raw materials”* (EEAS, 2023, p.1). On the same opinion, Josep Borrell, the Former High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, acknowledged a shift of some features from Beijing: the tendency describes today’s China as more assertive, expansionist and authoritarian than in the past (Borrell, 2020). As a matter of evidence, there are four major issues that express drastically EU-China dis-alignment: China’s position in the War in Ukraine, Beijing’s vision on human rights and values, Xi’s global ambitions and the EU’s necessity to secure its self-reliance.

First, one of the most pressing issues regarding EU-China relations is focused on the war in Ukraine, especially on Putin’s commitment to continue the war (Bequelin in MERICS, 2024) and Chinese ambiguous position in the conflict (Casanova, 2024b). This topic has been at the center of some of the latest meetings between European and Chinese officials, like the one occurred on July 2024 between Josep Borrell and Wang Yi, the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs, during the ASEAN Regional Forum in Laos. Here, the former EU HR reported the EU position on the issue, explaining that Brussels conceives Moscow’s aggression as a security threat to Europe; he also added that China’s exports to Russia of dual-use goods represent a clear support for the military of the Kremlin, and that EU considers it an encouragement to continue the conflict; instead, according to the Union, China should use its power to influence Russia to end the war (EEAS, 2024a). Therefore, on the one hand, China may be trying to maintain a sort of equilibrium between its strategic partnership with Russia and the expectations of the western countries, proposing a sort of neutral position in the conflict (Politi, 2023a); on the other side, China seems to play a *“pro-Russian neutrality”*, in light of the trade in energy, machinery and technology that it provides to Moscow (Casanova, 2024b). Despite the perceived impossibility to peruse a dialogue between the parties, it is necessary for the EU to

continue in this effort in order to influence the situation and create the presupposes for ending the conflict between the parties.

Secondly, the already mentioned question on the evident differences of approaches and values concerning human rights. As a matter of fact, the EU bases its accession on the adoption of the EU law, specifically the TEU and the TFEU. The first source of EU Law clearly mentions the protection human rights multiple times, making it one of the bases of the EU legal framework: Art.2 para.1 of TEU states that “*EU’s founding values are ‘human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights’*”; Article 3 para. 5 TEU: “*In ‘its relations with the wider world’, the EU contributes to the ‘eradication of poverty and the protection of human rights’*”; Article 21 para. 2b TEU: “*consolidate and support democracy, the rule of law, human rights and the principles of international law*” (Kasnika, 2024). At the same time, a mention to human rights is also present in the Chinese Constitution, more specifically at Art.33 para. 3, stating that “*The State respects and preserves human rights*” (Constitution of the People’s Republic of China, 2019). Despite official human rights recognition by both the fundamental laws ‘sources, the two actor’s perspective on human rights is undoubtedly different. In fact, according to Xin, China and Europe conceive human rights differently: “*China emphasizes the right to development, while Europe focuses more on political rights. Additionally, China stresses the diversity of human rights practices and rejects Europe’s imposition of its standards on others, arguing that human rights progress is a continuous process that can always improve*” (Xin, 2024). On the specific topic of human rights, the European Union organizes periodical bilateral Dialogues with different actors in order to discuss the status of this topic both globally and nationally. This June, EU and Chinese officials met in Chongqing for the 39th edition of the event, during which few topics were addressed, such as the impact of Hong Kong’s new national security law and the consequent violation of the Rule of Law, the “*very serious human rights situation in China, in particular in Xinjiang, in the Tibetan areas and Hong Kong*”, referring in particular also to “*the crackdown on human rights defenders, lawyers and journalists in China*” (EEAS, 2024b). The main issue in the dialogue resulted in a major difference of vision: on the one hand, EU generally considers human rights universal and necessary, while China sees them as particular and not priority, as other questions need to be accomplished more urgently (Gallemì, 2021). In fact, Chinese officials prefer to prioritize national security and counterterrorism over the protection of fundamental freedoms: therefore, it is possible to consider that China deems national questions more critical than individual ones. On the same meeting, China lamented also the treatment of Chinese migrants in the European Union, mentioning racism and xenophobia as everlasting obstacles for integration (EEAS, 2024b). This double approach to human rights protection is allegedly damaging: if on the one hand, as stated by Ursula Von der Leyen at the Joint Press Conference

following the EU-China Summit videoconference in 2020, “*for the European Union human rights and fundamental freedoms are non-negotiable*” (Von Der Leyen in EEAS, 2024b), for China, the necessity remains into the prioritization of national security. This shows the clear existence of two critical visions, which have already created issues in these relations: as a matter of evidence, let’s also recall the already mentioned failure of the CAI.

Third, another critical impediment of the relation between EU and China is Brussels and Beijing’s opposing global ambitions, both politically and economically. At first, as it has been already stated, China became more expansionist: this formula refers to the increased will of China to influence its region, with clear evidence in the South China Sea where Beijing has enlarged its presence and committed assertive actions violating the United Nations Conventions on the Laws of the Sea (UNCLOS). Beijing disregarded also the 2016 South China Sea Arbitration (Borrell, 2020), committing maritime operations considered threatening for the Philippines and the freedom of navigation in the area. On the matter, the EU has expressed the necessity for China to respect international law, by promoting the freedom of navigation and overflight, not to use any coercive actions to threaten peace and stability in the region (EEAS, 2024c). Furthermore, Taiwan represents another critical question on the relation between the two: on the one hand, the war in Ukraine, the increasing tensions between US and China and the latest trends of Beijing-Taipei relations suggest a worsening of the relations between China and Taiwan, bringing to the attention the increasing possibility of a Chinese move to annex the island that Beijing claims as a part of PRC under the famous *One-China Policy*. According to scholars, this can occur with a window of opportunity estimated from 2027 to 2030, since this period presents the best conditions for success (Amonson and Egli, 2023). On the other side, EU respects and agrees just formally to this policy, as “*EU institutions are treating Taiwan as a “de facto” independent state with which they are entitled to entertain economic and political relations policy*” (Casarini, 2024, p.1). On the issue, EU “*supports the status quo and peaceful resolution of differences across the Taiwan Strait, rejecting the use or threat of force. It continues to encourage dialogue and constructive engagement*” (European Economic and Trade Office in Taiwan, 2021). Despite the EU’s relative inactivity on the issue, an eventual Chinese attack will trigger heavy sanction on Beijing, worsening the already difficult relations between the two (Casarini, 2024).

On the economic side, two important factors have to be put on the plate: the first is the increased adversary Chinese and European presence in the African continent and their two differing development systems; the second is their two different approaches regarding trade: BRI vs De-Risking. At first, Brussels and Beijing are currently trying to increase their relation and development

efforts in the African continent. Some of the goals that the European Union and China want to reach are similar, despite so, they do not cooperate. On the one hand, the EU is focused on promoting sustainable development, fair trade and western values in the continent, working to sponsor the influence of EU as a normative power: to do so, EU investments focus more on small and medium size industries. In contrast, Africa represents a critical element of Chinese international strategy and a symbol of its model of state prosperity, through a mix of capitalism and authoritarianism; therefore, Chinese investments are more related to big infrastructures, as explained in the previous chapter, mainly thought the project of the BRI. In Africa, Chinese strategy of development and investments looks more satisfactory than the European one, due to their lack of conditionalities (Tay, 2023). More than a rivalry, cooperation between the three actors would be beneficial to harmonize development in Africa; however, this does not occur due to lack of trust and an opposed global strategy between Beijing and Brussels (Tay, 2023),

Finally, a friction in the EU-China relations is evident in their different strategy and ambitions regarding global trade. On the one hand, as already mentioned, China aims at building infrastructures and expanding new global markets through continuing its increasing and strengthening its export through its Belt and Road Initiative, creating interdependence between states. Instead, Europe is doing exactly the opposite by applying the de-risking model, theoretically in line with the US strategy of “protect, promote, and partner”. To defend itself from increasing dependence on Chinese raw materials, technology and chemicals, the European Union has inaugurated some tools, such as the “Foreign Subsidies Regulation” to investigate and eventually block investments coming from firms founded by non-EU governments; “the Dual Diligence Directive”, which binds business to respect human rights and sustainability practices in their supply chains, and the “EU Critical Raw materials Act”, which stabilizes that EU members must lower they dependence from non-EU countries for critical materials (Hamilton, 2024). As already mentioned, worried by the increasing problem of Chinese industrial overcapacity in the sector with may result in a wave of cheaper Chinese goods in Europe, the EU has imposed a new set of temporary taxes, especially on Chinese electric vehicles. This will be removed, according to Brussels, when Beijing will shift to a more accommodating economic policy over the Union. However, the situation seems not to get any better: as a consequence, China imposed its tariffs on specific EU goods, majorly on Cognac, dairies and meat exports, leading HR Borrell to foresee the alleged unavoidability of a trade war between Brussels and Beijing (Hamilton, 2024). Therefore, also the EU is changing its approach towards China, showing increasingly opposed interests from Beijing: if on the one hand, Chinese attention is focused on the ambition of supremacy on critic technologies, Brussels is moving towards a opposite direction, characterized by higher regional protectionism with the declared intention to avoid pre-Covid global

chains ‘interdependence and overreliance on single sources. What the EU is working for is highly incompatible with Chinese ambitions in Europe, and this trend is far from being altered.

As evidenced in this sub-section, the critical conflicting interests of EU and China represent the major impediment for a florid bilateral relation. Differences in geopolitical visions, strategic ambitions, development strategies and economic priorities continue to unfold, shaking the basis of Brussels and Beijing’s weak common grounds. The two need to navigate these differences, putting effort in the aim to balance their priorities and to compensate their increasingly conflictual relations to promote global order and stability. In the final section, the Chinese point of view will be presented, offering also some shortcomings and strategies to be adopted on the issue.

2.1.4 The Chinese perspective and the EU strategy

The previous analysis on the European multi-faced approach on China revealed the difficult mechanism underlying this complex relation: EU perceives China as a strong partner for cooperation on global issues, a dangerous economic competitor and a threatening strategic rival; but what is the position of China on the issue, how does Beijing conceive its relationship with Brussels, and furthermore, how does civil society see it? This fourth sub-section will be dedicated to analyzing the Chinese perspective of EU, first on an official point of view, and later, on a more informal outlook.

As first, it is important to state that Chinese officials’ perception on the EU is not aligned with the Commission’s: instead, Beijing was highly disappointed by the wording of the European Commission on EU-China relations, arguing instead that such definition represents a problem for the progress of their partnerships. As a matter of fact, during the “9th China and Globalization Forum” in 2023, Wu Hongbo, China’s Special Representative for European Affairs, focused his intervention on the need to prioritize cooperation over competition between Brussels and Beijing, rejecting the notion of the EU-China rivalry, specifically over the geopolitical sphere. According to him in fact, “*we have no fundamental conflict of interest or geopolitical contradictions between the two sides. Our cooperation outweighs competition, and our consensus exceeds differences.*” (Wu in Chen, 2023). Moreover, according to Wu, EU’s wording results highly confusing and misleading, comparing it to a traffic light suddenly lighting up all three colors at once, creating disorder and fear to the drivers in the street. In the same spirit, EU’s definition puts China in an ambiguous position, creating obstruction for dialogue and progress between the two. The intervention was then closed by the advice for the EU to be more independent in their decision making and to avoid depending on external influence,

referencing to an alleged excessive EU dependency on Washington in the Chinese view. (Chen, 2023).

On the same spirit, in an interview by China Daily reported on the website of the Consulate General of the People's Republic of China in Milan, the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs, Wang Yi, said that "*China and the European Union should be characterized as partners with cooperation being the defining feature, autonomy being the key value and win-win outcomes being the future of the relationship*" (Wang in Zhou, 2024). In this sense, the Chinese Minister emphasized the importance of the mutual benefit of the cooperation between EU and China as an engine to resolve marginal tensions between them. He then criticized the famous EU Commission's wording, arguing that it "*is neither consistent with reality nor viable, [...] it only causes distractions and creates obstacles for China-EU relations*", reproposing the metaphor of the semaphore and stating that in light of the absence of clashing critical ambitions "*We hope that China-EU relations will move ahead smoothly with green lights at every crossing*" (Wang in Zhou, 2024). Therefore, Wang Yi words show the different vision of China towards the EU: Beijing looks at the matter with a broader scope, addressing to EU an important role of ally in addressing global challenges and mutual benefit rather than a rival. The message is therefore that China is open to cooperate with the EU, minimizing the differences between the two and focusing on the benefits of cooperation. Instead, as already seen in this section, EU official vision is diametrically opposite.

Interestingly, these different official national perceptions align also with respective citizen's point of views. In Europe, EU's Eurobarometer survey operated in 2023 studied EU citizen's concern on the Rise of China and the human rights issue: EU citizens' vision on China has dropped since 2018, as now, just 22% of the respondents hold a non-negative image of China, and the trend is downgrading (Eurobarometer, 2023). On the other side, from the Chinese perspective constructed by the 2023 survey by Woo, Dong and Kubler, it appears that Chinese citizens may be reconstructing their idea of the EU: at the basis, there is still optimism, especially looking at the US's counterparts; however, critical opinions are on a rise, showing the more differentiated view than in the past. According to the authors, a quote of Chinese nationalism and pride is also present in the survey; however, the Chinese vision on Europe remains still positive and available to cooperation (Woo and alt, 2023). This vision clearly aligns with the one of the Chinese government, acknowledging the potential of cooperation with Europe despite growing disagreements, which however remain relatively marginal.

If China's approach can be synthesized in cooperation despite issues, what about the European strategy at this moment? The right answer according to Borrell is the "*Sinatra Doctrine*" (Borrell,

2020, p.1). The name refers to the famous song “My Way”, by the famous American singer Frank Sinatra, which perfectly describes the main idea of the strategy. In fact, according to the doctrine, the best approach for the EU in the framework of the US-China rivalry must be to pursue its own strategy of autonomy and sovereignty. To do so, EU must continue to cooperate with China on global issues, at the same time protecting its critical sectors and maintaining its founding values. In practice, the approach suggests EU to engage in a balanced relation with China, avoiding dependency and pushing on multilateralism, keeping a certain degree of independence both from US and China. Of course, EU will always be closer to Washington, as cooperation with the US and NATO is crucial, but investing more on EU’s absolute interest, increasing its internal cohesion and promoting the primacy of international law and multilateralism must be Europe’s major priorities (Borrell, 2020).

Therefore, in conclusion, the sub-chapter analyzed the different degrees of the relations between EU and China, showing the European perspective on China as a partner, competitor and rival, and Chinese perspectives on the issue. This analysis will be useful in studying Italy’s relation with China, considering the Italian membership into the European Union and the aspects that this implies. Next section will be dedicated to introducing the major topic of the Italo-Chinese relations, offering an eclectic outlook on their cooperation history and trends.

Section 2.2

Italy and China: a strategic convergence

The second section of this chapter is designed to study the Italo-Chinese relations with the aim to seek the convergence of factors that persuaded Italy to join the Belt and Road Initiative. This complex choice was not made in isolation, indeed it was influenced by multiple elements which will all be considered during this chapter. First, through the analysis of the diplomatic relations between Rome and Beijing, the thesis will display the fertile ground for the economic dialogue, which will be later considered the basis of the partnership. Moreover, the chapter will examine the Italian political and economic Eurosceptic context of the time, highlighting the national necessity to look for external partners; at the same time, it will also consider China’s interest in establishing a link with a strong European actor. Finally, the analysis will assess whether this decision aligns with traditional Italian foreign policy, concluding with an examination of the coherence between the signature of the Memorandum and Italy’s historical diplomatic practice.

2.2.1 Italy-China relations: an historical perspective

This first sub-section is aimed at historically framing the relations between Italy and China: the two states boast a millenary tradition of dialogue and exchange, beginning with ancient trade routes and cultural interactions that evolved into the current diplomatic and economic relations we see today.

Already in the II century A.D, the Roman and the Chinese Empires were trading in goods: given the physical distance between the two territories, these exchanges were occurring indirectly, thanks to the intermediation of the Parthians. At this time, Rome was already presenting a trade deficit with Beijing, caused by the high appreciation of silk in the Roman Empire (Bertuccioli & Masini, 2014). Moreover, until the XVIII century, Italians had been pivotal in bridging Chinese and western cultures. (Rostagni, 2012). In this framework, it is necessary to remember the famous Venetian merchant and explorer Marco Polo (1254 -1324), who travelled the Silk Road, providing Europe with the first comprehensive written account of Asia, “*Il Milione*”, highly contributing to the opening of the reciprocal exchange between the two cultures (Cerretti, 2006). Another important Italian historical character is Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), a Jesuit missionary whose deep integration in the Chinese Imperial Court made one of the most influential westerners in China. Thanks to its numerous writings portraying China in the XVI century, Ricci is today considered the world’s first sinologist (Venturi and Caraci, 1936).

In modern times, Italy and China relations were relatively peripheral in the international sphere: in 1866 the two countries stipulated their first bilateral treaty on trade, but their political relations remained highly limited. Notable exceptions are represented by the Italian colony in Tianjin, which lasted from 1901 to 1947, the support of Japanese expansionism during the Fascist Era, and the siding with South Korea during the Korean War (Diodato and Marchetti, 2023). After the war, the civil societies of the countries began to interact more, majorly for economic and cultural reasons: in this sense it is important to remember the missions of the intellectual Francesco Flora, and the entrepreneur Enrico Mattei, head of ENI, who played important roles in fostering early cooperation. (Rostagni, 2017).

If economic and cultural relations were already flourishing, political interactions developed later, gaining momentum since the 60s; at that time, some European states like France in 1964 started to recognize the PRC; the French opening to Beijing unlocked the debate also in Italy. The turning point on this topic was reached in 1970, contemporary to the beginning of the US-China normalization

efforts: during the Rumor Government, the Italian Foreign Affairs Ministry Pietro Nenni promoted to open the negotiations for the recognition of the People's Republic of China. The diplomatic discussions took more than a year, at the end of which Rome accepted to adhere to three fundamental conditions: to recognize Beijing as legitimate government of China, to accept Taiwan as part of China and to support the UN reform to include the government of Beijing in the organization at the place of Taipei (Rostagni, 2012).

Since the recognition, Rome and Beijing intensified their political economic and cultural relations, by opening different channels. Significant milestones in this period include the visits of the President of the Italian Republic Sandro Pertini and Enrico Berlinguer in China in 1980, following the visit of the Chinese President Hua Guofeng in 1979. Moreover, a bilateral cooperation agreement between Italy and China in the fields of economy, culture, science, and technology was signed in 1988 in Beijing, replacing the previous intergovernmental agreement on cooperation in scientific and technology of 1978. Economic ties between the two continued to grow, marked by another important document in 1986, the "Agreement for the Avoidance of Double Taxation and the Prevention of Fiscal Evasion with respect to taxes on income", aimed at facilitating Chinese and Italian reciprocal investments (Italian Ministry for Economy and Finance, 1986). Cooperation grew also in new fields, for example in defense, as the two states organized the first joint exercises of Italian and Chinese marines in 1996, which will then open to a wider cooperation in the arena (Diodato and Marchetti, 2023).

Entering the new millennium, the relations between Italy and China intensified, promoting the negotiation and the signature in 2004 of the key "Global Strategic Partnership", through which Rome and Beijing further strengthened their cooperation, both bilaterally and multilaterally. Through the wording of the Italian Embassy in Beijing, *"the scope of this collaborations is not limited to the strictly bilateral sphere, be it political, economic-commercial or cultural, but also touches upon global issues, the EU-China relationship, multilateral issues"* (Italian Embassy in Beijing, 2023a). In the specific, this partnership is concretized in the creation of three main coordination tools: the Governmental Committee, which is the main instrument and occurs yearly, the Economic Commission and the Financial Dialogue (MAECI, 2021). Later, in 2009, Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi hosted in Rome the Chinese President Hu Jintao: during this visit, the two signed a cooperation agreement designed to expand bilateral trade and consequently investments; however, the latter did not bring the expected results as 2008 financial crisis arrived in Europe and Eurozone crisis followed, lowering Chinese economic certainties towards the continent. With the same spirit,

Matteo Renzi, during his visit in China in 2014, signed an “Action Plan for Economic Cooperation” and a Memorandum of Understanding, expressing the will of cooperation on different topics such as environment, energy, food security, urbanization, health and aviation (Gallelli and Mariani, 2021).

Until recently, the relationship has been further strengthened by the diplomatic visits by President of the Republic Sergio Mattarella to China in 2017 and the participation of Paolo Gentiloni to the “Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation” in Beijing, which contributed to open the field for more cooperation between the parties, culminating in the visit by President Xi Jinping to Italy in March 2019, in which the famous Italy-China Memorandum of Understanding was signed. Since then, Italy was the first country of the G7 to join China’s Belt and Road Initiative. After the signature, high level interactions continued, despite Covid-19’s impediments: the State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Rome in 2020 and 2021 at the occasion of the G20 (MAECI, 2021). In March 2020, during the acute phase of Pandemic, Rome-Beijing cooperation reached its highest, as China sent to Italy tonnes of medical aid to cope with the Coronavirus emergency and a team of doctors to share knowledge and support practically the emergence in Italy, coordinating the efforts with the Italian Red Cross (La Repubblica, 2020).

After the Pandemic, the two states engaged in further initiatives, like the celebration of the Italy-China Year of Culture and Tourism in 2022 (originally 2020, but postponed due to pandemic reasons), to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the bilateral diplomatic relations, working especially on organizing cultural events and people to people exchange (Sassaroli, 2021). At the end of the Pandemic, Italy-China relations went through a period of tension, caused by the decision of the new Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni to step back from the Memorandum; this was officially declared in December 2023.

This year, Italy and China just celebrated the 700th anniversary of Marco Polo’s death, inaugurating a number of cultural events dedicated to friendship and exchange (Consulate General of Italy in Shanghai, 2024). This was the occasion for Rome and Beijing to rebuild their cooperation through top official visits, after the Italian decision to exit from the Memorandum, of Understanding. In fact, in 2024, Italian Prime Minister Meloni visited China and met President Xi Jinping to celebrate the 20 years of the Global Strategic Partnership and to relaunch a new cooperation with China, known as the “*Action Plan Italy-China 2024-2027*” (Ambasciata d’Italia Pechino, 2023b).

In conclusion, the relationship between Italy and China has certainly evolved through time: from the early connections to the high period of friendship under the Memorandum, until the current times of rebalancing, Rome and Beijing have always shown commitment to maintain a strong economic and cultural dialogue through meetings and initiatives. This evolving balance represents an important element to understand the current state of the art of these relations and the future of Rome-Beijing dialogue. The next sub-section will analyze the Chinese interests in Italy, and the reasons why Beijing chose Rome to start its relation into the G7 countries.

2.2.2 Chinese interests in Italy: Rome's dowry

This sub-section aims to analyze the role of Italy as a partner in the Belt and Road initiative with a Chinese perspective, explaining the main point of attractiveness of the country. In this thesis, three major areas are studied: the geographic and infrastructural strategy of Italy, the economic opportunity of the Italian market and the political role of Rome inside the European Union. These factors represent some of the principal reasons explaining Chinese interests towards the participation of Italy in the BRI and make Italy doubtlessly a desirable partner to include in the project.

First, it is necessary to open this sub-section by mentioning the geographical strategic location of Italy. The paper by Dossi defines the position of the Italian Peninsula as “*ideally located to become the Western terminal of the BRI*” (Dossi, 2020, p.66). As a matter of fact, Italy is a peninsula stretching all along Southern Europe, linking the west and the east parts of the continent, with North Africa, the Mediterranean and central continental Europe. For its peculiar localization, Italy is usually defined as a bridge between different regions or a natural hub connecting Europe, North Africa and Middle East; this explains its central strategic significance (Dossi, 2020). Moreover, the particular interest of China in the Mediterranean Sea is evident: let's recall the big Chinese investments in 2008 and in 2016 in the port of Piraeus. Compared to Greece, Italy may represent a better alternative: the peninsula presents an easier access to Western Europe, as it is geographically closer and more developed in land transport infrastructures like railways. In engaging with Italy, China can easily move goods throughout the country and beyond, considering the high degree of connectivity of the Italian infrastructures with other European networks (Casarini, 2019). Moreover and most importantly, Italy already presents big water infrastructures like ports and harbors all across its territory: as a matter of fact, according to Ghiretti, “*Ports and maritime infrastructures are some of the core and most traditional elements of China's Belt and Road Initiative*”, (Ghiretti in Galleli and Ghiretti, 2023 p.27), and Italy is provided with a number of these important infrastructures from north

to south; mentioning just some of them: Genova, Trieste, Taranto, Gioia Tauro and Venice. Investments and cooperation between Chinese enterprises and Italian harbors were already occurring even before the signature of the Memorandum, as explained by Ghiretti, like in case of the ports of Genova and Trieste (Ghiretti in Galleli and Ghiretti, 2023).

Secondly, Chinese interests towards Italy are characterized by a great economic effort. According to Gallelli, Italy and China presented a comparable economic situation in the 80's: this similarity may represent the reason of the relatively late strengthening of these economic relations, given that, the two states were somehow economically similar. Italian and Chinese economies were in fact sharing a strong manufacturing sector, a strong dependence on exports and absence of high tech, which resulted in the increase of competition between the two (Gallelli and alt. in Gallelli and Gherini, 2023). Today instead, looking at the expansionist interests of China, Italy seems an adequate partner: with a 1.8 trillion euros GDP, Italy is the third largest economy and the second largest manufacturer in the Eurozone. Moreover, on trade, the state is the eighth larger exporter in the world, with a share of 2.7% of the worldwide market; such exports represent around the 32% of its GDP (Italian Trade Agency, 2024a). Moreover, apart from Italy 's importance in manufacturing and exports, Rome is also important for its network of friendships: in fact, Italy has important economic relations with all its partners from the Eurozone, but also with North Africa and Middle East. Partnering with Italy means practically to get closer to these regions, and this is highly valued in Chinese interests (Dossi, 2020). But the question still remains: what made Italy the correct choice for China at that exact time? According to Dossi it is the fact that Italy is a developed country with a strong industry and big network of partners, but at the same time in a strong economic and political crisis. This factors made Italy desiring new investments, making Rome generally more vulnerable than other EU big powers, resulting generally more available to new external partners far from the EU (Dossi, 2020). Specifically on Italy-China trade, before 2019 Italy represented the third-largest receiver of Chinese exports in the EU, instead, China was the ninth destination market of Italian exports.

Third, Beijing nourished also political and reputation interest towards the strengthening of its relations with Rome. As a matter of fact, Italy currently represents an important county in the international community, as it a globally present actor. As a matter of fact, the country is a member of the Group of Seven (G7), the club reserved to the seven most advanced western economies, but it is also part of important international organizations such as NATO and the UN; most importantly, it is a founding state of the European Union and part of the Union for the Mediterranean. For these reasons, together with the economic weight of the country into question, China sees Italy an important

partner not just for eventual positive economic results, but also for the significant geostrategic and political implications that this partnership may eventually bring. In fact, the increased Italo-Chinese relations may be intended by China as a political message, trying to convince other important EU or G7 partners to adhere to the BRI and to engage with the project instead of strengthening their anti-Chinese sentiment (Casarini, 2019). This strategy is not in contrast with the evident mistrust that China nourished towards the EU after the Eurozone crisis: afterwards, China lost confidence in the EU institution *per se*, and privileged bilateral relations with singular EU members, as elucidated by the 17+1 strategy. In this sense, Italy represents the most important European economy which came in close contact with China so far, and perhaps this could equally promote the opening of the discussion with new partners. (Dossi, 2020). Additionally, a closer cooperation with Italy would also signify a demonstration of political support towards Beijing's proactive role in international politics, which will lead China to assume more international credibility, considering China's proposal to Italy a Chinese attempt of advancement in its international status. In this sense, *"the Belt and Road Initiative serves as a vector within a broader social creativity strategy that aims to integrate the evaluation metrics on which beliefs about China's status are based. For this strategy to succeed, the new metrics need to be validated by the dominant circle of recognition"*, starting from Rome (Andornino, 2023a, p.100).

Apart from that, other reasons for Chinese momentum in Italy can be mentioned, as the historical trade relation between the two and the presence of the biggest Chinese community in Europe; however, from a strategic point of view thanks to Italian partnership, Beijing would acquire an important weight in the Eurozone, profiting from the current tensions arising between Washington and Brussels (Sacks, 2023).

Therefore, in conclusion, this sub-section explained the principal reasons of the Chinese interest in investing and bringing its BRI in Italy. In this part, the thesis recognized that *"Xi had his own reasons for courting Italy"* (Sacks, 2023), mentioning geographic, strategic, economic and political explanations for this partnership. The next sub-chapter will study exactly the opposite, focusing instead on the elements that convinced the Italian government to access the partnership with China.

2.2.3 Italian participation to the BRI: reasons and context

The previous sub-chapter explained the main reasons for Beijing to include Rome in the Belt and Road initiative: instead, in this part, the analysis will be based on the study of the Italian point of view on the matter. To do so, it is important to deepen into the analysis of the political and economic framework of Italy in 2019, understanding the major issues, ambitions and priorities of the government and assessing the elements that made Rome finally convinced to sign the Memorandum of Understanding with China. As a matter of fact, this sub-chapter will be based mainly on the intuition of Dossi, according to which the signature with China did not embody a clear long term-strategy but it was more the result of temporary factors (Dossi, 2020), such as the fragility of Italian economy, the trade competition in the Mediterranean, the pick of Euroscepticism in the country and the fragmentation of national politics.

Thus, at first, it is necessary to explain the economic significance of the Memorandum. As a matter of fact, the integration of Italy to the Belt and Road Initiative was mainly driven by an essential economic factor. In 2019 the Italian economic situation was stagnant: the country was suffering from the 2008 financial crisis. Additionally, the appreciation of the dollar, the tensions in the financial markets, a more prudent behavior on the part of households and the consequent rise of the unemployment and a growth in consumer's goods' price (Bank of Italy, 2019) contributed to increase the national public debt up to 132,2% of Italian GDP in 2018 (ISTAT, n.d). Therefore, economically stressed, Rome needed to look for new partners and investments out of its comfort zone, and it is not difficult to understand the reasons that led Rome to commit with China. At that time, Italy saw the possibility to upgrade its economic situation by expanding its trade through exports and investments with China (Zeneli, 2023). In 2018, the Italo-Chinese exchanges were already highly developed, however, the trade balance between the two countries revealed highly skewed towards Beijing, with a surplus of 350 billion dollars (ICE, 2019). China was therefore a good trading partner, but it was somehow necessary to reformulate the terms of this bilateral economic relation. Therefore at that time the signature of a Memorandum with China was perceived as a facilitator of these new rules of economic cooperation through which Rome could have gained further economic benefits: *"The Italian government hopes to obtain three things: more market access in China for Italian companies and Made in Italy products; more Chinese investments in Italy under the BRI framework; and a commitment by China to buy Italian bonds even in a situation of turbulence in international markets"* (Casarini, 2019, p.14). Therefore, the Italian government considered the agreement majorly as a tool to get out of the crisis and strengthen Italian trade, as President Conte declared that, through the

Memorandum “*We want to first and foremost rebalance our trade, which is not favorable to us now. Our exports to China are far lower than other European countries*” (Conte in Barry, 2019). Therefore, it is undeniable that the economic reason represented the most important driver of the Italian decision, as the BRI was considered as a vital opportunity to vitalize the stagnant Italian economy and to increase Italian exports in China (Cristiani, 2019).

Secondly, another important argument in the academia was the question of the competition in the Mediterranean Sea trade. In the specific, the issue is synthesized in the quotation by Fardella and Prodi: “*The Italian port in the high Adriatic Sea could be displaced by Piraeus capacity, especially if this port is linked through railways with the center of Europe. Italy needs to coordinate its ports together with its railway network to take advantage of Belt and Road Initiative opportunities*” (Fardella e Prodi, 2017, p.1). As a matter of fact, trade, especially sea trade, represents one of the main Italian drivers in joining the BRI. As already stated, Italy offers several important port infrastructures, some of them crucial for the trade in the Mediterranean. In the last fifteen years, Chinese companies, mainly COSCO (acronym for “Chinese Ocean Shipping Company”), invested in several European ports, acquiring shares of the management of these infrastructures. This specially occurred in the case of the port of Piraeus in Greece, where, in 2008, COSCO started to invest on the infrastructure. China acquired, for the sum of €490 millions, a thirty-year concession to manage two terminals of the commercial Port (Le Corre, 2018). Since then, China acquired 51% of the stakes of the infrastructure in 2016, and finally reached the 67% in 2021: in this framework, the port of Piraeus kept on upgrading its capacity of container-handling operations: from managing just the 2% of the total Mediterranean traffic of goods, it passed to the 13% in 2015 (Fardella and Prodi, 2017). The political commitment of this project is evident: during a 2016 visit to China, Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras openly said that Greece intended to “*serve as China’s gateway into Europe*” (Tsipras in La Corre, p.14). Beijing’s ambitions in Europe are not however just limited to Greece: China is in fact already investing in the construction of a new railway connecting Serbia and Hungary. This project will permit China to expand significantly its business in the region: goods shipped from China will be arriving in Greece by sea, will travel through the Balkans and will reach directly central Europe, where they will be distributed throughout the continent. China is therefore greatly benefiting from the Piraeus port, transforming the infrastructure in one of today’s most important sea harbors of the Southern Mediterranean and one of the ten largest container ports in Europe (SYM Naval, 2021). At the same time, the development of Piraeus is a problem for similar infrastructures, such as those located in Italy. In this sense, since China took over the port of Piraeus, Italian ports have ceased increasing their performance, especially the ones of Trieste, Genova and Gioia Tauro. As a result of

this phenomenon, in the long run Italian harbors are likely to lose their share of trade in the Mediterranean (Bindi, 2019). This example shows the perceived necessity of Italy to partner and align with China on the issue of sea trade: cooperation with Beijing brings investments in the infrastructures of the country and protection of Italian interests against pressing competition. Instead remaining outside, Rome would have inexorably lost important opportunities and competitiveness. (Bindi, 2019; Fardella and Prodi, 2017). Therefore, in this field, joining the BRI was considered as a necessity to guarantee sea trade shares to Italian infrastructures.

Thirdly, in the discussion on the signature of the MoU, it is necessary to acknowledge the wave of Euroscepticism in Italy at that time and the consequences this led to. As a matter of fact, the perceived EU's inability to advance economic and political reforms in solving the economic crisis, united with Italian financial and migration issues, made Euroscepticism flourish in the country. Italy registered high trends of EU rejection since 2008, caused by the disillusionment of the political class in dealing with the financial crisis (Balfour and Robustelli, 2019). This sentiment became nationally mainstream in 2010 and the trend was particularly evident in the biennium 2018-2019, when, according to Parlemeter, just 37% of Italian citizens perceived the Italian EU membership as a "*good thing*" (European Parliament, 2019). Therefore, Rome needed to look for new partners and investments out of its comfort zone, and it is not difficult to understand the reasons that led Rome to commit with China. Consequently, this sentiment conveyed to the election and subsequent formation of a Eurosceptic coalition government, chartered by the anti-establishment party "Five Star Movement", led at the time by Luigi Di Maio, and the right-wing party of Lega, headed by Matteo Salvini. In order to fulfill both party's ambitions and the Italian political dynamics, Di Maio and Salvini were appointed both as Vice-Presidents of the Council, around President of the Council of Ministers, Giuseppe Conte. At this time, Italy was in a peculiar period of its political history: this was evident by the singular coalition of the parties at government, leading then to a political crisis of the majority in the late 2019; this terminated with the establishment of a new Conte II government, supported this time by a majority of the Five Star Movement and the Democratic Party. Therefore, made these premises, it is possible to argue that the decision to sign the Memorandum with China occurred in a scenario of high political instability.

It is therefore important to acknowledge that, even at the top-level dimension, the government was not united on the signature: notably, the Five Stars Movement and Lega were not likeminded on the issue. This idea would confirm Dossi's vision, according to which the signature was the result of one of the "*uncoordinated initiatives by some members of the government*" (Dossi, 2020, p.69). In

practice, the signature was promoted on the domestic side by some Five Star movement's members who were particularly committed to Beijing, like Minister Tria who studied in China. Moreover, on the foreign affairs side, engaging which China represented a crucial element to signify a more autonomous and proactive Italian foreign policy and to send a message to EU institutions. The Five Star Movements's members were in line with this approach, by opposing the "*submission of Italy to NATO*" and the will to act in "*in the interest of the country*" (Dossi, 2020, p.70). On the other hand, due to his party opposition to the MoU, Salvini was neither present at the ceremony of signature, reflecting the deep contradictions and disagreements on the topic. As a matter of fact, on the BRI, Lega's leader stated: "*If it opens exports for Italian companies, it is great. The only constraints are security, the control of Italians' data, and energy. I would not like someone to wake up on the other side of the world and turn off the switch*"; he then continued "*If the Chinese want to invest in railways and ports, fine. What is important that control remains in Italian hands*" (Salvini in Barry, 2019). Other dissenting opinions were also evident from the opposition. The right-wing party Fratelli d'Italia, leaded by Giorgia Meloni, expressed since the beginning the fact that the participation of Italy inside the BRI was to be regarded as a "big mistake" (Meloni in Amaro, 2023); on the same idea was the former leader of Forza Italia, Silvio Berlusconi, who criticized the fact that the Memorandum would have had a negative consequence on the Euro-Atlantic relations, and complained also about the fact that the parliament had not been consulted prior to the signature (TGCOM 24, 2019).

In conclusion, this sub-chapter supported the idea that Italy signed the Memorandum as a consequence of the political will of just a part of its national government. The signature was recognized as a short-term reply to current economic and political situation of the time, lacking a true long-term vision. More in depth, Italy saw the BRI as an opportunity to recover from its previous economic shocks and to boost trade bilaterally, benefitting national enterprises and infrastructures. Domestically, Euroscepticism and political fragmentation played a key role, as the Italian government sought to diversify from its traditional partners, creating a new opportunity for China. In this sense, the Italian government may have overpassed the limit of the traditional foreign policy by disentangling from general EU action and the loyalty towards the United States. Therefore, the question arises, was the signature of the Memorandum with China in line with traditional Italian foreign policy? This issue will be answered in the next sub-section.

2.2.4 An outlook on Italian Foreign Policy

This last sub-section represents one of the most significant parts of this chapter: in fact, it is designed to discuss the traditional priorities of Italian foreign policy and to assess the validity of these with the signature of the Belt and Road Initiative. If on the one hand, the signature of the Memorandum has surprised the public opinion, it can be argued through diplomatic terms that such decision was not too far from current Italian foreign policy trends. With this aim, this sub-section will at first present the traditional theories regarding Italian foreign policy, then it will go deeper in analyzing the later trends, until finally answering the question on the effective compatibility of the diplomatic choice to adhere to the Belt and Road initiative in 2019.

Italian foreign policy has been historically defined as sometimes irrational and highly swinging, usually referring to the position of the country during the two world wars. However, according to the majority of scholars, this approach does not reflect the reality of the topic, instead, it makes reference to just isolated cases as these definitions may be influenced by prejudice. This thesis' approach supports the idea described by Diodato and Niglia, that "*Italy is different but not divergent from other western European countries*" (Diodato and Niglia, 2017, p.101). This wording affirms the existence of a distinct Italian approach to foreign policy that generally aligns with broader Western-European traditions; however, at the same time, it suggests that Italy has found its rationale for engaging with China precisely in the subtle difference within these traditions.

The traditional Italian approach to foreign policy is magisterially described by Diodato and Marchetti in the book "Manuale di Politica Estera Italiana". According to them, the traditional Italian priorities are embodied in three different pictures: the "*three rings*", "*the two directives*" and the "*strategic triangle*" (Diodato and Marchetti, 2023, p.164). The first, "the three rings" refers to the vision that Italian foreign policy is structured around three concentric circles representing the national centers of interest and influence: the first is the European Union, the second the Atlantic Alliance and the third the rest of the world. This vision helps to understand the hierarchy of the Italian interests, helping to navigate the sea of the foreign policy decisions and priorities. Concretely, Italy is therefore closer to the EU than to NATO; despite this, the war in Ukraine can potentially shift this order. The second, "the two directives", draws the two lines that geographically intersect Italy: the country has a European Directive and Mediterranean one, which explain the direction of the major Italian foreign policies. Finally, the "strategic triangle" puts Italy at the center of three fundamental priorities of the same value: the EU, the US and the Mediterranean Sea, including the African continent (Diodato and

Marchetti, 2023, p.164). These three approaches perfectly synthesize the major contemporary interests of Italy and help somehow to prioritize its attentions. As a matter of fact, Italy is principally a member of the European Union, a part of NATO and a Mediterranean country, therefore, one can say that Italian traditional foreign policy interests effectively revolve principally on European, Atlantic and Mediterranean affairs. These priorities are real; however, they may need to be updated to very current times. According to Giorgia Meloni's speech during the Italian Ambassadors' Conference of December 2023, these priorities are correct, however two more points are to be integrated. The first is to be found in Italy's participation in the G7: Italy's role and interest into the G7 is growing, and this is evidenced by Giorgia Meloni's speech saying that G7 has an "*increasingly important role in the defense of democratic values, the protection of the rules-based international system and the ability to meet the challenges of our time*": implying that given the UN impossibility to operate due to UNSC Russian veto, it is the duty of the G7 to act in order to reestablish the rule of law and avoid the role of the strongest (MAECI, 2023). Second and more relevant to this thesis 'purposes is China. As a matter of fact, Meloni refers to China, saying that Italy "*will continue to cultivate dialogue and cooperation with China, which is a key interlocutor in addressing major crisis scenarios and global challenges*" (MAECI, 2023). In this case, Meloni's words mirror the growing importance that China acquired both in the international sphere and in the national one. Despite the exit of Rome from the Memorandum, Italy highly considers dialogue with China and the strengthening of the cooperation with Beijing, as Meloni mentioned during her speech in 2024 at the Business Forum Italy-China 2024 in the Chinese capital (Governo Italiano, 2024b). Despite the growing centrality of China in the international affairs, the analysis of the traditional Italian foreign policy does not present Beijing as one of Italy's priorities: this is true, as the country does not represent one of Rome's closest allies, nonetheless, Beijing needs to be increasingly attentioned. As a matter of fact, for traditional Italian foreign policy, China has never been a priority, however, "*China has been the recurrent target of Italian ambitions, driven by a mix of economic and political motivations*" (Dossi, 2020, p.67); this aligns with what it was expressed earlier in the previous sub-chapter on the reasons Italy was optimistic about the signature.

However, this approach in reality seems to align with the tendency of the current Italian foreign policy: the hypothesis of this sub-section is therefore to argue that the signature of the Memorandum was reflected in the "Italian different approach" of foreign policy mentioned earlier, despite not being apparently in line with general guidelines of traditional Italian foreign policy. To start this analysis, it is primary important to define the role of Italy in the international scenario. As a matter of fact, according to the majority of scholars, Italy can be considered into the category of the middle powers

(Santoro, 1991); Diodato and Marchetti agree, defining Italy as a “*middle power playing in the game between big and small powers*” (Diodato and Marchetti, 2023, p.164), reporting also a citation by Bosworth stating that Italy is “*the last of the big powers and the first of the small ones*”. (Bosworth in Diodato and Marchetti, 2023, p.164). This nature brings Italy to act in an ambiguous style, taking swinging positions which can pursue the ambitions of a middle power to act as a big one: based on this assumption therefore, Italian international behaviors can look sometimes bizarre compared to the one of other big powers, exactly due to its nature of middle player. Another important factor of Italian foreign policy is the specific Italian meaning of alliance, which is identified by Diodato and Niglia. As a matter of fact, the Italian instability in foreign policy is to be attributed to the fact that alliances are used not just at a defensive level, but they have a second implication: to import models of development and best practices from allies. Therefore, for Italy, alliances can be changed according to the national needs of citizens (Diodato and Niglia, 2017). This factor may also be coming from the ancestral identarian struggles with which the Italian nation fights still today. (Diodato and Marchetti, 2023).

All this brings to the idea that Italy in its foreign policy results particularly inclined to follow its national interests, as stated by Spinelli. In his words “*Our national interests [...] are defended inside and outside the supranational organizations, often with delay but always firmly. The organisms of which Italy is a member are in such a case ignored, or there is an attempt to use them as instruments to further our own interests*”, making Italy an instable player (Spinelli, 2015). Therefore, alliances and international organizations are useful as long as they serve the interest of Rome; instead, in the opposite case, Italy will engage in its “Italian approach”, moving towards new partners and interests to fulfill its economic and political *grandeur* ambitions. With these premises, the signature of the Memorandum of Understanding may be understood in this perspective: Italy, while traditionally focused on the European Union, NATO and the Mediterranean has always maintained a level of national pragmatism in its foreign policy, allowing for critic shifts when national interests were at stake. Therefore, the Memorandum denotes the ability of Italy to adapt its partnerships on current needs: in this case, Italy applied a proper economic mechanism to the decision-making, trying to satisfy its internal necessities and its global ambitions, inaugurating a new direction which was never considered by traditional allies. Therefore, in conclusion, this ambitious decision of the Italian government to commit with Beijing in 2019 represents a digression from the Italian traditional foreign policy, which however finds its *raison d’être* in national broader strategy of perusing economic interest pragmatically, as, Italy’s middle power position permits to balance between different actors, using opportunities like the BRI to advance their interest. Therefore, this trend reveals in line with

Casarini's idea: *"By officially endorsing the BRI the Italian government helps China drive a wedge into the Euro-Atlantic alliance; undermines EU efforts at finding a common stance vis-à-vis Beijing; and weakens Trump's position in his tug-of-war with Xi Jinping over trade and global leadership. But this seems to be the price to pay for an "Italy First" (Casarini, 2019, p.14).*

However, it is undeniable that the Memorandum had two different meaning for the two actors signing it: on the one hand, for Italy, it represented a sort of a *"selective fellowship"* (Andornino, 2023b, p.138) principally aimed to develop the economic relations with Beijing, making the partnership purely economic (Bindi, 2019); on the other side, President Xi Jinping saw it differently, as he considered the partnership for its political meaning: *"I came to Italy to strengthen political relations between our two countries; I have succeeded"*, he stated (Xi in Andornino, 2023b, p.143). In conclusion, despite apparent incoherence to traditional Italian foreign policy, Italy-China Memorandum represents the flexibility and focus on national interest of Italian foreign policy, forming a pragmatic maneuver and a *"political shortcut to energize bilateral relation"* (Andornino, 2023b, p.138), that triggered astonishment to Italian allies and gratification to the Chinese counterpart.

Therefore, in conclusion, this sub-chapter has examined the multiple factors that influenced Italy's decision to join the Belt and Road Initiative by signing the Memorandum of Understanding with Beijing. Italy's historical ties with China, compounded by economic struggles and political fragmentation formed the primary motivation for this decision. At the time of economic stagnation and political vulnerability, engaging into the MoU represented a practical solution to national problems, expressing, at the same time, a sort of foreign policy independence from the European Union and the Atlantic partners. China timely recognized Italian needs and vulnerabilities, strategically presenting the BRI as an advantageous opportunity which could not be refused. Therefore, it is possible to argue that China was there at the right place and time. The next section will then be dedicated to the analytical study of the Memorandum of Understanding, in order to offer a broader view of its contents on the document and the consequences of the signature for the parties.

Section 2.3

The Memorandum of Understanding: Analysis and Consequences

This third and final section will be dedicated to the deep study of the Memorandum of Understanding signed by Italy and China in 2019. This specific research will contribute to the aim of the thesis by explaining the different parts of the document, and its legal signification and value. Later, it will compare the Italo-Chinese relations with similar cases in the EU, taking into considerations BRI members and non-members countries. Finally, criticisms of the signature will be reported to show different points of view on the matter both nationally and internationally.

2.3.1 The MoU: structure and contents

On the 22nd of March 2019, Italy and China signed the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU). This document represents one of the central elements of this thesis: given its centrality for the purpose of this work, this sub-section is designed with the aim of analyzing the form and the content of the document, in order to offer a specific outlook on the positions agreed by the two governments in the early 2019.

The document was signed in Rome at 12 AM, to the presence of the Chinese President Xi Jinping and the Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte. The two signatories were, for China, the State Counselor and Foreign Affairs Minister Wang Yi, and for Italy, the Vice-Prime Minister and Minister for the Economic Development Luigi di Maio. On that occasion, apart from the MoU, 29 further agreements were signed: among them, ten were institutional and nine about private companies, and the initial value of the agreements was esteemed at 7 billion euros. According to Vice-President Di Maio, this initial economic value would have gradually grown in time (Di Maio in Perrone, 2019). Italy and China therefore signed the Memorandum of Understanding, but what is it, and what does imply for the future of the Italo-Chinese relations?

In legal terms, a Memorandum of Understanding is understood both as a traditional international treaty containing the obligation to adhere to the agreed text, or a non-binding document mentioning the convergence of interest between the parties. The double nature of this documents is promptly explicated in the praxis, as it is mandatory to include a norm in the document stating its real significance (Calamita, 2019). In this specific case it is possible to refer to the Paragraph VI of the Memorandum, stating that *“This Memorandum of Understanding does not constitute an international*

agreement which may lead to rights and obligations under international law. No provision of this Memorandum is to be understood and performed as a legal or financial obligation or commitment of the Parties” (MoU, 2019, pr.VI). Because of this passage, the Memorandum of Understanding signed by Italy and China in 2019 represents a non-binding document; instead, it expresses the will of the two governments to increase their cooperation in certain specific areas which will be later discussed in this sub-section. This source of law is assimilable to the concept of Soft-Law, and in diplomatic terms, it is used in cases in which the parties do not want to commit to each other, creating instead a more flexible area of cooperation which is also administratively easier to activate: the Memorandum gets into function since the moment of the signature, and it does not need any formal ratification. Similarly, to cease the agreement it is sufficient to send a written note of refusal to the counterpart three months before the renovation period, which takes place every five years; in absence of this communication, the Memorandum renovates automatically (Calamita, 2019).

After having explained the technicalities of the form, let’s shift to the analysis of the content. The first paragraph of the Memorandum establishes the objectives and the guiding principles of the cooperation between Italy and China: such relation is therefore based on the Charter of the United Nations along with the national and international legislations. In this sense, the parties agree to *“translate mutual complementary strengths into advantages for practical cooperation and sustainable growth, supporting synergies [...] and to enhance their political relations, economic ties, and people-to-people exchanges”* (MoU, 2019, pr.I). Therefore, the first paragraph expresses the main direction of the cooperation between the parties, showing the source of law on which the partnership is based on.

The second paragraph is the most interesting as it explains the six different areas of cooperation of the Memorandum, in order: (1) Policy dialogue; (2) Transport, logistic and infrastructures; (3) Unimpeded trade and investment; (4) Financial cooperation; (5) People-to-people connectivity; (6) Green development cooperation. The first point mentions the necessity to increase the policy coordination over connectivity and technical standards, expressing also as a point of interest the strengthening of the multilateral cooperation inside the AIIB. The second states that the two governments agree to cooperate in the development of their transportation system, collaborating into projects of infrastructural development, especially integrating the synergies between the Belt and Road and the Italian system of transports. At the same time, the parties welcome discussions on EU-China connectivity and on the facilitation of customs clearance to promote a system of *“open, transparent, and non-discriminatory procedures”*. The third point claims that parties will work with

the intention to expand reciprocal trade and investments in a free and open system; with reference to the BRI, they promote “*transparent, non-discriminatory, free and open trade and industrial cooperation*”, as well as respect of intellectual property rights and advancing in multilateral cooperation. The fourth argues that Italy and China will fortify their coordination on fiscal and financial policies towards the construction of a favorable economic environment; with this aim, they establish the “Italy-China Finance Dialogue” between the respective Economy Ministers and promote the creation of partnerships between the respective financial institutions. The fifth emphasizes the will of Rome and Beijing to expand the cultural cooperation through twinning among UNESCO sites exchanges and cooperation between their citizens on a variety of domains, such as tourism, health welfare etc. Finally, the sixth mentions the necessity to increase connectivity with a green sustainable logic, cooperating bilaterally and multilaterally in the efforts for ecological and environmental protection, and promoting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (MoU, 2019).

Last paragraph to be analyzed in this thesis is the III, regarding the “*Models of Cooperation*”. In this part, Italy and China explain the major tools of their cooperation: “*the exchange of high-level visits and discussions within existing governmental and non-governmental exchange mechanism*,” but also “*joint research, capacity building, personnel exchanges and training*”. This final passage highlights the will to create a solid partnership grounded on continuous dialogue on different levels and topics. (MoU, 2019, pr.III).

After the signature of the Memorandum of Understanding, some scholars have expressed criticisms on the document: from the point of view of Gabusi and Prodi, the agreement is to be considered more symbolic than economically significant. In fact, once left Italy, Xi Jinping flew to France, a country which is not in the BRI, to sign agreements worth 40 billions of dollars, testifying the relative insignificance of the Italian partnership (Gabusi e Prodi, 2020; Tiezzi, 2019). Moreover, according to Politi, there would be an imbalance between Chinese and Italian interest in the Memorandum as “*the MoU perfectly aligns with China’s advertised rhetoric, [...] but it is confusing as to how the MoU could actively address Italy’s core needs*” (Politi, 2020, p.9). Moreover, according to the same author, the “*targets set in the MoU are incredibly ambitious for a medium-sized country like Italy and the document is vague on several points*” (Politi, 2020, p.9). As a matter of fact, it is true that the Memorandum can appear quite generic and lacking specific norms and articles about the pragmatic cooperation between the parties, however, this void can be partially filled thanks to the specific agreements signed on the side of the Memorandum. The initiative is in fact expressed also through the signature of a number of these specific agreements, some of them have been stipulated between: Ansa and Xinhua, Rai and China Media Group, the Italian Agency for Space and the China National

Space Administration. At the same time, on the private sector, it is possible to mention the partnerships between Eni and Bank of China, Ansaldo Energia and China United Gas Turbine Technology, the Autorità di Sistema Portuale del Mare Adriatico Orientale – Porti di Trieste e Monfalcone and China Communications Construction Company, Cassa Depositi e Prestiti and Bank of China (Pictet, 2021; Gabusi e Prodi, 2020).

Another criticism moved to the Memorandum was related to the alleged incompatibility of it with the European Union Law: as the Union has some specific exclusive competencies. On this topic, the study of Calamita was dedicated to verifying the existence of specific incompliances between the Memorandum and the EU legislation. Despite small potential incongruences, the outcome assesses the compatibility of the Memorandum with the competences of the Italian Government in respect of the EU legislation, given the generality and the lack of specificity of the clauses of the document, which does not enter into clash with any specific communitarian norm (Calamita, 2019).

In conclusion, this sub-chapter explained the form and the content of the Memorandum of Understanding signed between Italy and China in 2019 and highlighted the major criticisms of the issue, creating the basis for the understanding of the following discussion in this thesis. The next sub-chapter will then be dedicated to the comparative analysis of other EU member states' relations with China, focusing especially on the countries which adhered to the Belt and Road Initiative.

2.3.2 The Belt and Road in Europe: a comparative analysis of EU MS' relations with China

Italy has not been the only country in Europe to have signed an agreement with China in the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative; today, seventeen states in the EU have already signed Memorandum of Understanding with Beijing (Nedopil, 2023). Therefore, it is now interesting to study the principal strategies of China in different European countries, analyzing and understanding different EU members' perspectives vis à vis Beijing. To do so, this sub-chapter will propose a comparative analysis of the principal EU countries engaged into the Belt and Road Initiative, as Hungary, Greece, Portugal and Poland; at the same time, their approaches will be compared to the ones of France and Germany, states that never formally engaged with China, but nevertheless need today to keep contacts with Beijing. Therefore, the question is: how are different EU countries acting towards China and how differently does Beijing perceive them?

To begin with, it is necessary to mention the case of Hungary. The country signed the Memorandum with China in June 2015, and it was officially one of the first European nations to join the Belt and Road Initiative. Besides their long friendship, Budapest represents one of the most loyal allies of Beijing in Europe. As a proof of it, President Xi Jinping came recently in official visit to the country in July 2024, elevating the nature of their bilateral relationship to the status of an “*all weather comprehensive strategic partnership*” (Szunomàr & Peragovics, 2024). As a matter of fact, Hungary represents the perfect example of the ideal Chinese partner: it adopts the Chinese attitudes of coexistence, mutual respect, win-win arrangements and no engagement into each other’s domestic affairs (Szunomàr & Peragovics, 2024). The two partners cooperate in a variety of fields, as shown by the eighteen recent agreements signed between the two leaders, including investments in critical infrastructure like railways, nuclear energy, and border crossings (Andersson and Lindberg, 2024). Sino-Hungarian partnership goes beyond national borders: the Hungarian President Orbàn has challenged the general EU strategy towards China, by promoting and increasing Chinese economic influence in the country, especially in the sector of batteries and electric vehicles, showing also its disengagement with the EU policy of de-risking. The latter is in fact considered by Beijing as an attempt by the US and Europe to isolate China (Matura in Andersson and Lindberg, 2024). In addition, China has engaged in different infrastructural cooperation projects in Hungary, proposing the construction of a new airport, different railways and highways: however, some of these projects have been postponed (Szunomàr and alt, 2014). If the Hungarian reason to engage with China is explained in economic benefits, increased trade relations, growing investments, and infrastructure projects (Szunomàr & Peragovics, 2024), it is important also to understand why Beijing results particularly committed to Budapest. Apart from the excellent political relations, there are also the EU membership, the perfect geographical location of the country and the presence in Hungary of one of the biggest Chinese communities in Eastern Europe. (Szunomàr and alt, 2014). The Hungarian commitment to China is also allegedly visible in the EU, as Budapest usually puts limits over the EU’ action against China: the blocking of an EU declaration on the South China Sea and another one vetoing the EU statement condemning Chinese action in Hong Kong are relevant examples in this sense (Ghiretti, 2021). In conclusion, as a result of this brief analysis, it is possible to argue that Hungary represents Beijing’s closest ally in the European Union, making Budapest an essential partner in the continent.

Another interesting example of a Chinese partner in Europe is Greece: the Mediterranean country signed the Memorandum with China in August 2018, and since then, economic investments in the state flourished. As already stated in this chapter, one of the most important elements of previous

cooperation between Beijing and Athens is the Port of Piraeus, however, since the entry of the country in the BRI, the situation has developed, as Chinese imports from Greece have increased reaching \$1 billion in 2021, showing a 26% upsurge. In that same year, China became Greece's third most important trade partner with a share of 7.7% (Global Times, 2022). Indeed, Chinese investments in Greece grew mainly also in the field of energy, telecommunication, and tourism, bringing economic benefits to the country. However, after the signature, Beijing and Athens were able to advance also in the fields of their foreign policy and cultural exchanges cooperation (Stroikos, 2024). Politically, Beijing and Athens tightened their links, as Greece was accepted as a member of the AIIB in 2017, and in 2019 the country became part of the 16+1' group of China, which was later renamed 17+1 (Stroikos, 2022). As in the case of Hungary, Greece was one of the few EU countries to support the use of a lower register in the EU statement concerning China's maritime disputes in the South China Sea (Stroikos, 2024; Ghiretti, 2021). Therefore, it can be argued that, on the one hand the accession of Greece to the Belt and Road Initiative has undeniably boosted the bilateral economic and political relation with China in the last years; however, it is also true that Athens has now recognized its identity as a European and a western nation; this has limited Chinese opportunities in the country, promoting Athens' interests by profiting of economic benefits and limited political cooperation between the two, in the framework of the growing EU-China competition (Kokoromytis and Chrysogelos, 2021). Therefore, Greece represents an interesting case of a country highly benefitting from the partnership, but progressively willing to limit it.

Another important actor on this issue is Portugal, signing the Memorandum with China in December 2018. Despite the late signature, Lisbon was already cooperating with Beijing in the sectors of transportation and energy. Through the 2018 partnership, Portugal wanted to increase its prospect of sustainable economic growth and its general international competitiveness, evading from its long-lasting low position among the EU states (Ferreira-Pereira & Duarte, 2022). However, after the signature, the situation of Sino-Portuguese relations did not change substantially, at the exception for infrastructure development. In fact, as soon as the country signed the agreement, the already mentioned COSCO appeared as the potential interested party to participate in the construction of a new container terminal in the harbor of Sines (Ghiretti, 2021). The real heart of the cooperation between Beijing and Lisbon is however the energy sector, as Chinese enterprise GTG detains around one third of shares of Energias de Portugal; later, China tried to acquire more portions of the company, but Portugal blocked it. The reasons for these decisions have never been clarified, but this move established a solid limit to the cooperation between the two (Ghiretti, 2021). Moreover, on telecommunications, Lisbon had accepted Huawei to develop its 5G in the country: however, after

US pressures, Portuguese government let to national telecommunication providers the choose wheatear to adoperate it or not, and they rejected to use Huawei in their networks, signifying a deceleration of the Chinese business in the country (Ghiretti, 2021). Therefore, Sino-Portuguese relations are on a fork: on the one hand, last year Xinhua published an interview with a Professor from the University of Lisbon, stating that Portugal *“always considers foreign investment as a positive issue, and we also consider Chinese investment a very positive issue”* (Ilheu in Xinhua, 2023). Concluding the article, the journalists expressed the fact that the BRI represents a solid and sustainable initiative to further strengthen the economic cooperation between Lisbon and Beijing (Xinhua, 2023b). However, on the other hand, the situation seems to be changing. In fact, in 2022, a survey on Portuguese public opinion has shown how Portuguese population results more skeptical and critical than the national government on China (Fernandes and alt, 2022). As a matter of fact, starting from 2023, the Prime Minister António Costa has started to refresh the relations with western allies as Portugal had increasingly reduced the ties with Beijing: according to Sheridan, Lisbon is walking the way Rome inaugurated, by progressively diminishing cooperation with China. Moreover, the Portuguese Former Foreign Affairs Minister, João Gomes Cravinho, openly said that Portugal would *“review the meaning of the political and economic relationship”* (Cravinho in Sheridan, 2023) if China kept on supporting Russian invasion in Ukraine by sending arms (Sheridan, 2023). However, the economic relations seem to be partially maintained, as expressed during the last Forum for Economic and Trade Co-operation between China and Portuguese-speaking Countries in April 2024: on the occasion, Portuguese Minister of Economy Pedro Reis stated that Portugal wanted to maintain its economic cooperation with China and to promote bilateral investments (Global Times, 2024). Therefore, in conclusion, it is possible to state that Sino-Portuguese relations have passed through a first phase of big engagement and enthusiasm which has now evolved is a more cautious approach by Lisbon.

Poland is another curious case in its relations with China. The country joined the Belt and Road Initiative, signing the Memorandum in November 2015. The strategic location of the state makes the country a hub for the railway traffic and therefore an important potential partner for China. At the beginning of the partnership, there was reciprocal enthusiasm in the relations between Beijing and Warsaw: however, today the situation has drastically changed, rising a wave of skepticism, both at the government and civic level (MERICS, 2023a). In the past, Poland had prioritized its relations with China thanks to its pragmatic approach since the 2008 financial crisis, joining also the 16+1 format and the AIIB; however, since the beginning of the war in Ukraine their relation has changed. (Bachulska, 2023). Economically, Warsaw detains one of EU’s highest trade deficits with Beijing,

therefore the country holds a need to increase the economic cooperation with China to rebalance this relation; on the other side, there is low optimism, considering the worsening of the political Sino-Polish relations. The main problem resides in the war in Ukraine, as the conflict massively infringes Poland's security. Consequently, Sino-Russian cooperation in the conflict is unacceptable for Warsaw: on the issue, Deputy Prime Minister Wojciech Gerwel argued that "*Poland notes with concern Beijing's declarations concerning its persistent will to strengthen its bilateral relations with Russia*" (Gerwel in Bachulska, 2023). Poland's approach looks to be tendent to reach a more conscious line towards Beijing, yet without totally antagonizing China due to economic reasons. Therefore, Poland represents an important example of a country which was previously enthusiastic about the initiative, and that later changed opinion due to external factors. In this context, the major challenge for Warsaw will be therefore to adapt to the incurring circumstances and to avoid Chinese countermeasures.

In the framework of this comparative study, two additional perspectives which are worth to be analyzed are the French and the German. Contrarily to the previous examples, both these countries have not signed any sort of BRI Memorandum of Understanding with China; nevertheless, given Beijing's centrality in the global dynamics, it is necessary for them to continuously interact with it. These two important European countries have different strategies regarding China, and this thesis will analyze them in brief, to understand whether it is possible to cooperate with China without a formal Memorandum.

Starting with France, Paris presented a big trade imbalance with China and this made the country vulnerable to Beijing's policies (Nicolas, 2021). Despite so, France did not accept to sign a Memorandum with China; instead, Paris engaged in a project-by-project cooperation, (Nicolas, 2019) perusing a more cautious and *less naïve* approach, trying also to influence the EU's line towards Beijing (Pajon and alt., 2024). Since the beginning of the BRI, France never openly ostracized the initiative; instead, the French President Emmanuel Macron adopted a sort of high-level standards approach with China, (similar to the one adopted by Japan) trying to achieve a bilateral balanced cooperation between the two and, at the same time, promote development in acceptable terms for Paris, Beijing and the international community. Some of these conditions are related to environmental sustainability and sustainable financing, and admittedly, China has shown flexibility in these topics (Nicolas, 2021). At the same time, France and China have signed a number of agreements, especially in 2019, just after Xi's visit to Rome: these totaled a value of 40 billion dollars (Tiezzi, 2019), a bigger amount than the one signed with Italy the day before. Considering that Italy was a part of the

BRI while France no, this fact created great controversy, suggesting that French less accommodating approach had been more economically and pragmatically rewarding than the Italian one (Nicolas, 2021). To these days, France still considers China as a necessary actor with which to engage in high level of dialogue to reach cooperation in fields of common interests such as climate action and security balances in the war in Ukraine, considering Beijing an influential interlocutor of Putin. At the same time, Paris pushed Europe towards the necessity to adopt a strategy centered on the European sovereignty, applying more aggressive trade policies and the already mentioned de-risking approach, but also increasing protections for European technology and strengthening European competitiveness, lowering perceived external dependence and vulnerability (Pajon and alt., 2024). France was also the first state to engage into an Indo-Pacific strategy, aimed to defend the freedom of navigation in the area. Current French approach to China can be therefore synthesized in the following formula: *“Paris has been careful not to adopt a confrontational approach towards China, but instead aims to maintain a robust dialogue and partnership with China while also checking Beijing’s influence”* (Pajon and alt., 2024).

Lastly, Germany has undergone significant changes in its relationship with China, given Berlin’s industrial dependencies on Chinese products, geopolitical tensions and the increase of Chinese assertiveness in the global sphere. At the beginning of their relation, under Angela Merkel’s government, Berlin welcomed increased relations with Beijing, promoting the Belt and Road Initiative and its potentially positive consequences on development and trade all over the world; with this same spirit, the country joined the AIIB in 2015. Consequently, Sino-German relations were transformed into an institutionalized cooperation framework creating different dialogues on economic, political, social and cultural issues. This approach was based on the German ambition of guiding China towards adopting a new relation based on mutual benefits for both parties, liberalization of the country and the inclusion of China in the global order as a responsible stakeholder (Mair & Schaff, 2021). Given the extremely good relations, German companies, especially the sector of the automotive, began to invest in China and developed a dependency on Chinese exports. (Mair & Schaff, 2021). As Chinese influence grew, and its global assertiveness increased, Beijing’s investments in Eastern Europe started to distress EU infrastructure initiatives, pushing Germany to call for coordination between EU and China. Since then, Berlin started to lament issues regarding the lack of transparency, openness and fairness in its relationship with Beijing, understanding its national overreliance on China and the geological implications of the BRI as a rising problem (Mair & Schaff, 2021). Hence, Germany assumed a critical behavior towards China criticizing the 17+1 initiative and lamenting the infringement by China of EU rules for environmental and social standards, pushing

Germany to co-lead with France the initiative Europe-Asia Connectivity Strategy, a clear challenge to the BRI (Mair & Schaff, 2021). Moreover, Germany met enormous difficulties in acting towards China both due to its fractured national debate on the issue and the reluctance of the government to define its relations with Beijing univocally. Finally, in 2023, under the government of the Chancellor Olaf Scholz and the Foreign Affairs Minister Annalena Baerbock, Germany published its National Security Strategy on China. In it, Beijing is addressed both as a threat and a necessary actor in the system, basically confirming the definition given by the European Commission in 2019 (Hildebrandt, 2023). The document therefore recognizes the necessity of reducing dependency on China by diversifying the supply chain and protecting critical infrastructures, pushing the EU to engage in the application of the EU global Gateway Initiative. As a matter of fact, the slowing economic cooperation of Germany with China is coupled with a value-based strategy focused on opposing its geopolitical influence in Europe (Hildebrandt, 2023). Moreover, a closer look at the document shows the fact that “*de-risking is urgently needed*” (Government of the Federal Republic of Germany, 2023, p.10): even if this approach is one of the most critical strategies towards China. On this topic, Germany is in a particular situation, as the country is Europe’s biggest exporter to China, accounting for 7% of its national export and for almost the 40% of EU trade with Beijing. However, after a year of the publication of the strategy, it seems that German industries have not yet adhered to de-risking policies, as “*there are no indications that the German industry is following the government’s advice and indeed urging to invest less in China*” (Berkofsky, 2024). The importance of the economic relations with China and the worsening political interactions with the country are making European leaders less powerful towards Beijing. The last visit of Chancellor Scholz in China was the symbol of the great ambition of the EU and the current incapacity of the Union to shift the debate on its side, as Xi Jinping simply did not address topics presented by Scholtz (Berkofsky, 2024). As a concluding remark, Germany will maybe continue to do business with China, keeping a high-profile dialogue with Beijing: an aggressive behavior would not be beneficial; however, this engagement must be done in the spirit of alignment with EU’s standards and interests (Berkofsky, 2024; Mair & Schaff, 2021).

In conclusion, this comparative study of the European Union states’ relations with China has analyzed and highlighted the different degrees of integration and dialogue that European national governments share with China, with varying levels of cooperation and skepticism. Hungary remains the strongest ally of China in the EU, benefitting from economic investments and infrastructure projects; Greece and Portugal are adopting a more cautious approach in the BRI, while Poland’s relations with China have soured mainly due to security concerns. Meanwhile, France and Germany, officially not in the

BRI, present a more practical attitude towards China, less based on formal coordination but more on economic pragmatism. These two states are pushing the EU to adopt a line which may balance economic cooperation and strategic concerns. On the one hand, France has emphasized dialogue, by trying to shape Chinese action towards Europe; on the other hand, the German action is rooted in its trade dependency on China. Overall, this sub-chapter has analyzed just six of the different national approaches of EU states; however, despite the limited number of cases, several incongruences and differences are noted. Acknowledging the complexity of the question may therefore be useful to coordinate EU countries towards holding a single EU-China approach, balancing between economic interest and political distancing. The next sub-section will be then dedicated specifically to the consequences of Italy's signature of the MoU, analyzing the different reactions by different influential subjects, both nationally and internationally.

2.3.3 Rome in the eye of the cyclone: critiques to the partnership

The signature of the Memorandum of Understanding between Italy and China represented a crucial moment in their relations; it had also an important resonance in the traditional Italian allies, mainly on the European Union and the United States. Therefore, this sub-chapter will be dedicated to the analysis of the reactions of these global actors to the signature, also including the analysis of the Italian public opinion on the issue. This study will contribute to understand the complexity of the situation at the national and international levels, and the dissenting opinions on the topic.

On the European perspective, the signature of the MoU by Italy represented a deviation from EU's main policy towards China. In this sense, the timing looked particularly unfortunate, since Italy openly shifted its economic attitude towards China in a moment when the EU was advising the opposite (Amighini and Sciorati, 2021). As a matter of fact, the signature came at a time in which the EU members had opened a debate over the EU Chinese strategy in view of the EU-China Summit of April 2019; additionally, the Commission had recently published its already-mentioned Strategic Outlook on EU-China relations, increasing the Union's criticism over Beijing and famously stating that the country represented a partner a competitor and a rival. In this scene, EU approach was advising to protect national critical sectors, such as telecommunication services, which, as discussed earlier, were part of the agreements between Italy and China (Amighini and Sciorati, 2021). The main economic issues regarding China according to the Commission were the lack of competition in the Chinese national market for European goods and the lack of reciprocity in trade relations. Therefore, the major problems stood on the fact that the signature brought misalignment in the effort of creating

a unified EU approach against China and possibly a breach of EU competencies (Van der Eijk & Gunavardana 2019). To these criticisms, Italian Premier Giuseppe Conte promptly responded that the Memorandum was not infringing EU law, Agenda 2030 or EU-China cooperation Agenda (Cristiani, 2019).

Similar criticism was arising also from the United States. Since the early discussion on the Memorandum, Washington warned Italy about the possibility that Rome could have become the “Trojan Horse” of China, permitting Beijing to access the European continent and the G7 group from inside. Moreover, they expressed concerns over the consequent issues on security and strategy of the decision, expressing the fact that the BRI was a geopolitical tool in the hands of China to reshape world order. Additionally, Washington warned Italy on Chinese debt traps, noting Italy’s particular fragility in the field due to the economic conditions of its national debt (Nadalutti & Ruland, 2024). Furthermore, few days before the signature, the Executive Office of the President of the United States of America published a tweet stating that: *“Italy is a major global economy and a great investment destination. Endorsing BRI lends legitimacy to China’s predatory approach to investment and will bring no benefits to the Italian people”* (Mitchell, 2019). Similarly, the American Ambassador in Rome at that time, Lewis M. Eisenberg, stated that the *“BRI represents not just a strategic mistake, but also a danger for national security”* (Eisenberg in TGCOM 24, 2019). Some days after, Premier Conte answered these criticisms by expressing that commercial or economic deals cannot make the Euro-Atlantic alliance under question, securing Italy’s strong commitment towards Washington and the USA (Mitchell, 2019).

Having understood the different points of view of important global actors, it is now important to focus on the Italian people; therefore, what does Italian citizens really thought about the topic at the time? A survey by the Demopolis Institute has shown that the Italian public opinion was basically divided. On the one hand, 51% of the interviewed agreed with a part of the Italian government on the fact that the signature would have been beneficial for the country, boosting trade and investments in Italy especially in the field of the Made in Italy. On the other hand, Italian citizens also expressed criticisms: more than one third of them agreed that this could have opened the way for further competition risks, creating an imbalanced trade relation. Moreover, about one fourth of the respondents criticized the fact that this partnership would have potentially created tensions between Italy and its traditional partners, mainly the European Union and the United States. Therefore, globally, just half of the Italian population agreed with the government, leaving another fifty percent with doubts and uncertainties (Demopolis Institute in Politi, 2020).

At the same time, it is important to mention the fact that some criticisms were moved to Italy also from the academia. First, it is undeniable that the timing could have maybe been managed differently, as a decision of this kind showed a clear detachment between the European and the national policymaking. According to Sisci, the mistake was not the signature *per se*, but the lack of efficient communication between the allies: *“There was a lack of professionalism and political know-how. Whatever the deal is, they need to speak first with the Americans and the Europeans, agreeing to a common approach, then speak with China”* (Sisci in Cristiani, 2019). Furthermore, some scholars call into question the unnecessary of the signature. According to Italian politicians, the MoU was signed to profit of the economic opportunity of the partnership: in Conte’s words: *“The infrastructure will redefine commercial traffic routes. We will have new airports, new trade corridors, and it will certainly influence our economic growth. We don’t want to lose any opportunity”* (Conte in Barry, 2019). At the same time, some scholars argue that Italy and Chinese relations may have profited more of a trade without any MoU. According to Tramballi, *“you must do business with this great country without engaging in an ambiguous political and economic agenda”*, following the example of other G7 members: given their importance, China needs to partner with these countries anyways, therefore Beijing would be disposed to cooperate with them, with or without a memorandum, making it basically unnecessary (Tramballi, 2019).

In conclusion, as shown in this sub-chapter, the signature of the Memorandum created criticisms both at the national and at the international level. Domestically, the decision created a strong divide, both inside the government and in the public opinion. Externally, historical allies expressed strong reservations, emphasizing the national risks for the country but also the potential weakening of these alliances. Additionally, some academics questioned the real necessity of the plan, arguing that the country could have reached the same results simply by pushing China to coordinate more with the EU. As a matter of fact, the chapter has displayed the multifaced nature of the Italian engagement in the BRI, showing the negative implications and outcomes of the decision. The next chapter will then be dedicated to the assessment of the Italian BRI partnership and the analysis of the results of these five years of strengthened cooperation, assessing the reasons of the decision by the Italian government to step back from the Memorandum.

Chapter 3

Untangling the ties: Italy's withdrawal from the BRI

The third chapter of this thesis examines the Meloni government's decision to step back from the Memorandum of Understanding with China. To fully comprehend this choice, it is essential to consider various factors ongoing at that time, both in Italy and in the broader global context.

Since 2019, the world has witnessed the emergence of new challenges that have jeopardized international peace and security, making western world leaders and citizens more conscious of their forgotten fragilities. Events such as the Covid-19 Pandemic, the ensuing economic crisis and the war in Ukraine are just some of the new elements that influenced both global current dynamics and national decision-making. Conscious of this complex international framework, any analysis of the Italian decision to conclude the MoU with China must take these factors into account, as they played a crucial role in shaping the Meloni government's actions. The central question in this chapter is therefore not just why Italy decided to withdraw from the MoU but rather, how did the major changes in the national and global scenario in 2019-2023 had influenced Rome.

To address this question, this chapter follows a structured approach. First, the thesis will offer an outlook on the major international factors that allegedly performed an indirect role in the worsening of the Italo-Chinese relations: the shift in US leadership in 2020, the spreading of the Covid-19 Pandemic and the explosion of the war in Ukraine. Of course, this thesis is not aimed to fully describe these occurrences, yet the focus will be put on the impacts of these latter on the Italo-Chinese bilateral relations. Second, the thesis will delve into the discussion of the different Italian governments alternating in the country during the 2019-2023 timespan: in order Conte II, Draghi I and Meloni I. Third, the discussion will then move to an economic analysis, questioning the alleged financial benefits of the MoU: this will occur by examining trade, investment and financial cooperation between Rome and Beijing and assessing the success of these economic relations. The final section will be then dedicated to explaining the diplomatic initiative of the Italian government in navigating into its "divorce" with China, explaining the strategies and discussion leading to the decision, emphasizing also the dissimilar opinions of some Italian and Chinese officials. The chapter then closes with a fast review of similar cases of states dismantling their relations with China and assessing the consequences and the possible costs of the Italian decision in the future.

By the end of this chapter, the reader will acquire a comprehensive understanding of the major national and global drivers that prompted Italy to reconsider its approach to China, along with the major impacts of this decision.

Section 3.1

2019-2023: Five years of exceptional change

The timespan between 2019 and 2023 represented a dynamic period for the international community. At this time, after months of strengthened cooperation in the economic sector, Italy and China had just signed their Memorandum of Understanding under the government Conte I. A few months later, the US elections were held, with the revolutionary victory of the Democratic candidate Joe Biden, and the Covid Pandemic was slowly starting to spread. These events represented two critical moments for the world history, as they embodied a watershed line in the international dynamics.

With the end of the Pandemic, the world, still aching from the consequences of health and economic crisis, witnessed the return of warfare in Europe with the Russian invasion in Ukraine. This new challenge accelerated the already ongoing process of strengthening integration of the European regionalism and the rising out of the ashes of NATO, creating the basis for the development of a potentially highly complex global scenario. Later, in December 2023, Italy officially communicated to Beijing its intention not to renovate the MoU.

Today's situation is therefore the result of a quick succession of global critical events that occurred in a relatively small amount of time, embodying a period of exceptional change. The question to be answered by this chapter is therefore whether and eventually how intensely these major events influenced the Italo-Chinese relations, highlighting the influence of global trends on the bilateral relations between Rome and Beijing.

3.1.1 US influence on Italy's China strategy: The Trump-Biden shift

In this first sub-section, the focus of the analysis will be Rome's change of approach in the Italo-Chinese relations, in light of the succession of the US leadership in 2020. This thesis has already studied the US and Chinese relations; however, it has not yet explained the consequences of the net transition between Trump and Biden's presidencies. Of course, one can argue that US politics may not represent the main driver of the Italian political approach, however, it is impossible not to

recognize that Washington has enjoyed, and still does today, a high degree of priority in Rome's eyes. Therefore, the interrogative of this section focuses on whether the US Presidency influenced Italy's decision to sign and later to step away from the Memorandum.

To answer this question, it is essential to remind that Italy signed the MoU with China in 2019, when President Donald Trump was already governing in the USA for his first mandate. At that time, Trump's "America First" policy emphasized the role of bilateralism and economic protectionism at the expenses of traditional multilateral US-lead alliances: this idea is perfectly synthesized by the article by Manca, arguing that *"Inevitably for Europe, Trump's 'America first' approach to foreign policy and the transatlantic relationship didn't come without consequences"* (Manca, 2023a).

At the national level, the Republican President fostered a more provocative approach towards China, including trade wars and the block of Chinese investments and technology in the US national territory, as in the case of the already cited Huawei. Yet, on the international arena, this approach did not include any specific policy aimed at mobilizing EU allies: at the beginning, Trump's strategy greatly limited any interactions with Atlantic partners, especially with the EU. Therefore, in this moment of perceived void of the EU-US relations, China could acquire its momentum: according to Wright in fact, *"When Trump became U.S. president, Europeans looked set to continue to engage Beijing, especially when Xi publicly positioned himself as a champion of multilateralism as the United States was turning against the international order"* (Wright, 2020, p.1). Moreover, in the frame of multilateralism, Trump withdrew from numerous international agreements and softened the dialogue with EU allies, precipitating the relations with Brussels until a point in which the Union was economically defined as *"worse than China, only smaller"*, given EU's trade regulations (Trump in Wright, 2020). It was then just in a second phase that Trump administration started to pressure Europe to lower MSs relations with Beijing, particularly on sensitive matters such as telecommunications (Wright, 2020). With this perspective, it is therefore possible to argue that Trump's approach contributed to the development of a European feeling of isolation, letting to Brussels and the MSs an increased sense of self-autonomy and perceived treason by the traditional US ally. In Italy, this sentiment combined with national political and economic crisis creating the need for new economic partner, and Xi's auto-proclaimed "multilateral China" appeared as the best alternative (Insisa, 2023).

Later, in November 2020, the American elections awarded the Democrat Joe Biden, opening for a new profound shift into Washington's leadership. Under President Biden, the US revived its priorities of increasing the multilateral strategy. As a matter of fact, despite conserving part of the protectionism

enacted by the former President, the new White House tenant engaged in the solid determination to rebuild its relationship with the traditional Atlantic allies, jeopardizing the newly Chinese acquired multilateral governance (Manca, 2023a; Insisa, 2023). It is therefore crucial to understand that on the one hand, economic policy over China was not substantially modified; while on the other hand, what was altered was the renewed opening of dialogue with allies, especially on the field of security issues. Related to Beijing, the effort of President Biden was therefore focused on opposing China through a renewed coordination with western countries and allies, also in the area of the Indo-Pacific, pressing European partners to reconsider their close economic and commercial ties with China.

In this perspective it is therefore possible to claim that the Italian decision of December 2023 aligns with a period of relative optimism for the EU-US relations, considering the strengthening of these ties under Biden's administration. Differently than before, Italy and the whole continent were feeling again closer to Washington. In this sense, it is possible to argue that the Italian conduct with China may have reflected the increased optimism of the Union's geopolitical realignment with the US.

To sum up: Trump's lack of cohesive mobilization sparked a sentiment of autonomy in Rome, which led indirectly to the engagement between Italy and China. Later, as new President Biden returned to multilateral diplomacy and security alliances, the international dynamics required a restored alignment with Atlantic allies; consequently, Rome decided to step away from the agreement. These considerations show the significant indirect influence of US foreign policy on Italy's geopolitical decisions. At the same time, it is important not to overestimate the issue: most of the EU states, despite Trump's administration, did not engaged with China as closely as Italy did. Therefore, Rome should be considered as a specific case rather than an absolute example. Acknowledging that US political shift had surely an impact on Italy, it is necessary to not ignore other factors such as the national context of the country into question. In this case, Italy is hence a peculiar example of how national priorities intersected with international influence, showing the complexities of geopolitical alignments. Finally, based on the analysis of the sub-section, it is possible to conclude that Italy signed and then retired from the MoU not due to the US's direct influence; instead, the change of Washington's approach in foreign policy indirectly impacted on Italian political action.

3.1.2 The Covid-19 Pandemic: a potential existential threat for the EU

The Covid-19 Pandemic has created unprecedented challenges for the international community: during these times, it was possible to witness a shift in national priorities and states' behaviors. For

this thesis's sake, the analysis will not address the pandemic phenomenon as a whole, but it will be focused on the impacts and consequences of the Covid-19 epidemic into the European Union and in the international equilibria. This global outbreak conveyed into the Union unprecedented challenges, influencing political, economic and social life of the citizens, bringing to lights EU's contemporary fragility and resilience in the multilateral system of government. This section therefore aims to analyze the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on the European Union, exploring the consequences this existential threat had on the Union and assessing whether it influenced relations between Italy and China.

The Covid-19 Pandemic hit the European continent since the beginning of the 2020: with the spreading of the virus, European countries experienced health and economic challenges, complicated by the lack of knowledge about the disease and the absence of emergency plans both nationally and at the communitarian level. The complex nature of the crisis was represented by the merging of a health threat with an economic shock, resulting into several consequences both into the EU and in the global sphere. To deal with the virus, national governments restricted social and political rights, by locking down their citizens and imposing them strict limitations over behaviors out of home. This led to a general decline of the world's economy, caused by the decrease of production, trade, and the disruption of the world's global chains. This crisis has been as economically significant as the 2008 financial crisis, as it shown also new economic weaknesses, which at the time were not yet seriously addressed (Grasso and alt, 2021).

As a matter of fact, it is true that at the beginning of the pandemic states were not sufficiently prepared to coordinate their efforts to avoid the spreading of the virus: at the first stage, EU governance witnessed a clear moment of embarrassment, while MS lived a period of national egoisms, prioritizing their people's prime interests over collective action (Brooks et alt, 2022). Despite this first months of puzzlement, the EU was gradually more capable of coordinating a unilateral response, by creating a stronger health cooperation between the MS. One of the most important EU policies during Covid was the collective vaccine procurement which ensured, despite initial delays, the access to the whole EU to efficient vaccines (Quaglia & Verdun, 2023). More in general, the crisis originated a situation in which cooperation between states and collective action was necessary and the EU was able to tackle this opportunity just in a secondary phase (Quaglia & Verdun, 2023). Another essential measure run by the EU to deal with the Covid-19 crisis was the famous Recovery Fund: as the Pandemic had had serious influence on the national financing due to the sharp decline in production, the EU created a fund of 750 billion euros, named "Next Generation EU", aimed at refreshing the

markets by funding some projects in the MSs by injecting some funds in the national states' economies, proportionally to the economic damage suffered during the Pandemic. This tool represented a critical element of the European economic governance, displaying the presence of the EU into the MS; according to some scholars, the plan implied also the determination of the EU to increase the European fiscal integration and to expand its role into MS's economic efforts: in fact *"Beyond a contemporary economic rescue package, the recovery fund implied laying the cornerstone of completing a fiscal union in the Eurozone, for enhancing institutional functions of the European Commission, and for rediscovering the nature of European integration as the rescuer of national states"* (Luo, 2022). Other scholars have also hypothesized the opportunity to compare the famous Hamilton's paradox with the case of the European Union during the Covid-19 crisis. Notionally, this model comes from the economic tradition, but it can be enlarged to include governance as well. The theory can be applied to political systems by suggesting that a state with a highly centralized power structure may not be necessarily more efficient in times of crisis than one with weak centralization. In the first case, individual entities can take bigger risks or be totally inactive, relying excessively on the assurance from the big state. In contrast, in more decentralized federations, states might be incentivized to support and legitimize the central authority, recognizing a need for collective action. Based on this idea, some authors therefore recognized the Pandemic as a trigger for European cohesion in terms of health and economic policies, noting that *"The EU performed no worse than the US in its functional handling of the pandemic"*, despite their differing systems of governance (Alexander-Shaw and alt, 2023). With other words, according to other scholars, crisis have the potential to *"stimulate policy responses and spur institutional development, resulting in a more resilient polity"*, admitting that *"the EU's 'weak center' held strong against the headwinds"*, despite initial pessimist expectations (Oena and alt, 2023). Following this view, according to some scholars, big events such this pandemic crisis have the potential to acquire a sort of existential value for highly criticized institutions: an eventual failure to concretize an effective European response could potentially damage the future stability of Union, making people to prefer national governments' approach, leading to a decrease in political participation in the EU and a shift of focus towards national politics and needs (Alexander-Shaw and alt, 2023). In fact, as stated by Brooks and alt, COVID-19 was considered as holding the seeds of EU collapse (Brooks et alt, 2022). However, it is interesting to acknowledge that the citizens' participation to the political elections for the European Parliament has not decreased in the timespan between the 2019 and 2024 elections. In fact, for the 2019 European elections, the percentage of the EU MS's citizens who voted totaled to 50.66% (European Parliament, n.d.): this data is extremely important, since it portrays a degree of interest towards EU politics into the whole European society right before the spread of the Covid-19

pandemic. Comparing these data with those of the 2024 elections, it is possible to derive some conclusions. The 2024 elections witnessed a total of 50.74% of voters, an increase of 0.08% compared to the previous democratic exercise: this trend indicates that the interest on EU politics has kept stable in the aftermath of the Covid-19 Crisis. This factor is important, since, according to the precedent theory, citizens' participation into the vote would be proportional to their interest towards the EU. Therefore, it may be too simple to state that the Covid Pandemic has strengthened the sentiment of Europeanness of EU citizens; however, it is instead possible to argue that European citizens still consider EU as an important element of their political life due to their unchanged participation to EU elections before and after Covid crisis. This implies that EU did not generally dissatisfy the expectations of its citizens during the Covid crisis, as voters still consider important to express their vote in this kind of democratic exercise.

During the ongoing of the Pandemic, it is critical to recognize an evident change of priorities for the EU: a clear example can be the coordination plan for EU-China cooperation; this ambition had temporarily lost its centrality as EU and China were concentrated in the fight against Covid-19. Truth be said, at this stage, some of Brussels and Beijing's priorities were similar: the production of medical devices and vaccines, the need to limit the economic damage and the necessity to reopen the borders as soon as possible (Chapuis, 2020). At the same time, despite these resemblances, different global actors came out with distinctive solutions: states increased their protectionist policies and cut dialogue, by developing their own vaccines and intensifying the already existing geo-economic rivalries between, such as US and China (Schmucker, 2020). Additionally, global trade chains suffered enormously from the pandemic, especially the production in China, where the Zero-Covid policy was seriously impacting on the national firms and consequently on the global supply chains. This phenomenon made EU MS conscious on the issue of overdependency and the need of a supply differentiation (Pacinte, 2023): these topics have already been discussed in this thesis, and they will be fundamental in the last chapter of this research. Therefore, if China in that period became temporarily a second-level urgency of the European Union, member states became the top priority for Brussels.

Shifting now the attention to Italy during the Covid crisis, Rome was an important player at that time: the state was in fact one of the first to record high numbers of Covid-19 infections and it was among the first to adopt national lockdowns measures. In the country, the Pandemic was particularly violent, both in terms of human lives and economic costs. As already stated, at the beginning of the pandemic, EU's approach to Covid has been not coherent: national governments imposed their own roles and

had no interest in supporting each other: this all came at the expenses of some states, as Italy which at the beginning of the crisis were not sufficiently supported, despite request of aid from Rome. In fact, during an audition at the European Parliament in April 2020, the President of the European Commission Ursula Von der Leyen publicly apologized to Italy for not having helped the country during the beginning of its deadly coronavirus outbreak. As a matter of fact, Italians initially criticized the EU's response to the pandemic, lamenting the lack of support by Brussels. In her speech, Von der Leyen declared that *"Yes, it is true that no one was really ready for this. It is also true that too many were not there on time when Italy needed a helping hand at the very beginning"*. Through these words, the President admitted the lack of preparedness of the Union for such events and the consequent lack of prompt support for Italy in time of need (Von der Leyen in Lee, 2020). However, despite initial delays, EU support reached Italy: one of the most important measures was exactly the already mentioned Next Generation EU, which destined to Rome the biggest shares of the funds, exactly due to the huge consequences Italy suffered from Covid. The projections of the funds received by Italy are around 191 billion euros, to be spent to invest to develop the three strategic assets of digitization and innovation, ecological transition, and social inclusion. The fund has six main targets: (1) Digitization, Innovation, Competitiveness, Culture; (2) Green Revolution and Ecological Transition; (3) Infrastructure for Sustainable Mobility; (4) Education and Research; (5) Inclusion and Cohesion; (6) Health (Italian Ministry of Economy and Finance, n.d.).

Therefore, in conclusion, authors agree that after the outbreak of Covid-19, Europe faced a clear moment of trauma (Dennison & Zerka, 2020). During this tough time, the outbreak represented a challenge to the existence of the European Union, initially presenting deep divisions as member states prioritized national responses, with Italy feeling particularly isolated. However, through the development of the crisis, the EU was gradually capable of better managing the situation, including the establishment of the Next Generation EU and enabling for more coordination between the member states. The crisis therefore showed EU's vulnerabilities but also highlighted the capacity of the Union for resilience and adaptation, giving a proof of high adaptability. Moreover, the maintenance of the political engagement demonstrated by the stable voter turnout at elections and the push towards greater fiscal and health integration implies that the EU has generally not mistaken its management of the Covid-19 crisis. Therefore, was the Covid-19 the beginning of a new European crisis? Essentially yes, as the pandemic would have had the potential to become a true existential threat for the Union; however, the EU was able to navigate this period of crisis in a coherent manner. Of course, this is a macro tendency which can be easily falsified in the specific national interests, but in general, the management of the Covid-pandemic by EU has been more positive than negative: Covid-19

reminisced human's vulnerabilities, opened westerner's eyes on the weaknesses of the global supply chains, called for an increased EU preparedness for times of crisis and showed the potential of the communitarian European action. Consequently, on the one hand, it is maybe hyperbolic to deduct an increase in the European spirit in MS and citizens; however, on the other hand, it is possible to observe a general strengthening of the European Union since the beginning of the Pandemic. In these times, relation with external actors like China were undermined, while links between MS were developed, creatin a sort of conviction over the necessity to increase cooperation at the EU level in times of crisis.

3.1.3: The war in Ukraine: the revival of EU and NATO commitments

The last sub-section is dedicated to the analysis of the war in Ukraine and the consequences that it fostered both at the EU and at the global level. At a first sight, the Russo-Ukrainian conflict and the Italo-Chinese relations may not seem particularly related: however, during the discussion, the thesis will make sense of this relation, linking the increase of hostilities in Ukraine with a growing necessity for EU and Atlantic cohesion.

To start the discussion, it is necessary to acknowledge that the war in Ukraine, begun due to the unilateral Russian aggression, represents a major shift in the international scenario and a great threat for the European continent. As a matter of fact, different scholars such as Polyakova shared the idea that *“Russia’s full-scale invasion has sparked the most serious crisis in Europe since World War II and shattered the post-Cold War international order”* (Polyakova and alt, 2023, p.3). In fact, apart from bringing back the phenomenon of war into the European territory, this conflict has shown the clear failure of the Atlantic defense integration efforts by highlighting the fragilities of NATO deterrence on the Ukrainian-Russian border. According to Mearsheimer, the cause of the attack was related to the US intention to include Ukraine in the NATO: this would have jeopardized Moscow’s security ambition of not sharing any of its national border with NATO. In this sense, the Bucharest Summit of 2008, in which the organization expressed the hope for a Ukrainian and Georgian membership, and Biden’s will to follow Kiev’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations, triggered the Kremlin’s intervention with the aim to avoid any further progress of the western axis (Mearsheimer, 2022).

Although Ukraine is not a NATO member, the country has been a NATO partner ally since 2008: this label officially includes countries that have started the process of joining the organization; although, they are not still covered by the security guarantee of the organizations founding treaties (Menon & Ruger, 2023). The failure of the NATO’s deterrence in Ukraine permitted to the Atlantic Alliance to overpass the period of perceived *“braindead”* status, as the French President Emmanuel

Macron has famously stated in 2019 (Macron in Bond & Scazzieri, 2022), opening for a new strategic realignment and an increased attention on the topic of security in the European continent (Polyakova and alt, 2023). As a matter of fact, the alliance has recently regained its centrality in the global discourse: the accession of new members as Sweden and Finland strengthening the alliance's western borders and the call for increased national funding of the organization are some important elements of the renewed NATO's assets (Bond & Scazzieri, 2022).

On the EU point of view, a study by Fernandez has shown how Common Security and Defense Policy has been favorably welcomed by the European Union member states after the Russian invasion (Fernandez and alt, 2023). Moreover, it is a common perception that the war in Ukraine has also awakened the sector of the EU defense, remained relatively silent until recently. Triggered by the threat of Donald Trump's declarations to leave or to decrease the funding to NATO and the uncertain future support of the US officials to the European allies, the European Union has increasingly moved towards a formalization of the EU policy in this direction. Accordingly, scholars argue that "*Russia's war in Ukraine has underscored Europe's humbling dependence on the United States for defense and security*" (Polyakova, 2023, p.3). The creation of a new portfolio dedicated to Defense and Space in the new Von der Leyen Commission represents a fundamental element to comprehend the increasing prominence given to the sector. Previously, defense had never covered a crucial spot in the EU debate, but today, especially due to the current global situation, it is becoming increasingly considered (Politi, 2024). As a matter of fact, since the war in Ukraine, the European Union has improved its security duties, by publishing some influential guidelines such as the Strategic Compass for Security and Defense. The Union has drafted this plan with the aim to reinforce the EU security and defense policy by 2030. Its main ambition focuses on the intention to advance into the creation of a common European strategic culture against external threats. This strategy implies the will of the EU to act on four pillars: *act, secure, invest and partner*, in order to be a stronger security provider, increasing its strategic autonomy and improve the EU ability to act decisively in case of crisis (EEAS, n.d.).

Moreover, as already mentioned, another important consequence of the war in Ukraine was its impact on global economy: the conflict has in fact contributed to worsen the economic situation of the supply global chains. In the specific: Russia exports about 19% of the world's natural gas and 11% of oil, while Ukraine represents an important global wheat producer (Orhan, 2022). The disruption of supply chains did not occur just due to the lowering of quantity of production or due to the imposition of sanctions, but it concretized especially because of the physical disruption of land or sea infrastructures, and the air and sea ties between the states due to international bans. Hence, the war

in Ukraine has impacted on world economy through financial sanctions, increase of commodity prices and supply chain physical disruptions (Orhan, 2022).

The Ukrainian crisis has also consequently reopened the debate between a more integrated cooperation between NATO and the European Union. On the one hand, NATO can be considered as a facilitator of defense technology sharing and as a discussion platform between both EU states and Atlantic allies. At the same time, this cooperation still needs to be materialized in concrete terms: a clear example is the lack of standardization of armaments in the Union: some joint actions have been presented through years, but it is now increasingly necessary to address them with a comprehensive approach (Politi, 2024). Moreover, a strengthened EU-NATO complementarity is today needed to provide Kiev with structured security guarantees coming from committed states and not from a fragmented axis (Raik, 2023).

Therefore, on the one hand, it is possible to claim that the Russian invasion in Ukraine has strengthened the spirit of NATO and its partners: as a matter of fact, more than ever, the alliance's core mission stands as the one to provide collective defense in Europe (Polyakova and alt, 2023). At the same time, the EU has shown an increased interest in the field of defense and in a closer cooperation with the Atlantic alliance yet maintaining separated the two aspects due to uncertainties about the US future.

In this framework of strengthening alliances, it is interesting to understand the Italian position and the consequences of the phenomenon on the Italo-Chinese relations. As mentioned earlier, the succession of strong pro-European and Atlantic governments in Italy as Draghi and Meloni's, Rome became the protagonist of an important shift. In fact, the increased Sino-Russian cooperation in the war in Ukraine, as well as the net position of the EU and NATO allies towards Beijing have obliged Rome to take a side and to stop with its ambiguous foreign policy. Therefore, by exiting from the BRI, Rome wanted to deliver a clear signal to the international community, strongly committing to strengthened western security frameworks: in this sense, Italy chose to side in the western view, condemning the detrimental impact of the continuation of hostilities in Ukraine, the Sino-Russian silent cooperation and the gradual affiliation between Moscow, Teheran and Pyongyang. Moreover, the decision aligns with the bigger European and Atlantic stance, promoting higher cooperation among allies on the issue. From here comes the encouragement by the EU and US towards Italy to reconsider the BRI partnership in light of the Sino-Russian strategic cooperation in the war: keeping the Memorandum active in a context of increased tensions with Beijing may cause the Italian support

to Kiev to be inconsistent, especially in light of China's role in the war and the vitality of the western support towards Ukraine. Therefore, in this sense, the strengthening of the global tensions and the gradual rise of a neo-blocks logic rendered necessary a clear-cut choice for Italy: in this framework, Rome renewed its support to the western allies, and as a *quasi*-automatic consequence, the highly politicized and opposed Italo-Chinese partnership represented the main victim of this choice.

Hence, in conclusion, it can be argued that Italy's decision to step back from the BRI is part of the broader puzzle towards a closer alignment with the western allies, especially considering the war in Ukraine. This conflict has thus underscored the necessity of a united approach among the EU members and NATO against Russian and Chinese influence. By prioritizing its transatlantic relationship, Italy is signaling a clear commitment to European security and stability, opening to solidarity with western partners in an increasingly polarized global landscape.

Section 3.2

Italian political (in)stability: from Euroscepticism to Atlanticism

The second section of this chapter focuses on the analysis of the different Italian governments that alternated in the timespan between the 2019 and 2023. The study of the political history of the country is necessary to understand both the differing priorities of the executives and the opposing views on Italo-China relations by political leaders of the time. This section describes a period of political instability in Italy, which negatively influenced China's commitment in engaging with Rome. As a matter of fact, the analysis of this peculiar Italian political period is essential to understand the Italo-Chinese relations, in the sense that, according to some scholars, the period of high political uncertainty and the impossibility of Rome to provide for political certainties to the project impacted the Chinese priorities in Italy (Ranaldi, 2023). Therefore, this section focuses on the analysis of the Conte II, Draghi I and Meloni I governments, in light of their China's views, willing to show the increasing degree of difficulty for Beijing to ensure a clear soil to their interests in the country.

3.2.1 Conte II Government: between continuity and change

Soon after the signature of the Belt and Road Initiative Memorandum in March 2019, the "yellow-green government" led by Premier Giuseppe Conte gave proof of its structural instability. The already fragile majority coalition of the time entered a period of deep political divergence, that quickly evolved into the first political crisis of the XVIII legislature.

In 2019, Italian politics was complex: some analysts described it as a sort of a contract between the government parties tracing the borders between their influence on the central government (Cerioni, 2019). In this scenario, the role of Giuseppe Conte was particularly complicated, since it had to coordinate two political forces which were not exactly spiritually close: it is recalled that the Five Star movement is an anti-establishment and populist force, while the Lega is a right-wing party. The two shared different tones and spirits: some of the more critical disagreements in their political view were on the fields of defense, foreign policy, investments in infrastructures, the introduction of the flat tax and social policies (Cerioni, 2019). The government was created by the political elections of 2018, which ended with the victory of the Five Star movement (M5S), with the 32.7% ; second the Democratic Party (PD) with 18.7% and third the Lega with 17.4%. The government was therefore formed by the first and the third parties, representing however two different sides of the electorate (La Repubblica, 2018). Together, thanks to the electoral law, the two parties could reach the majority of MPs both in the *Camera dei Deputati* and in the *Senato*. However, the difference in the number of MPs of the two parties was evident: the internal dynamics of the coalition and the results of the elections influenced the decision making inside the majority, leading to a overpower by the Five Star Movement on Lega. The signature of the MoU is pivotal example of this dynamics, as it was famously supported by Five Stars and opposed by Lega.

The situation drastically changed in May 2019, when the results of the 2019 European Elections were published: Lega won the election with 34.3% of preferences, Democratic Party reached the second spot with 22.7% and the Five Star Movement got the third place with 17.1% (Il Sole 24 Ore, 2019). Since this vote, the dynamics inside the government shifted: stronger from the result of the elections, Lega's ambitions in the coalition intensified and the party worked to gain more influence on the action of the government. In August, the situation reached a point of rupture: during the vote on TAV, the 8th of August, the Five Star and Lega voted in contrast to each other, and Lega's Leader Matteo Salvini publicly expressed its party's desire to retire from the majority and to call for new elections, given the impossibility of dialogue with its counterpart, calling for the necessity to give a voice to the electors. The day after, Salvini presented a motion of no confidence, which was then retired (Giacobini, 2019). Despite the retirement of the motion, the crisis was already opened: a fracture of the majority had strongly emerged, and both the parties were no longer willing to cooperate; in fact, the 20th of August, Premier Conte resigned. After two rounds of consultations with political elites, instead of calling for new elections, Sergio Mattarella, the President of the Republic, recalled Conte to ask him to lead a new government with a different coalition. Hence, the 5th of September, the

Premier Conte inaugurates the Conte II government, the second of the XVIII legislature. The Conte II government was supported by the Five Star Movement, the Democratic Party, and the left-wing short-lived Liberi and Uguali party (LeU); to those it is important to add the later support of newly born Italia Viva party (IV), originated after the exit from the PD of Matteo Renzi, the founder of IV.

The Conte II government represented a combination between the old and the new: on the one hand, the populist and China-friendly Five Star movement and the left wing and Atlantic Democratic Party adopted a more conciliatory approach. The narrative of the new government was in fact built on the necessity to continue to consider the United States as Italy's main ally, but at the same time keeping attention over the increasing role of China and maintaining a friendly relation with Beijing in the global arena: in this perspective, the Conte II government aimed at reaching the status of a potential bridge linking Washington and Beijing (Maecchi, 2021). However, on China, PD shown a strong rejection on the signature of the Memorandum: new PD Minister of European Affairs of the time, Vincenzo Amendola, stated that *"if we were in government, the Memorandum with China would never have been signed."* (Amendola in Soldi, 2020). At the same time instead, an article posted by Xinhua shared optimism for the new Conte II government, stating that the Italian ties with China would have remained a priority for the new executive (Xinhua, 2019). Though, according to Italian analyst Andornino, the situation proved differently: in fact, according to him *"a sharp reduction in positive stances can be noticed during the Conte II government"* (Andornino, 2023b, p.150). As a matter of fact, some important elements of change were registered in the Conte II: since September 2019, the Conte government started to make use of the so called "Golden Power", at the time, this power permitted to the executive to impose a *de facto* limit to block the foreign acquisition of Italian strategic tools by foreign subjects. During this time, the executive vetoed a contract between Fastweb and Huawei and imposed a series of specific requirements on another agreement between Fastweb and Zte (Paba and Parolini, 2021). Later, in 2020, Italy approved a Decree Law by the Council of Ministers with the aim to extend the fields of the Golden Power in 2020 to finance, insurance, energy and food safety (Il Sole 24 Ore, 2020). The decision to use the Golden Power in Italy and the following enlargement of the latter did not represent an isolated case; instead, it reflected the US ban of Huawei and Zte under Trump's administration. Accordingly, US allies had been informed of the alleged security risks associated with the use of Chinese 5G infrastructure; since then, also the European Commission and the European Network and Information Security Agency had underlined the security risks of using a single non-EU supplier of 5G equipment. Consequently, countries as United Kingdom, Japan and Australia banned the companies from their states, and EU countries such Germany and France increased the level of scrutiny (Paba & Parolini, 2021).

These occurrences signified the beginning of a serious policy shift in Italy towards China, caused both by internal political equilibria and external reasons: in the specific, according to some authors the major drivers were the economic and commercial crisis, the issue of human rights and the spread of the pandemic (Paba & Parolini, 2021). At the same time, Covid-19 was maybe one of the few moments in which the Memorandum proved to be effective: the timely support in personnel and medical equipment in the early weeks of the Covid-19 pandemic provided by China to Italy made analyst think about a strong relation between the Chinese aids and the special status gained through the Memorandum (Andornino, 2023b). Actually, at this time, China was capable of providing what EU was still not able to offer at the time, and this impacted positively the perception of Italians towards China (Andornino, 2023b).

After a period of continuous frictions in the majority, the 13th of January 2021, the second crisis for Conte government begun. Bigger disagreements in the majority were on the MES and the statute of Recovery Fund. A discussion on the approval of the European Recovery Plan triggered the exit of Renzi's Italia Viva from the governing majority and the subsequent resignation of IV Ministers Teresa Bellanova and Elena Bonetti. After the crisis, Premier Conte tried to negotiate a new majority with unaligned senators, but this maneuver failed, opening for the resignation of the government. Two alternatives were on the table, creating a new government with the pre-existent majority or calling for new elections (Lauro, 2021).

In conclusion, Conte I and Conte II governments have shown a certain degree of similarity and difference at the same time. On the one hand, at the beginning, the line of the Five Star Movement was maintained by increasing relations with China, despite Democratic Party's disapproval. However, with the spread of the Pandemic, the framework started to change: Italy was one of the most hit countries by the virus and the government started to adopt a more careful approach, especially through the use of the first version of the Golden Power. Next subsection will then be dedicated to the analysis of the Mario Draghi's government, and the Italo-Chinese relations under his technical government.

3.2.2 Draghi Government: technical realignments and Golden Power

When the Conte II government crisis opened, Italy faced a crucial choice: call for new elections or form an alternative government. The President of the Italian Republic Sergio Mattarella, who is in charge of these decisions according to the Constitution, opted for the latter, inviting Mario Draghi,

the former governor of the Banca d'Italia and former the President of the European Central Bank to lead a new technical government. Draghi, who was already an influential figure given his European credentials and economic expertise, accepted and took office officially in February 2021 with the support of all the major political parties but Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia, opening a new phase for Italian politics. His mandate was in fact clear: navigate Italy out of the economic crisis generated by the pandemic and reorienting the country within the contest of the European and Atlantic affairs (Lauro, 2023). Therefore, this sub-chapter will analyze the Italo-Chinese relations during the Draghi Government in Italy.

Since the beginning, Draghi's technical government represented a clear shift from the former: the country annulled the distance with traditional allies, such as the EU and the NATO members, reinforcing the Europeanist and Atlantic orientations. At the same time, Draghi's foreign policy witnessed a realignment concerning China and Russia, states which have had importance during Conte's administrations (Meacci, 2021). These intentions were not secret, as Draghi expressed them in his first speech at the Senate, stating that his government will be "*in line with Italy's historical anchors: European Union, NATO and the United Nations*" (Draghi in Gragnani, 2021). As a matter of fact, some articles express the fact that Draghi's government was able to freeze the Memorandum, applying a critical screening of the relations between Rome and Beijing (Amaro, 2023).

On the relations with China, Draghi's executive was extremely determinant due to the series of decisive policies aimed at limiting the Chinese influence in strategic Italian sectors. The strong use of the Golden Power regulation, reinforced after the amendment of the Conte II granting the government the right to veto foreign investments on national security and strategic grounds, was one of these. In fact, under Draghi, Italy blocked several Chinese investments, including the veto on the attempt to Huawei to expand its 5G network in Italy and a number of acquisitions by Chinese firms in the sectors of telecommunications, semiconductors and automotive (Gazzola, 2021): an example was the veto on the acquisition of the LPE S.p.a, an Italian semiconductor company that was not acquired by Shenzhen Investment Holdings due to concerns over technological sovereignty on semiconductors (Gragnani, 2021). Later, the Italian government vetoed the acquisition of Verisem by Syngenta, which is owned by state-owned ChemChina; similarly, Palazzo Chigi took steps to narrow the scope of Huawei and Zte in the area of 5G (Cuscito, 2022). These policies were all aimed to avoid the transfer of know-how to China in critical domains, to escape dependence and to concretely demonstrate to Washington Italy's will to realign with western allies and to contain Beijing's technological rise (Cuscito, 2022). Thus, this national political tendency was the result of the broader European and

Atlantic trend towards a greater scrutiny of foreign investments, especially in the critical sectors (Fonte & Cao, 2021), and a response to the growing influence of the Chinese state-backed industries.

At the same time, it is also necessary to take into account the global scenario of the time. Draghi's government coincided in fact with the ending of the pandemic and the beginning of the war in Ukraine: in this scenario, Italy's policies became increasingly aligned with EU and NATO (Andornino, 2023a). In this sense, the Italian approach to China was also influenced by specific concerns framing Beijing as a competitor rather than a partner in Italy's eyes: these included Chinese perceived responsibility for the spread of the pandemic, the lack of prompt information sharing on the matter, the repression of minorities in China, the crackdown of Hong Kong's autonomy and lastly, the lack of condemnation on Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Andornino, 2023). From these aspects, the difference in values and the opposing political global view between Rome and Beijing became even more evident. Consequently, Draghi's policies represented a significant cooling of the enthusiasms of the Italo-Chinese relations at the time of the signature of the MoU. In fact, Draghi's attitude revealed more cautious and attentive on European and Atlanticism concerns (Manca, 2023a). On the Memorandum, at the press conference during the G7 in Cornwall in 2021, the Italian Prime Minister publicly stated his intention to "*examine the document with care*" (Draghi in Rai News, 2021), implying the willingness of the government to reopen the discussion on the manners and the participation of Italy in the BRI initiative. The will is also caused by "*the ways it (China) uses, including with coercive detentions. It is an autocracy that does not adhere to multilateral rules, does not share the same worldview as democracies*" (Draghi in Rai News, 2021), expressing the clear difference in values and believes of the two societies.

Despite its initial parliamentary strength, in July 2022, a new government crisis occurred in Italy: on the day of the vote of the *Decreto Aiuti*, the Five Star Movement abstained: this led to a series of events that convinced some parties, as Conte's Five Star Movement, Salvini's Lega and Berlusconi's Forza Italia to organize and to subsequently not attend the vote of no confidence on Draghi. Consequently, the lack of a strong parliamentary majority led Draghi to resign on the 21st of July. Since then, the President of the Republic Mattarella had no other choice than to call for early-elections to be held on September 2022 (Cecili, 2023).

Different Italian newspapers have defined the Draghi government's crisis bizarre and complex at the same time, given the concomitances of different factors and the rapidity of the facts (Il Post, 2022). Draghi government has lasted for a year and a half, but has it truly been the right solution to the crisis

that Italy was living at that time? Considering the evolution and the consequences of the political crisis, the technical government may not have been the right solution to the numerous problems Italy was facing; however, it is necessary to recognize the huge contribution of Draghi executive in the adjustment of the Italo-Chinese relations. Through the use of the Golden Power and the reprise of the European-Atlantic approach, Draghi was capable of bringing back Italy on the traditional allies 'side and fixing the stigma of Italy as the "*weak link of the chain of the G7*" (Cooper in Bechis, 2021). The Draghi era contributed also to opening the way to today's political scenario, envisaging the empowerment of Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia, subject of the analysis of the next sub-section.

3.2.3 Meloni Government: the withdrawal from the Memorandum

This final sub-section is aimed at describing the Italo-Chinese relations during Giorgia Meloni's government, limiting the analysis until December 2023. The contemporary positions of the Premier will be later treated in the next chapter about the present and the future of Italy-China partnerships; the analysis in this sub-section is instead focused on Meloni's government actions until the decision to conclude the MoU. For this reason, the analysis steams from September 2022 to December 2023, the final deadline to renovate the agreement. In this sense, the question to be answered is whether the seizure of power in Italy of a right-wing coalition headed by Fratelli d'Italia party truly represented a new era for Italy and its relationship with China or not.

In September 2022, Italy organized new elections: these were won by Meloni's party Fratelli d'Italia, with the 26% of votes; second place for the Democratic Party with 19% of the preferences and third to the Five Star Movement with 15.6%. In this context, the right-wing parties were capable of creating a new government supported by the coalition of Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia, Salvini's Lega and Tajani's Forza Italia, appointing Giorgia Meloni as the new Italian Prime Minister (La Repubblica, 2022).

Since the times of the signature, Meloni had openly opposed the MoU and the general tendency of increasing the political ties with Beijing. During the electoral campaign for the 2022 election, Meloni repeated multiple times how the MoU represented a huge error of the Conte government; at the same time, she clearly stated her intention to stop the expansion of Chinese interests in Italy. It is also interesting to acknowledge that historically, Meloni's position on China has never shifted: since her first political appointment as Italy's Youth Minister in 2008, under Berlusconi IV government, she had always been critical against the Chinese Communist Party, promoting also the boycotting of Beijing 2008 Olympics (Malinconci, 2023). Therefore, as during Meloni administration the executive

had to decide on the renovation of the MoU, the Prime Minister position was far from obscure: however, it is interesting to analyze the approach of Meloni's government until the formal decision in December 2023.

As a matter of fact, since the beginning, Meloni government kept Draghi's line as a basis for its China politics. On the one hand, the Prime Minister reaffirmed the Italian will to align with Atlantic allies and values; on the other side, Meloni rendered the China dossier a point of strengthened agreement within Atlantic and European allies, shifting the previous Italian position towards a more traditional one (Gallelli in Nelli Feroci & Goretti, 2024). Therefore, while analyzing the relationship between Italy and China under Meloni government, it is necessary to mention some specific initiatives: the Meloni-Xi meeting in November 2022, the Meloni-Biden meeting in March 2023, the visit of Tajani, Italian Vice-Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs in China in September 2023 and the Meloni-Li meeting in September 2023.

In this sense, it is important to start the analysis by mentioning the first mission abroad of the newly elected Prime Minister: it was on November 2022 in Brussels. On the occasion, Meloni met with the President of the European Parliament Roberta Metsola, the President of the European Commission Ursula Von der Leyen and the President of the European Council Charles Michel. In the press moment, she argued that this choice was not by hazard, but "*Italy wanted to obviously participate, collaborate and defend its national interest in the framework of the EU, to find solutions on the biggest challenges of today*", denoting it as clear political choice (Rappresentanza d'Italia presso l'Unione Europea, 2022).

Later, on the same month, Prime Minister Meloni participated to her first global multilateral exercise: the G20 in Indonesia. During this event, the Italian Premier had the opportunity to meet with Chinese President Xi Jinping for a bilateral session: the discussion focused on the mutual economic interests of promoting the increasing Italian exports to China, but also on the will of easing the EU-China relations and on the question of human rights and global situation (Governo Italiano, 2022). On her side, Meloni additionally expressed disagreement over the strengthening of the logic of the blocs and promoted the necessity of dialogue and solidarity despite differences (Xinhua, 2022). The bilateral was therefore a positive event, aimed at introducing the new Italian leadership and creating a first discussion floor with the Chinese counterpart.

Another extremely important moment for the Italo-Chinese relations under the Meloni government was embodied by the summit held in Washington in March 2023 between the Italian Prime Minister and US President Joe Biden. In this bilateral, Meloni reaffirmed the Italian alignment with the western allies, recalling the longlisting friendship between Rome and Washington. During the discussion, China was also mentioned, since the two countries agreed to increase their cooperation on the challenges coming from Beijing: in this sense, Biden mentioned the MoU. Later, Meloni's Minister of Defense Crosetto declared that the signature of the MoU was a "infamous choice", stating that today's issue was not focused on whether to step away from the MoU or not but how: China is in fact still an economic partner and Italy should retire from the agreement without jeopardizing its relations with Beijing (Verderami, 2023). Additionally, at NATO Summit in Vilnius, in July 2023, an important event where support of Ukraine, accession of Finland and Sweden treated, and Indo-Pacific allies like Australia, South Korea and Japan were invited, Meloni stated that "*we have as Italy always done our part, we will continue to do our part [in NATO]*" (Meloni in Governo Italiano, 2023a). These words reflect the strong determination and commitment of the Italian executive to the alliance, showing a renewed interest to be an active subject in it.

Another important moment during the first year of Meloni's government was the visit of Antonio Tajani, Italian Vice-Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs in China in September 2023. The visit was aimed at conversing on a series of topic with Chinese officials: with the Chinese Minister for Commerce Wang Wentao, the discussion focused on the strengthening of the economic partnerships between Rome and Beijing; while with the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi, the exchange included topics of global politics and security (Ambasciata d'Italia a Pechino, 2023a). Most importantly to this thesis, during the visit, the Minister has declared the friendship between Italy and China to be fund on the 2004 Strategic Partnership, without directly mentioning the BRI MoU. As a matter of fact, according to the Minister, the 2004 Plan is much more influencing than the 2019 Memorandum in the field of the Italo-Chinese relations (Gallelli in Nelli Feroci & Goretti, 2024). Interestingly, according to the Italian press, the visit of Tajani in Beijing was in reality instrumental to analyze the Chinese perspective on the Italian breaking of the MoU: with this view, the visit of Tajani prepared both Italy and China to the official conclusion of the Italian membership in the BRI (Maselli, 2023; Modolo, 2023). On this line, some days later, Prime Minster Meloni took part to the 2023 G20 in India: for the event, the Italian PM had the opportunity also to arrange a bilateral with the Chinese Prime Minister Li Qiang: at this venue, the official report by the Italian government mentions the existence of a strong friendship based on the 2004 Global Strategic Partnership, the same mentioned by Tajani, but there is again not clear indication of the MoU (Governo Italiano,

2023b). Moreover, at the press conference of the event, Meloni stated: “*There are European nations which in recent years have not been part of the Belt and Road but have been able to forge more favorable relations (with China) than we have sometimes managed*” (Meloni in Zampano, 2023), expressing the general dissatisfaction of the government towards the partnership. Therefore, according to some scholars, both in these situations, the Italian officials tried to enact in a direct dialogue between Chinese counterparts to reinsure them about the possibility not to renovate the MoU. In fact, the message of these meetings was to denote that the stepping back from the MoU was not to be intended as a hostile act towards Beijing; instead, it represented a manner to better focus on the real priorities of 2004 Strategic Partnership. At the same time, the message has also reached the Chinese Ambassador in Italy, who in an interview clarified that deepening of the 2004 Partnership, would maintain in Italy a “*spirit of the silk road*” (Casanova, 2023).

In synthesis, at the end of the year, in December 2023, Rome sent a note to Beijing to express the will of the Italian government not to renovate the agreement. Through this act, Italy stepped out from the Belt and Road Initiative. This came as no surprise: from the analysis of the different meetings and events of the Meloni executive, a gradual shift of discussion from the MoU to the 2004 Strategic Partnership was evident. The Italian PM therefore operated a clear rupture with her predecessors, imposing Italy as a committed member of the western alliance, fostering state’s participation into the NATO and in the European project. The political ambition of Meloni was therefore the one to expand Italy’s reliability inside the global community, opening form more political exchange with allies, but not shutting the door to China. Therefore, this decision does not signify the end of Italo-Chinese relation; instead, it represents the opening of a new moment of the Italo-Chinese affairs, with the ambition to negotiate a fair after-MoU relation with Beijing.

Therefore, at the end, this sub-chapter explained one of the major motivations of the failure of the MoU in Italy: the Italian politics. As already stated, the MoU was signed in a moment of particular turmoil in the Italian national political area, which was proved by the three successive governmental crises in the three succeeding years. The BRI never fully took off also due to this instability (Ranadli, 2023) Since the first Conte governments, frictions inside the majority were clear; under Draghi, the rupture revealed even more evident, with the European reborn enthusiasm; finally, with Meloni, NATO and American allies became pivotal, bringing Rome to the fatidic decision of the rupture. At the end, the volatility of the Italian domestic situation certainty did not play positively for the Italian enthusiasm to the project but had an important influence on the Chinese side (Malinconni, 2023). In fact, Italy’s political instability could have perplexed Chinese officials on the uncertainty of the

continuity of investment in the country, preferring other targets (Ghiretti in Del Vecchio, 2023). In conclusion, the Italian political instability of the time was not optimal for the continuation of the MoU, leading both to change in discussion and bringing instability to the counterpart: nevertheless, citing Malinconi for the last time “*Two things are certain in life: death and Italian political instability*” (Malinconi, 2023).

Section 3.3

The Economic (un)profitability of the Memorandum

In the study of the assessment of the termination of the Memorandum of Understanding between Italy and China, it is necessary to put attention on the economic factors of the agreement. Given the great financial premises in the relations of the two countries and the optimistic trade and investment expectative by the Memorandum, it is therefore necessary to discuss the outputs of these five years of partnerships. Arguably, despite the relative short period under discussion, from 2019 to 2023, the economic relations between Rome and Beijing have considerably shifted towards a new equilibrium. It is possible hence to claim that the current situation of the Italo-Chinese relations has been shaped by both the will of the governments and the influence of external factors, as the Covid-19 crisis and the conflict in Ukraine.

This section is therefore focused on assessing the economic significance of the MoU signature, analyzing the potential and the concrete consequences of the partnership to the Italo-Chinese relations. This will be done through the analysis of the trade relations between Italy and China, the study of the advancement of the Chinese investments in Italy and, finally, the exam on the financial cooperation between the two countries under the Memorandum. All these topics were mentioned in the MoU signed by Italy and China, with the aim to create more cooperation and coordination in these Sectors. In the specific, Art 3.1 and Art.4 1-2 of the MoU write:

Art.3.1 “The Parties will work towards expanding two-way investment and trade flow, industrial cooperation as well as cooperation in third country markets, exploring ways to promote substantive mutually beneficial cooperation. The Parties reaffirm their shared commitment to free and open trade and investment, to counter excessive macroeconomic imbalances and to oppose unilateralism and protectionism. In the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, they will promote transparent, non-discriminatory, free and open trade and industrial cooperation, an open procurement, level

playing field and respect for intellectual property rights. They will explore closer and mutually beneficial collaboration and partnerships, which include advancing North- South, South-South and triangular cooperation”. (MoU, 2019).

Art. 4.1-2. “The Parties will strengthen the bilateral communication and coordination on fiscal, financial and structural reform policies in order to create a favorable environment for economic and financial cooperation, also through the establishment of the Italy-China Finance Dialogue between the Ministry of Economy and Finance of the Italian Republic and the Ministry of Finance of the People’s Republic of China. The Parties will encourage the partnerships between the respective financial institutions to jointly support investment and financing cooperation, at bilateral and multilateral level and towards the third Countries, under the framework of Belt and Road Initiative”. (MoU, 2019)

To this aim, the assessment will conclude on the alleged effectiveness of the Memorandum, answering the question whether the agreement can be considered profitable or not.

3.3.1 Impacts on trade partnerships

The study will be now focused on the effort to describe the trade relations between Rome and Beijing before and during the period of the Italian membership in the BRI, with the aim to assess whether the signature represented or not a real economically profitable tool. With the same aim, the study will then compare these data with those of major European countries, to get a view also on the EU framework on the topic.

At first, as already stated in the last chapter, Rome entered the Belt and Road Initiative in a peculiar period of its economic history: the country was in need of expanding its national exports with the aim to navigate its economy out of the crisis. At the time, the economic stagnation caused by 2008 global Financial Crisis and 2011 Euro Crisis made China appear as an optimal partner for Italy, bringing a new player to the game and allowing Beijing to revitalize the Italian economy and major sea trade infrastructures. Therefore, following the Memorandum, Italy and China agreed to cooperate in creating an economic environment of free and open trade where protectionism would be limited, and excessive macroeconomic imbalances resolved, with the ultimate goal of rebalancing Italy’s trade deficit (The Government of Italy, 2019). However, was it truly the case?

As a first factor it is important to report that, since the signature, trade between Italy and China increased yearly, reaching a top value of 74 billion euros in 2022 (MAECI, 2024c). More in depth, Italian exports to China were totaling 13.4 billion euros in 2019 and successively picked at a value of 16.4 billions in 2022. At the same time, in 2019, Beijing was exporting in Italy for a value of 31.6 billion euros; this grew exponentially until 2022, reaching the 57.8 billion euros. In the following year, the first under the Meloni government, Italian exports further increased up to 19.1 billions, while the Chinese ones decreased to 45.5 billions (about -17.8%) (MAECI, 2024c). Lastly, data until August 2024 show a drastic change of the situation: Italy's export decreased of -24.7%, compared to the same period in 2023, while China seems to register a positive trend of +2% (MAECI, 2024c). From this picture, it is possible to register an important variation in the levels of exports and imports by both countries: this can be linked with the signature of the pact, the government change in Italy and the general global situation.

Having analyzed the general commercial situation, it is now important to discuss the balance of the Italo-Chinese trade: the abovementioned situation reinforces the already high Italian trade deficit, which has been persistent since the beginning of contemporary Italo-Chinese trade relations. Conscious of the situation, one of the main objectives of the MoU was exactly to rebalance this trade relationship; however, empirical data show that the situation has not changed. In fact, Italy entered BRI in 2019 with a trade deficit with China of around -18.6 billion euro: this data increasingly amplified until 2021, with a value of -22.9 billion euros, peaking in 2022 with -41.45 billion euros. In 2023, with the change of government in Italy, the situation improved, and the trend started to decrease until -28.41 billion euros; in 2024, available data until the month of August show a balance of -22.43 billion euros (MAECI, 2024c).

TRADE WITH CHINA (millions of euros)	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	Ja-Au 23	Ja-Au 24
Total Trade	41,949	44,016	44,632	45,106	54,234	74,287	66,76	45,678	42,972
% Change (YoY)	9.2%	4.9%	1.4%	1.1%	20.2%	37.0%	-10.1%		-5,90%
Exports from Italy	13,489	13,127	12,969	12,851	15,657	16,42	19,172	13,644	10,268
% Change (YoY)	22.0%	-2.7%	-1.2%	-0.9%	21.8%	4.9%	16.8%		-24,70%
Imports to Italy	28,46	30,889	31,663	32,256	38,577	57,868	47,589	32,033	32,704
% Change (YoY)	4.1%	8.5%	2.5%	1.9%	19.6%	50.0%	-17.8%	2.1%	2,10%
Balance (Exports - Imports)	-14,972	-17,762	-18,693	-19,405	-22,92	-41,448	-28,417	-18,389	-22,435

Figure 1 (MAECI, 2024c)

As a consequence of this persistent negative balance of trade, the Italian market has been flooded

with Chinese products, which today represent up to 9 percent of Italy's total imports. At the same time, Rome does not enjoy the same degree of solidity of market with China, as Beijing is just the tenth destination for Italian exports, totaling less than 3 percent of its total exports (Zeneli, 2023).

From this first analysis, it is therefore possible to conclude that after the signature, on the one hand, Italo-Chinese trade has generally increased reaching a pick in 2022. More in depth, Italian exports to China have registered just a modest absolute growth (around 5.5 billion euros) compared to the Chinese (16 billions euros); yet, in relative terms, in the timespan 2019-2023, Italy's exports in China increased by 33.4%, while Chinese exports in Italy have grown of 33.5%. Despite this growth, Rome's share into the Chinese market has continued to be constant at around 1.1% since 2020, registering a low to around 1% in 2022. This was partially given by the Covid-19 Pandemic, and the consequent Chinese Zero-Covid policy, which would have the effect to create restriction from imports (Malinconi, 2023).

Despite the fact that Italy may not represent one of the pivotal trade partners for China in absolute terms, Rome nevertheless embodies an important trade partner in specific sectors. In this sense, it is important to share a light on the major areas of the Italo-Chinese trade: pharmaceuticals, textiles, machinery and chemicals (Italian Embassy in Beijing, 2023b). More interestingly, other data presented by Interesse show the shares of the Italian total exports per sector in China, showing a picture of the principal products and sectors of trade in the country (Interesse, 2024).

Main Products Exported from Italy to China in 2023		
Products Type	Value (US\$, Billion)	% of the Total Export to China
Pharmaceutical, chemical-medicinal, and botanical products	4.72	22.9
Textiles and clothing, leather, and accessories	4.35	21
Machinery and equipment n.e.c. (not elsewhere classified)	4.02	19.5
Substances and chemical Products	1.35	6.6
Vehicles	1.07	5.3

Figure 2 (Interesse, 2024)

At the same time, China itself represents a highly important trade partner for Italy, as Rome imports from the country almost 10% of its goods imports from abroad. China is an essential partner for Italy

for the sectors of computers, electrical equipment, textiles and chemicals, as well as machinery (Interesse, 2024).

Main Products Imported from China to Italy in 2023		
Products Type	Value (US\$, Billion)	% of the Total Export to Italy
Computers, electronic and optical devices	8.49	16.6
Electrical equipment	6.98	13.6
Textiles and clothing, leather, and accessories	6.71	13.1
Substances and chemical products	6.43	12.6
Machinery and equipment n.e.c. (not elsewhere classified)	6.05	11.8

Figure 3 (Interesse, 2024)

Having measured the effective increase of trade between Italy and China in the merit of the BRI, it is now necessary to evaluate this trend in comparison with other European economies. This analysis is ruled with the aim to assess the effective economic value of the MoU, with the question of understanding whether the signature really led to an increase in the bilateral economic exchanges with Italy, in respect to the European counterparts. To structure this study, it is firstly necessary to compare Rome with countries of its economic leverage: therefore, the study will be focused mainly on the biggest economies of the EU per total GDP, in order: Germany, France, Italy, Spain and the Netherlands (Statista, 2023).

On the imports side, the Netherlands (116.9 billion euros), Germany (94.5 billion euros) and Italy (47.5 billions euro) are the first three countries importing the most goods from China in 2023; instead, looking at the export side, Germany (97.3 billion euros), France (25 billion euros) and Netherlands (22.3 billion euros) represent the three biggest exporters of their national products to China; Italy is not in this classification, but it ranks fourth, with a total of 19.1 billion euros. From this first part of the analysis, it is therefore possible to draw some initial statements regarding Italy's trade performance compared to other major EU countries. It is easy to spot the fact that, on the import section, Italy acquires fewer goods from China than some other European counterparts; however, on the export section, the situation reveals more unbalanced, as in comparison to other EU main economies, Italian exports to China are largely lagged behind (Eurostat, 2024).

These data, completed with the fact that Italy was at the time the only country to sign a Memorandum of Understanding with China under the Belt and Road Initiative, may be able to call into question the real value of the economic engagement of the Memorandum. Data suggest that major EU states were able to maintain stronger trade relations with China, particularly on the export front. Moreover, at the European level, Italo-Chinese trade performance remains modest compared to other EU states. At first glance, contrary to expectations, it appears that Italy has not gained any economic preferential status, particularly when compared to non-BRI European states' data. In fact, in 2023, Italy presented a trade deficit of around -28 billion euros, while France detained a value of -17 billion euros and Germany -4 billion euros (Eurostat, 2024). This suggests that the BRI MoU has not given Italy a distinct trade advantage over other European states.

In conclusion, while the BRI MoU led to a modest increase of Italo-Chinese trade, the benefit for Italy in this domain remains strongly ambiguous. Although Italian exports grew during this period, the country's trade deficit with China increased significantly. Additionally, despite hopes that Italy would gain a privileged position within China's trade allies, the data suggest that this goal did not materialize: this evidence comes especially in light of the fact that some countries like Germany and France were capable to maintain profitable trade relation with China even without the signature of any MoU. Therefore, despite 2019-2023 external shifts, it is possible to conclude that Italo-Chinese MoU's ambitions on a stronger and more balanced trade have not been achieved. Next sub-section will instead analyze this topic under the point of view of investments.

3.3.2 Consequences on investments

The BRI MoU between Italy and China was drafted to ease economic partnerships between Rome and Beijing: apart from trade, another relevant field of potential cooperation were investments. As a matter of fact, the signed text and the corner agreements were designed on the will to strengthen the networks between the two countries with the aim to increase the reciprocal foreign investments in the two states and to remove eventual breakdowns for cooperation. In this sense, since the country aimed to leverage its geographical position in the Mediterranean to attract Foreign Direct Investments, Italy took the opportunity, particularly in key strategic sectors such as infrastructure, technology and energy. Considering the good status of Chinese investments in Italy beforehand 2019, the country promoted the signature of the MoU as a tool to improve this tendency, which was beneficial both for citizens and the state. This sub-chapter is therefore aimed to briefly discuss the topic of Chinese

investments in Italy, assessing whether the MoU represented an efficient tool in intensifying this relation.

Historically, Chinese investments in Italy are not new: Beijing started to be actively present in the country since the Eurozone Crisis. During this period, Rome's economy was stagnant and in need of foreign investments to boost its national finances. Consequently, given the national necessities, Italy became an important recipient of Chinese investments in different domains, such as on energy, transport, technology, and finance. Some of the most important Chinese efforts to be mentioned in this sense were the investment in 2014 by China's State Grid to acquire 35% stake in the energy grid company CDP Reti (Percy, 2019) and 2015 from ChemChina acquiring 16.89% of Pirelli, the fifth most important tire makes in the world (Zeneli, 2023). As a consequence of these and further acquisitions, in 2015, Italy overtook France for cumulative Chinese FDI since 2000, showing Beijing's renewed interest towards Rome (Percy, 2019). Cumulatively, Chinese Investments in Italy since 2008 until 2020 totaled about 27 billion dollars (Zeneli, 2023).

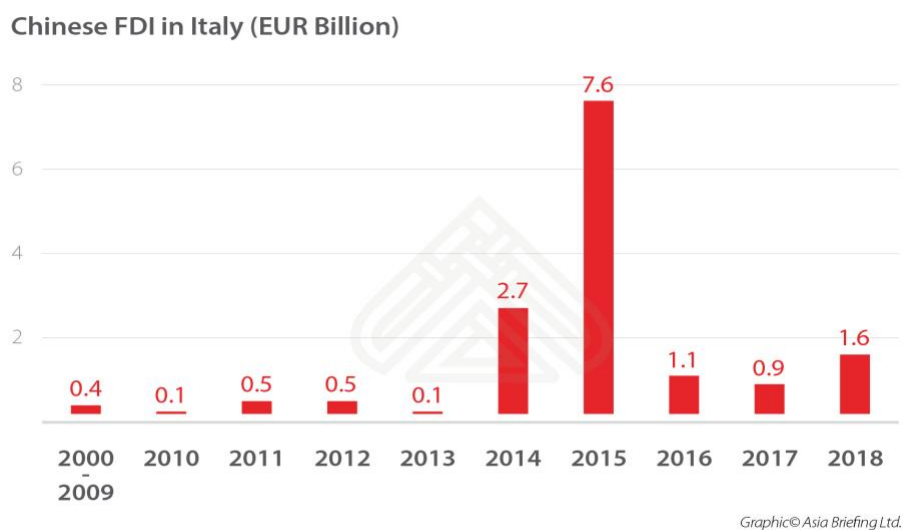


Figure 4 (Percy, 2019)

Therefore, it is possible to argue that in 2019, having seen the progress of Chinese FDI in the country, China seemed truly interested in continuing this trend in Italy: potential for new investments was available, as big port infrastructures of Trieste and Genova, and more in general, the economic momentum was encouraging. As a result of this tendencies, the MoU was signed (Nadalutti & Ruland, 2024).

Since 2019, the high expectations for a strengthened cooperation between Italy and China in the field of investments did not materialize: investments suddenly dropped for a series of political and external factors soon after the signature. Despite an encouraging 2019, when 650 million dollars were invested in Italy by China, 2021 witnessed a total of just 33 millions, a vertiginous fall of almost 610 millions in just two years. Consequently, in total, just 1.83 billion dollars were spent in Italy between 2019 and 2023: these figures are however not attributable exclusively to the Chinese will, but also by the global pandemic of Covid-19 and the change of policies introduced by the new Draghi government in Italy (Sacks, 2023; Manca, 2023). An important point is the one concerning the ports of Genova and Trieste, both of them increased their performance in 2019, to then come back to pre-MoU levels in 2023 (Zhang, 2024). Therefore, in general, despite the initial optimism, today it is not inadequate to state that Chinese investments in Italy have drastically reduced compared to the past. Additionally, it is also possible to argue that Chinese investments in Italy were limited due to Beijing's Made in China 2025: the policy aimed at increasing the competitiveness of Chinese firms in the field of high value-added industries. Therefore, in simple words, investments in Italy in that period were limited to mergers and acquisitions, highly restricted by national vetoes, shifting priorities and external factors (Casarini, 2023).

It was not just the value of the investments to have shrunk, but also the initiatives by Beijing in Italy: since the signature of the BRI MoU, China introduced in the country just three large investments. This number is significant: on the one hand in 2023, Chinese investments have generally dropped in Europe; in this sense, the situation in Italy is simply in line of this larger phenomenon (MERICS, 2023b). However, it is also necessary to acknowledge the particularly challenging historical moment and the shifting national priorities. Consequently, China chose to less focus on EU and to look elsewhere for new partners: despite so, Beijing treats EU states with different regards. As a matter of fact, compared to Italy's three projects since 2019, China has invested on thirteen projects in France, and fifteen projects in Germany: therefore, it can be admitted that "*Chinese investment in Italy lags behind its investments in Western and Northern European economies in terms of both the number of projects and the value of investments*" (Zhang, 2024). Agreeing with this position, according to Manca, Germany and France represent doubtlessly the current major recipients of Chinese FDIs in the EU area (Manca, 2023a); again, this data look extremely in contrast with the Italian ambitions towards the MoU.

More in general, while Chinese FDI in Europe has reduced since Covid-19 crisis, Beijing has reorganized its investment portfolio in member states. Despite the crisis, Germany and France were

capable to consistently attract significant Chinese investments: 2020 is an exemplar year, as Berlin and Paris received 1.7 billion and 1.6 billion euros respectively, while Rome 18 million euros only (Malhortha, 2024). This preference may result from at least three concomitant factors. The first is the limitedness of funds and the need to make a choice of priority: the long-established trade relations between Berlin and Beijing, German advanced industrial base, and French primacy in aviation energy production and luxury; these sectors and countries evidently signified a more critical position in China's eyes than those offered by Italy. Secondly, the already mentioned Covid crisis, which changed the direction of Chinese investments: in fact, after the pandemic, Beijing has shifted the allocation of its budgets, prioritizing domestic investments on its national economy and recovery instead of opening new financing for other countries. According to Magri, the key symbol of this tendency is the decrease in number of the so-called "*new investment projects*", registering a more selective and cautious approach (Magri in Amighini, 2021, p. 8). Thirdly, as already underlined in this chapter, the instability and the lack of confidence caused by the discontinuity of Italian political situation emerged as an important break of investments by Beijing, adding Draghi government's use of Golden Power to protect Italian critical sectors from external acquisitions. All these factors together have evidently created a non-optimal scenario for China to invest and trust in Italy.

3.3.3 Financial institutions cooperation

After having analyzed the bilateral trade and investment relations between Italy and China, it is also necessary to take into consideration the financial cooperation between the two countries, assessing the effectiveness of the document by analyzing whether the signature promoted the opening of new partnerships as stated.

To start, it is important to recall the fact that financial cooperation represents a basic element of the broader subject of economic collaboration: this in fact provides international firms with the essential tools to compete in foreign markets, guaranteeing cooperation between financial institutions and creating the platforms for discussion and exchange. In the framework of the Memorandum of Understanding, financial cooperation was a fundamental topic: article number four of the document in fact was addressing the creation of a favorable environment for financial cooperation between the actors, the creation of the Italo-China Finance Dialogue between the relative Ministries and the development of partnerships between the respective national finance institutions under the BRI's spirit (MoU, 2019).

Truth be said, financial cooperation between Italy and China originated already in the 80's: since then, biggest Italian financial agents, firstly Intesa San Paolo and then UniCredit, two of the most important Italian banks, entered in the Chinese market. This activity was contemporary to the beginning of the big Italian investments in the Asian country, and it was aimed at easing the accessing and increasing of the tools available to Italian businesses in China and strengthening the sector of the Italian banks abroad (Bilotta, 2021). Intesa San Paolo was particularly virtuous in negotiating with the Municipality of Qingdao for the creation of a Wealth Management Pilot Zone: consequently, the Italian bank became the first foreign financial institution to offer wealth management services in China (Casarini, 2023). Oppositely, Chinese financial institutions were latecomers in Italy: their major development in the country was witnessed in between 2013-2016. This timing however is not by hazard, as these years coincided with the major wave of Chinese investments in Italy, earlier mentioned in this chapter. Today, the two most important Chinese banks present in Italy are Bank of China (BoC) and the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC). However, it is important to acknowledge the absence in Italy of offices of China Development Bank and EXIM Bank: these two represent the financial institution coordinating the majority of BRI projects. Just, Cassa Depositi e Prestiti had signed with China Development Bank a Memorandum in 2014 to enhance cooperation between the two in the field of development: this demonstrates China's interest in investing in Italy, however, the lack of physical presence in the country strongly limits the realization of these intentions (Banca Depositi e Prestiti, 2014).

Mentioned in the MoU, it is also important to remark the inauguration of the Italy-China Finance Dialogue: the first one was held in July 2019 in Milan, with the signature of a Joint Declaration by the two governments, focused on cooperation on tax, financial and regulatory co-operation and support the development of green infrastructure and financial initiatives (Ministry of Finance of the People's Republic of China, 2019). Due to the Covid-19, the second Dialogue was organized virtually in November 2020: on the occasion, the two Ministries exchanged on the ongoing pandemic, macroeconomic policy coordination, global economic governance cooperation, as well as fiscal and financial cooperation (Ministry of Economy and Finance of Italy, 2020). Since then, no further meeting in the framework of the China-Italy Finance Dialogue has been registered.

Finally, according to the academia, the financial cooperation between Italy and China was not influenced by the Memorandum: it is true that some new partnerships were promoted, like the one between Intesa San Paolo and the city of Qingdao, but generally, the MoU cannot be considered a significant driver. Financial cooperation flourished in the period of Chinese investments in Italy, to

then reduce in the post signature phase: this was evident also from the interruption of the Financial Dialogues at the Ministerial level. According to Bilotta, the signing of the MoU does not seem to have brought any change from the previous situation: *“despite their highly political symbolism, the BRI-related MoUs in the field of financial cooperation have led to no groundbreaking development. They can only provide Italy–China financial cooperation with a (vague) direction, leaving unclear the question of whether, and how, that cooperation could be further advanced”* (Bilotta, 2021, p.18).

Therefore, in conclusion, under the financial point of view, Italo-China relations picked in pre-MoU period, injecting optimism and hope in the future of the relation between Rome and Beijing. However, the change of economic and political scenario, united to external factors and internal needs, stopped these positive trends producing a stagnation of the financial relations. In this specific case, the Memorandum was responsible for just a few corner initiatives, since the major number of partnerships had already been signed previously.

Finally, it is possible to conclude that the 2019 MoU between Italy and China had a limited and uneven impact on Italy. While trade volumes increased, the widening of the Italian trade deficit and the country’s underperformance relative to other EU countries continued, highlighting that the signature did not offer any significant advantage. On the investments, the expected wave of Chinese FDI’s did not concretize as previewed. Moreover, financial cooperation has not expressed its full potential, with key institution remaining at the corner of Italian markets. Thus, on the one hand, the MoU aimed at formalizing the direction of the Italo-Chinese partnership, while on the other side, questions about the profitability of the document grew: the document provided a framework for cooperation, but tangible economic effects in Italy have been limited.

In conclusion, in the timespan of 2019-2023, the MoU can be considered unprofitable for Italy under trade, investment and financial cooperation points of view. The major benefits from this relation were attributable to China: according to Malinconi, this was a *“symbolic and very visible effect of legitimization of Chinese global initiative”* (Malinconi, 2023).

Section 3.4

Exiting from the Memorandum

This last sub-chapter will be dedicated to the analysis of the Italian decision to retire from the BRI from a formal and operational point of view. The section will be describing the legal process and the formal discussion on the decision, focusing on the will of the two governments to maintain the negotiation the most veiled possible. Furthermore, the study will look at the reactions to the decision, considering both the point of view of Italian and Chinese officials. Finally, the focus will be shifted on some similar situations considering Chinese reactions to cases of states eluding from cooperation with Beijing, using these as a source to foresee potential Chinese retortions on Italy. Finally, the text will provide a conclusion, answering the question whether the Italo-Chinese divorce has been a peaceful example of diplomacy or not.

3.4.1 The Italian withdrawal from the BRI: not a dark horse

December 2023 represented a fundamental moment in the framework of the Italo-Chinese relations: this time embodied the deadline to express the will to exit from the agreement. According to the section VI of the document:

“This Memorandum of Understanding will remain valid for a period of five years and will be automatically extended for subsequent five-year periods and so forth unless terminated by either Party by giving the other Party a written notice at least three months in advance” (MoU, 2019).

The 3rd of December 2023, the Italian government has officially sent a note expressing the intention to withdraw from the Belt and Road Initiative and to conclude the agreement signed in 2019 by Conte I Government. In the note, Italy has also highlighted the purpose to relaunch the bilateral cooperation between the two countries on the basis of the Global Strategic Partnership signed in 2004, underlining the new opportunities of cooperation between the two.

In the preceding weeks, it emerged that Italy had tried to negotiate with China a modification of the terms of the agreement, with the aim to permit the termination of the agreement without any written note, switching instead to a termination for lack of explicit renewal. This modality has been refused by China, that preferred to maintain the agreement in the original form. Moreover, it is important to mention that the question has been resolved with a relative institutional silence: in fact, no official

communication was published on the issue. However, the reason for this preference is not difficult to grasp; on the one hand, the withdrawal of Italy from the BRI puts China inevitably into an uncomfortable situation, showing off the potential criticalities of its major project by watching the departure of one of its important European partners. In this sense, Beijing is aware that this situation could create an important precedent, possibly inspiring other states to do the same. On the other side, Italy has all the interest of continuing to have good relations with the world's second largest economy and to avoid to further jeopardize China's image (Galluzzo, 2023). Therefore, both Rome and Beijing, conscious of the significance of the decision, preferred to keep the negotiations strictly confidential to avoid any unnecessary redundancy. Importantly, during the G7 meeting in Japan, Meloni had mentioned the future debate in the parliament about the discussion on the renovation of the MoU; this however never took place, representing one of the major criticisms to the decision. Both states had interests to avoid a leakage with negative repercussions in terms of public relations for both the countries. Therefore, the communication on the issue was treated internally without any public show off on official channels or in the case of Italy, inside the parliament. In fact, the information was rendered public only a few days later, on an article of *Corriere della Sera* (Casanova, 2024a). Therefore, both Rome and Beijing, conscious of the significance of the decision, preferred to keep the negotiations strictly confidential.

Moreover, given the robust conviction of Meloni to withdraw from the agreement, it is important to understand the reasons of the relative delay of the decision until a few weeks before the final deadline. Interestingly, according to Insisa, there are three main reasons for this timing. First, according to the scholar, Rome wanted to avoid any sort of consequence or negative reaction by China: therefore, the two governments used all the time at their disposal to engage in a deep dialogue to agree on a consensual post-BRI strategy, permitting to relaunch the relations despite the withdrawal. Secondly, Italy needed time to handle domestic opposition: a part of the Italian society had greatly benefitted from the MoU, especially industrials, academia and cultural elements (Insisa, 2023). Lastly, the third reason is the will not to jeopardize the organization of the Third Belt and Road Forum in October: Rome did not want to embarrass China's initiative in a time of celebration of the latter. Therefore, Rome communicated the ending of the MoU in a moment which was distant in time from the Forum to avoid any further damaging of Chinese image (Insisa, 2023). Therefore, in general, the approach of the Italian government can be defined cautious: this tactic consisted in not treating the MoU in the bigger scheme of the Italian foreign policy but maintaining a strong distinction between the national BRI question and the general discussions on China with EU and NATO allies. In this sense, Meloni has been capable to maintain a direct dialogue with Beijing before and during the time of the decision to leave the MoU, with the aim to reassure China on the real nature of the withdrawal: not a hostile

decision, but a reshaping of the relation based on previous accords aimed at reaching mutually beneficial relations with China (Casanova, 2023).

Therefore, in conclusion, it is possible to state that the Italian decision to step back from the MoU did not represent a dark horse. In fact, Meloni's statements both during the opposition and governmental life had clearly stated the intention of the leader of Fratelli d'Italia. Once at government, Meloni worked to promote a soft and agreed withdrawal, based not on the resentment of the parties but clearly stating her position to the counterparts, acting also in an attentive and reassuring tone on China, promising a future engagement out of the MoU. The challenge of current Meloni's government is now to relaunch the cooperation coherently to the promises done in the past. Therefore, while it is undeniable to acknowledge the everlasting will of Meloni to sort from the agreement, it is also important to recognize a certain surprise at the moment of the decision: this comes not due to the intention, but more because of the relative lack of public discussion on the matter.

In conclusion, Meloni's decision cannot be considered a dark horse *per se*, but for the strategy that the parties have used to keep the question the more hidden possible. The next sub-chapter will treat the reactions to Meloni decisions, both in Italy and abroad.

3.4.2 From Rome to Beijing: national perspectives on the withdrawal

The decision to exit from the MoU represents an important shift of Italian foreign policy, now more focused on the European and Atlantic allies. This sub-chapter is therefore aimed at analyzing the comments of national officials about this choice, and the consequences of this important political move both in Italy and in China. Meloni's government aim was to avoid any resentment between Rome and Beijing, but was this truly the case?

Once the news of Meloni's decision to exit from the agreement came out public, one of the first reactions was the one of Michele Geraci, the former undersecretary of State at the Italian Ministry of Economic Development under Conte I Government. Geraci was in fact one of the main promoters of the signature of the MoU, highlighting the economic benefits that the partnership would have potentially brought. In December 2023, Geraci posted a tweet (now X), criticizing the governmental decision: in his message he stated that "*Meloni's decision to exit the Silk Road without even explaining her reasons is a gesture against the interests of Italy, our businesses and our economy*" (Geraci, 2023), criticizing the strong negative economic impact of the decision on the Italian finances. On the governmental side, Foreign Affairs Minister and Vice-Premier Antonio Tajani intervened on the matter pointing out that "*the Silk Road is not our priority, we have seen that the Silk Road has not*

produced the hoped-for effects, on the contrary. Those who are not part of the Silk Road route have had better results” (Tajani in Rai News, 2023). The Minister then commented that the non-participation in the BRI does not imply a negative relation with China; instead, Italy’s ambition is to continue to work with Beijing to strengthen trade and economic relations (Tajani in Rai News, 2023). Moreover, Senator Giulio Terzi di Sant’Agata, Chairman of the European Union Policies Commission and head of diplomatic relations for Fratelli d’Italia commented with optimism the decision of Meloni, as the Italian approach to China needed to be corrected as it had no parliamentary legitimacy and was vague and problematic with regard to our European commitments. (Terzi di Sant’Agata in Mossetti, 2023). On the line of the government, the Italian Ambassador in China, Massimo Ambrosetti, has declared how the Italian withdrawal from the BRI *“has no impact on the ties between the two countries”*. This is shown by the Chinese will to organize the visits of Italian Prime Minister Meloni and President of the Republic Mattarella, highlighting the existence of still high positive relations between the two (Italian Trade Agency, 2024b).

However, the critic question rounds about the Chinese reaction to the Italian decision. Previously to the facts, some analysts like Gallelli had underlined the complexity of the situation and the potential risks originating from a possible Italian retirement from the agreement: in her words *“Stopping a vague collaboration would make more remorse than letting it renew automatically”* (Gallelli in Ranaldi, 2023). Gallelli’s opinion focuses on political convenience: due to the imprecise effects of the agreement and the relative limited efficacy of it, she argues that keeping it could be more convenient than rejecting it. It is all a question of maintaining good relations with Beijing: in the first case, relations with China would continue to be stable, while in the second they will likely to be fragmented, as a new equilibrium between the parties must be created. At the same time, some other scholars like Ghiretti argue instead that *“Withdrawing from the Silk Road has very few economic disadvantages. Perhaps we might see actions against, for example, luxury brands in China through boycotts. It will depend on whether China sees this as something that harms its core interests or not”* (Ghiretti in De Filippis, 2023). More on the political side, according to Stefano Stefanini, Italy’s permanent representative to NATO, due to the worsening of the situation in the international scenario and the tensions between Washington and Beijing, Italy *“cannot have China and the United States at the same time”* (Stefanini in Ranaldi, 2023), urging the need to take a strong position in the international arena.

Apart from predictions, on the Chinese side, there has never been a formal declaration about the question. Despite so, Beijing has shown its disappointment for the Italian decision: some days later of the delivering of the Italian note, the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs published a statement,

showing its opposition for the “*smearing and undermining of cooperation on the joint construction of the Belt and Road*” (Aljazeera, 2023). Despite the vagueness of the wording of the communication and the lack of any explicit reference to Italy, the timing of the publication makes clear that it was targeted towards Rome.

Furthermore, it is important to assess whether China might adopt a different and maybe retaliatory stance towards Italy once the separation is formalized. This topic will be treated in the final subsection of this chapter, where Italy’s case will be compared to other nations that have similarly shifted their approach to China, along with an analysis of how Chinese policies have adapted in response to these changes.

3.4.3 Fears of Chinese retaliations: the Italian case

In March 2024, Italy has been officially the first country to exit from the Belt and Road Initiative. Soon after the decision, China seemed to have accepted the Italian position without any excessive resentment; however, this judgment is maybe too optimistic. As a matter of fact, in others similar circumstances, China has already shown a sort of vindicative approach towards countries which were infringing its cooperation plans: these cases are not strictly related to the BRI, but they are useful to analyze the trend and consequences that Italy might be facing; those are the cases of Lithuania and Australia. Therefore, on the base of these examples, it is possible to deduce that Italy will probably have to encounter a Chinese reaction; on the other side, Rome instead could arguably represent a different type of partner for Beijing, so it is conceivable that China’s approach may differ from that applied in previous cases. This sub-chapter is therefore aimed at analyzing these trends and to unveil the discussion on the possibility of a Chinese reaction on Italy because of the decision to interrupt the BRI.

The first case under analysis is Lithuania: the small Baltic state is in fact the protagonist of an interesting shift of foreign policy. Since the election of The Homeland Union – Lithuanian Christian Democrats (TS-LKD), Vilnius has decided to strongly align with the US effort to counter Chinese influence and to be an active role-player in EU’s China policies. Therefore, the national narration of Vilnius started to support the idea that Taiwan’s situation would have mirrored the Lithuanian one in the post-Soviet Era: as a matter of fact, the narration of the small democratic state resisting the domination of a larger authoritarian neighbor holds true both for Vilnius and Taipei (Lust, 2024). As a consequence, Lithuania decided to open a Taiwanese Representation in Vilnius, breaking the diplomatic convention to use the lable of “Chinese Taipei” to refer to the island. This policy

noticeably irritated China, consequently deteriorating Beijing-Vilnius relations. In response, China downgraded its diplomatic relations with the Baltic state, triggering severe economic consequences (Wang, 2021). Furthermore, the country withdrew from the China's 17+1 cooperation framework, a platform designated to strengthen China's ties with Eastern EU countries. Soon after, Lithuanian exports started to encounter significant obstacles in accessing Chinese markets: commercial ships were blocked or delayed and goods were subject to extended customs procedures. Additionally, China cut Lithuanian exports in a variety of sectors, plummeting trade for 80% from January to October 2022 compared to the previous year (European Commission, 2022). The situation made EU to move a formal action against China at the World Trade Organization (WTO) accusing China of discriminatory trade practices. Consultations were held on March 2022, and in December the WTO started an in deep investigation (European Commission, 2022). At the same time the European Union, as a deterrent, developed its legislation on an Anti-Coercion Instrument: its primary goal is to deter economic intimidation and preserve the EU's policy autonomy to oppose states imposing economic pressure on EU members to change their policies (European Commission, 2021). The investigation has currently been stopped for technical reasons and it is still pending: this represents however a procedural step related to the assessment of specific elements (Gijs, 2024).

Therefore, it is possible to argue that in the case of Lithuania, the withdrawal from 17+1 framework and the closer ties with Taiwan have created significant diplomatic and economic repercussions. China's retaliatory trade measures have greatly impacted Lithuanian exports, convincing the EU to act for the creation of the Anti-Coercion instrument and the WTO investigation. This first case study therefore showed the alleged Chinese reaction to the Lithuanian decision to step back from Beijing's influence.

Australia represents another interesting case related to China. Currently, China is Australia's most important trade partner, both in imports and exports. Their trade relations have increased since 2023 by 9.2% (Australian Government, n.d). It is important to mention this data as Canberra and Beijing were the protagonist of an important crisis occurring between 2020 and 2023. Since 2020, Australia begun to openly oppose China on a few topics: the ban of Huawei's 5G technology, the participation inside the QUAD and the AUKUS forums, the request of an inquiry on the origins of Covid-19 and the human rights violations in Xinjiang were some of the most divisive elements (Mc Donagh, 2024). As a consequence to these political tensions, China adopted an economic coercion approach targeting several industries in Australia with economic sanctions (Ye, 2023). However, despite a first moment of destabilization, China's trade restrictions against Australia revealed unsuccessful: the country was in fact capable of finding new markets for its exports, relativizing the economic damage operated by

China (Edmonstone, 2024). Later, in 2023, the new Australian government was capable of reopening trade with China as a consequence of a negotiation between Chinese President Xi Jinping and Australian Prime Minister Albanese: China engaged progressively in removing the sanctions, while Australia promises to suspend their ongoing World Trade Organization dispute (Basford Canales, 2023).

These examples, despite not targeting explicitly the question of the Belt and Road Initiative, show nevertheless the Chinese attitude towards a partner's shifting its policy: Lithuania and Australia experienced both negative economic consequences as they moved away from their original relation with China or moved a sort of threat to Beijing.

Observing these episodes, it is possible to acknowledge a Chinese retaliatory tendency; therefore, the question now focuses on a future Chinese reaction to the Italian decision to publicly abandon the forefront Chinese project of the BRI. In fact, on the one hand, it is true that Rome and Beijing agreed on creating a sort of hidden and silent separation to avoid any sort of consequences on China, but on the other hand, the Italian decision creates doubtlessly a crucial precedent that Beijing wants and must avoid from occurring again. In conclusion, the Italo-Chinese divorce can be maybe considered as more peaceful than rancorous: Italy respected the Chinese will to veil the question and to avoid any excessive resonance; moreover, until the moment of the extinction of the Memorandum, China did not engage into particularly damaging economic policies towards Italy.

Moreover, in light of the previous mentioned examples, the Italian case can be considered maybe a particular situation: in this view, China might have been trapped in a difficult situation. On the one side, Beijing needs to penalize Italy to minimize the possibility that other countries could take the same steps of Rome; on the other hand, China has not advantage in adopting a punitive approach towards Italy: the European country is in fact an important player in the global equilibria and it is backed by important allies, *in primis* the EU which remains a highly interesting target for the Chinese strategy. Beijing in fact is not eager to deteriorate its already delicate relations with Europe, currently at its historically deepest due to increasing US-China tensions, Covid-Pandemic and the increased European spirit originated by the war in Ukraine.

In conclusion, it can be argued that the Italo-Chinese divorce was more peaceful than painful, especially for Italy. This outcome was influenced by Italy's condescending approach and China's strategic decision to avoid further straining its already fragile relation with the EU.

Chapter 4

Redefining the Italo-Chinese relations in the global perspective: Italy's renewed balance of interests

The final chapter of this thesis is aimed to describe and assess Italy's action in the current international scenario. Recently, some key actors in the system have reformed their political approach or leadership, including their stance on China. Similarly, since Meloni's government, Italy has given prove of change by terminating the Memorandum with China and embarking in a new kind of posture vis à vis Beijing. This final chapter therefore wants to explain the major and relevant changes of the world perspective in 2024-2025, considering the ongoing tensions between the West and the East and the incredibly complex global scenario. With this aim, the text wants to give a reasoned and coherent answer to the question expressed in the introduction by taking into consideration all the basic aspects of Italy's external sources of influence. Among these, there are the new Trump government in the USA, the Von der Leyen's new Commission in Brussels and Rome's renewed ambition beyond its original sphere of influence. With this aim, before providing a detailed answer to the research question in the conclusion, this final chapter will structure its considerations as follows.

First, the study will focus on the detailed analysis of the new Italo-Chinese Action Plan, following with a comparison with the MoU, as well as the assessment of the reprise of the officials visits between the two states. Secondly, the chapter will delve into the discussion of the Italian strategic interests and ambitions in the world, analyzing different aspects of the Italian presence in regions that were not traditionally targeted by Rome. Finally, before the discussion on the future of the Italo-Chinese relations, it will be necessary to consider the major recent changes in leadership of the global chessboard, to understand the interests of the Italian key allies and partners as well as the future of the western alliance.

At the end of the chapter, the reader will acquire a general understanding of the renewed Italo-Chinese relations, the new ambitions of Italy in the global chessboard and the position of Rome's traditional allies on China. All these elements will be necessary to define the delicate equilibrium that Italy must adopt in the future to successfully reach its national interest, taking into consideration its allies and partners.

Section 4.1

Restyling the Italo-Chinese relations: from the MoU to the Action plan

In this final chapter, the first sub-section will be aimed at exploring the diplomatic task to reshape the Italo-Chinese relations after the conclusion of the Memorandum. This study will therefore start by analyzing the reprise of visits between Italian and Chinese officials, discussing whether these represent a true sentiment of revival or a mere diplomatic formality. Later, the focus will be shifted to the meticulous scrutiny of the new Italo-Chinese Action Plan, the document which embodied the restart of the relations between the two countries in 2024, with the aim to fully understand its structure, contents, but also its meaning. Finally, the text will present a comparison between the old Memorandum and the new Action Plan, assessing whether the latter can be considered as a moral heir of the former or not.

4.1.1 The reprise of the high-level visits: beyond mere formality

In this first sub-chapter, the thesis will describe the recent phenomenon of the reprise of the high-level visits in China by Italian officials. It is true that, since the decision to step back from the Memorandum and the consequent official termination of the agreement in March 2024, that Italian officials showed a renewed interest towards paying visits to China. The most relevant episodes to be mentioned in this study are certainly the missions in China of Adolfo Urso, the Italian Minister for Enterprise and Made in Italy, Giorgia Meloni, the Italian Prime Minister, and, lastly, Sergio Mattarella, the President of the Italian Republic. In the specific, this sub-section will therefore be targeted with the aim to generally describe these missions, focusing on the key moments, but also on the motivations and the consequences of these recent reinforced tradition of meetings. Arguably, these visits are not to be interpreted with just simple formal meetings between partners; instead, they present the specific aim to reshape the Italo-Chinese relations in the aftermath of their *divorce* of 2023. The best way not to lose contacts is to maintain dialogue and presence, even in moment of disagreement, and this is what Rome and Beijing are currently doing.

With several occurrences to be celebrated in the Italo-Chinese affairs, as the 20 years anniversary of the Strategic Global Partnership signed by the Berlusconi Government in 2004, the preparations of the 55 years anniversary of the Italo-Chinese relations and the 700 years anniversary of the death of Marco Polo, 2024 had a key role in expressing Rome's intention to redesign its relations with Beijing.

In the diplomatic practice, these events are important as they represent moments of exclusive bilateral connections with the counterparts, and therefore they are useful to organize events or promote policies or partnerships. Therefore, with both the intention to honor these important occasions and to reheat the Italo-Chinese relations, China became one of the Italian priorities in 2024.

The first important element to underline was the visit of Minister Urso to Beijing in July 2024. Despite its short duration, the mission was highly meaningful, as it promoted the perpetuation of the Italo-Chinese relations in the field of trade and investments. According to official reports, the visit was designed to evaluate possible industrial partnerships with Chinese counterparts, especially those relative to the field of green technology and electric mobility. Italy is ready to cooperate with China: *“Our government today has a strategic vision of how relations between Italy and China can grow, and can finally give guarantees of reliability, stability, and continuity, fundamental elements in the choice of any investor”* said Minister Adolfo Urso on the visit (Ambasciata d’Italia a Pechino, 2024). One of the main focuses of this mission was the discussion on the opportunity to create a Chinese EV production hub in Italy, due to its national production infrastructures and strategic location in Europe and in the Mediterranean. At the same time, this project would create investments and job opportunities in the country, providing China with a hub inside the EU frontiers and markets (La Stampa, 2024). This is not an isolated case: Chinese automotive enterprises are already investing in other EU countries, as BYD in Hungary and in Spain, Leapmotor in Poland and Saic Motor in France (Katanich, 2024; Fasulo, 2024). Later, Minister Urso met China's Minister of Industry and Information Technology, Jin Zhuanglong, with whom they signed a Memorandum of industrial cooperation. At the end of the mission, the Italian Minister stated that *“From a commercial partnership we can take a quantum leap and arrive at an industrial partnership, especially in the fields of green technology, electric mobility, and pharmaceuticals, which I think can also be useful for our Europe”*, expressing optimism on the renewed relations with China and prospecting an advance in the cooperation between Rome and Beijing (La Stampa, 2024).

Urso’s mission in China, besides the important commercial and financial achievements, had also the purpose to prepare for the visit of Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, scheduled for the end of the month. In the specific, PM Meloni was in China from the 28th to the 31st of July 2024. Four significative moments of this journey deserve to be analyzed in this thesis: the meeting with Chinese Prime Minister Li Qiang, the opening of the Italy-China Business Forum, the speech at the World Art Museum and the bilateral summit with Chinese President Xi Jinping (Governo Italiano, 2024a). This mission represents a highly important event, since it is the first visit by an Italian Head of Government

to China since April 2019, when Giuseppe Conte visited Beijing to attend the International Forum on the Belt and Road (Il Post, 2024).

Once arrived in China, President Meloni met with the Chinese Prime Minister Li Qiang. The two PMs had the opportunity to exchange on the importance of strengthening the Rome-Beijing relations, mentioning also the 2004 Global Strategic Partnership. The discussion verted also on bilateral trade and investment, scientific and cultural cooperation, and collaboration on global challenges as climate change. However, the most important moment of the meeting was the signature of the *Action Plan for the Strengthening of the Global Strategic Partnership*, aimed at reinforcing the 2004 Partnership. This document represents today the most influential text in the Italo-Chinese relations, as it establishes guidelines of cooperation for the two governments. Additionally, in times of tension due to Italy's withdrawal from the MoU, this Action Plan represents a replacement of the latter: however, the differences are prominent, and will be discussed in the following sub-section of this chapter.

Later in the day, both the PMs inaugurated the works of the Italy-China Business Forum in Beijing. In this occasion, PM Meloni delivered a speech expressing her will to progress the Italy-China economic partnership and to promote Italian excellences abroad. At the same time, she moved some criticisms on Italo-Chinese trade relations, mentioning important economic imbalances: “*We cannot hide the problem of the strong imbalance with an important deficit for Italy*” and “*Chinese investments in Italy are now about one third of Italian investments in China, it is a gap we would like to bridge in the right way and bridging it is from my point of view an excellent opportunity for us*.” (Meloni in Governo Italiano, 2024b). Therefore, Meloni showed Italy's commitment in deepening economic partnership with China, based on the concept of equilibrium and reciprocity. While, on the Chinese side, the speech by Prime Minister Li emphasized the Chinese will to deepen the Strategic Partnership with Italy, to expand economic opportunities and attract more investments “*to make the cake of common interests of the two countries bigger*” (Li in Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Italy, 2024a). In this sense, China reaffirmed its will to promote friendly and cooperative relations between the two countries by maintaining the open market, ensuring transparency and mutual beneficial economic ties and “*vigorously promote and practice the Silk Road spirit of peace and cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit*” (Li in Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the Republic of Italy, 2024a). Therefore, both PMs highlighted the will of their respective governments to strengthen their economic ties, underlining however some points of frictions in their relations.

The following day, PM Meloni visited the World Art Museum of Beijing. There she inaugurated an exhibition dedicated to Marco Polo, celebrating the 700th anniversary of his death. In her speech, PM Meloni underlined the special historic relevance of the Italo-Chinese relations.

Finally, Meloni was invited to meet the Chinese President Xi Jinping at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse in Beijing, the hall where foreign officials are traditionally hosted to discuss with the Chinese Head of State. According to Italian sources, the meeting involved three major topics: economics, politics and of global governance. During the economic debate, the two parts discussed the need to balance their economic cooperation and to base these relations on mutual respect and trust (Governo Italiano, 2024c). In this sense, Chinese sources report agreement on the need to “*adhere to mutual openness and cooperation [...] carrying on the tradition of friendly exchanges and continue to understand and respect each other's development paths*” (Xi in Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Republic of Italy, 2024b). Xi has also welcomed the Italian ambition to further invest and to import quality products in China, expressing however that Rome should provide a non-discriminatory business environment for Chinese goods and companies (Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Republic of Italy, 2024b). Later, political topics were addressed, such as the Russo-Ukrainian and Middle Eastern conflicts, with an important focus also on the Indo-Pacific region (Governo Italiano, 2024c). On the topic, Chinese sources state that Xi asked Meloni to support the perpetuation of the EU-China cooperation dialogue. Finally, on the discussion on global governance, the topics addressed were climate change, AI and reform of the UNSC (Governo Italiano, 2024c). After the talks, journalistic sources reported that Meloni addressed China as “*a very important interlocutor to address all these dynamics of international stability and peace*” (Meloni in Rai News, 2024); moreover, according to Xi, “*China's willingness to enhance and develop China-Italy relations has not changed and the friendship between the two peoples has not changed*”. This is an important passage, considering the recent Italian withdrawal from the MoU and the fears of Rome for eventual Chinese retorsions (Xi in Rai News, 2024). Curiously, at the end of the meeting, the Chinese report synthesized the Italian position as follows: “*Italy attaches great importance to China's international standing and role. Italy opposes decoupling and severing industrial and supply chains, rejects protectionism, and is ready to play a positive role in further deepening and consolidating EU-China relations*” (Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Republic of Italy, 2024b).

At the end of the visit, PM Meloni delivered an interview with the Italian press. Commenting on her mission, she said:” *We wanted to set concrete goals: the aim now is to strengthen cooperation but in a balanced way with regard to both commercial and direct investments [...]. We want to work to*

remove obstacles to the access of our professions to the Chinese market and ensure equal treatment for our companies” (Meloni in Palazzo Chigi, 2024a). In conclusion, Meloni’s mission in China underlines the Italian will to reengage in its economic relations with Beijing in a new balanced approach. As written by Fasulo, the important element of this visit was not just the signature of the Action Plan, but the very fact that the two parties met, despite their moment of relative diplomatic freeze (Fasulo, 2024).

Later in September, in the spirit of the diplomatic reciprocity, the Chinese Minister of Commerce Wang Wentao came to visit Rome. During his mission, Wang met the Italian Foreign Affairs Minister Antonio Tajani and the Minister Urso. With the first, the discussion focused on the reshaping of the Italo-Chinese relations. During the exchange, Minister Tajani stated that *“Relations between Italy and China are going through an important phase of revitalization, with the shared objective of strengthening and updating the Italy-China Global Strategic Partnership, which has been the framework for the development of our relations since 2004”* (Tajani in MAECI, 2024a). Tajani also mentioned the Italian necessity of a fair access to the Chinese market in order to strengthen economic cooperation and rebalance the trade and investments. Furthermore, the two discussed also the potential role of China in the peace process in Ukraine (MAECI, 2024a). With Minister Urso, the exchange was instead based on the discussion about green technology and electric mobility. The two conversed especially on the incoming tariffs imposed by the EU on Chinese EV. Recalling the support of the Italian government to the European Commission's (at the time) proposal aimed at restoring equity conditions and avoid the disruption of fair concurrence given by Chinese governmental subsidies to national enterprises (MIMIT, 2024), Rome did not accept to negotiate the tariffs. The Chinese reaction to this approach was not enthusiastic, as higher tariffs were considered as a protectionist and unfair market practice (Katanich, 2024).

Finally, the most recent visit by an Italian official in China was the mission of the Italian Head of State, Sergio Mattarella, at the beginning of November 2024. During these days, the Italian HoS firstly met with the Chinese President Xi Jinping at the Palace of the National People's Assembly. This summit focused on some of the most important bilateral topics, such as the necessity to rebuild dialogue and cooperation on the aftermath of the BRI through the Action Plan 2024-2027. Journalists have defined the tones of the meeting as friendly: Xi’s addressed Mattarella as an *“old friend of the Chinese people and of mine”* (Xi in Palmerini, 2024). Furthermore, the Chinese President voiced the will to strengthen cultural cooperation between Rome and Beijing and his consideration of the EU: in this sense, Brussels was mentioned as an important partner for global peace and Chinese

modernization. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2024). On the same day, the two Presidents inaugurated the Italy-China Cultural Forum: during the summit, ten agreements and Memoranda were signed on different topics: among them, culture cooperation, academia and university, translation and publications support, cinema and art collaborations and concurrence practices (Palmerini, 2024). With words full of optimism, Mattarella expressed his wish for an increasing friendship between the Italian and the Chinese people, mentioning the key role of culture and the necessity of constructive interlocutions between citizens (Quirinale, 2024). Later, President Mattarella visited the already mentioned exhibition dedicated to Marco Polo at the World Art Museum of Beijing. The day after, the Italian HoS met the Chinese PM Li Qiang, and the President of the National Assembly of the People, Zhao Leji. Similarly to the former meetings, the Chinese parts mentioned the aim of strengthening China-Italy ties through innovation, sustainability, cultural exchange, and SME support, while boosting EU-China cooperation. Mattarella highlighted opportunities to expand trade, investment, and cultural links, promoting sustainable development and stable EU-China relations (Chaoyue & Lu, 2024). After these meetings, Mattarella visited the cities of Hangzhou and Canton, and finally came back to Rome.

In conclusion, this number of Italian missions in China right in the aftermath of the MoU termination is not to be considered as mere formality; instead, it represents a first move towards the reprise of friendly and high-quality relations between Rome and Beijing. In fact, according to some authors, the objective of the 2024 trip is the *“normalization and depoliticization of the bilateral relationship with China, albeit in full awareness of the current scenario of competition between great powers”* (Fasulo, 2024). Despite the Italian withdrawal from the BRI, China's major newspaper reports that *“China and Italy are willing to uphold the traditional Silk Road spirit and maintain the momentum of developing relations”* (People's Daily in Lamperti, 2024). According to this perspective, Italy and China might have found the new direction for their relations, especially thanks to the guidelines of the Action Plan 2024-2027. The next section will therefore be aimed at clearly understanding the content of this plan and to abstract the major factors that both parties are willing to obtain from the signature of the document.

4.1.2 The 2024 Action Plan: structure and contents

This second sub-section aims to describe and assess the new *“Action Plan for Strengthening the Global Strategic China-Italy Global Strategic Partnership (2024-2027)”*, signed by Italian Prime Minister Meloni and Chinese Prime Minister Li, during her last mission in China. This new agreement

represents an important expression of the renewed cooperation between Rome and Beijing, emphasizing the comprehensive fields of interest in the relation between the two and indicating a sort of guideline for the Italo-Chinese relations for the near future. Despite being a different kind of agreement, the Action Plan enters into force as a formal and moral successor of the Memorandum of Understanding on the Belt and Road Initiative between Italy and China. Given the occurrence of the events, the new Action Plan should represent a new starting point into the cooperation between the two countries. This subsection therefore wants to analyze the Action Plan through critical lens, in order to provide the means to continue the analysis of the new Italo-Chinese relations and to assess them with a critical perspective in the next sub-chapters.

The “*Action Plan for Strengthening the Global Strategic China-Italy Global Strategic Partnership (2024-2027)*” comes as the new guideline of the Italo-Chinese relations. By reading it, it is possible to understand the major areas of interest in the dialogue between Rome and Beijing. The document, defined a “*concrete result*” by PM Meloni (Meloni in Palazzo Chigi, 2024a), opens a new era of the relations between the two countries, as it directs the cooperation between the two nations outside of the Belt and Road Initiative framework.

The Action Plan established in 2024 remarks the “*Comprehensive Strategic Partnership*” of 2004, signed under the Berlusconi Government in Italy: this wording aims at enlarging collaboration from bilateral to global topics, touching the EU-China relationship and multilateral issues (Ambasciata d’Italia a Pechino, 2023b). This partnership had represented a turning point, as the two parties created some special committees for coordinating bilateral relations: those are the Governmental Committee and the Economic and the Financial Dialogue (MAECI, 2021). The Action Plan comes exactly during the 20th anniversary of this Partnership: it represents a renewed and strengthened version of the latter, updated with the most recent issues. According to Xinhua: “*The Action Plan stresses that both sides will continue to improve market access, ensure fair competition among economic operators, and jointly promote the balanced and stable development of bilateral trade. Additionally, it proposes to accelerate the green transformation of both countries by promoting their respective financial institutions to better comply with the global sustainable finance principles. Through enhanced cooperation in economic and financial sectors, the Action Plan shows significant potential investment opportunities in some emerging industries, such as high-end manufacturing, the medical industry, cultural exchange, and tourism*” (Xinhua, 2024a). Therefore, the plan represents a new guideline for Rome and Beijing, showing the intention of their future cooperation.

From a formal analysis of the document, it opens with an introductory part, mentioning the general framework of the agreement and the main points of the document. Here, the parties committed to enhancing their bilateral relations, fostering cooperation in six different macro-areas: (1) trade and investment; (2) financial; (3) scientific and technological innovation, education; (4) green and sustainable development; (5) health and medical; (6) cultural relations and people-to-people exchanges. Before entering into the details, some fundamental aspects must be here considered. The first is the commitment to organize a yearly meeting between the respective Heads of Government in flexible format: this agreement institutes an important moment of contact, to ensure a strong and continuous dialogue on the implementation of the plan, aimed *“to strengthen the coordination of their respective development strategies and to deepen cooperation in various fields by enhancing cultural and civil society exchanges and developing the full potential of the Global Strategic Part”* (Action Plan, 2024, p.1). The second relevant point of the introduction is relative to the mention of the *“Spirit of the ancient Silk Road”* (Action Plan, 2024, p.1). Contrarily to what it can seem, the expression does not make reference to the Belt and Road Initiative, instead it recalls more an historical heritage. According to Fasulo *“the Silk Road is not a Chinese copyright, and therefore a reference to that tradition is not a support for the BRI”* (Fasulo, 2024). However, it is still interesting to acknowledge the presence of this term, yet indirectly evoking the famous Chinese initiative. The last remarkable aspect of the introduction is the fact that almost half of it is dedicated to the European Union: in the second part of the introduction in fact, Italy is not anymore mentioned, leaving its place at the EU. In the specific *“The parties support the continuation and intensification of high-level China-EU dialogues in the strategic, economic-trade, environmental, digital and civil society relations fields, jointly addressing global challenges in an open and cooperative spirit”* (Action Plan, 2024, p.2).

Now, this thesis will underline the most relevant parts of the plan. The first section concerning the economic and trade cooperation represents the denser article of the document: it is composed of different parts, all of them defining guidelines for action. The most important elements are mentioned in the first three sections, committing Rome and Beijing to cooperate on trade exchange, making the national markets more opened and inclusive. On this topic, page 4 of the documents writes that the parties *“support a rules-based, free, equitable, open, transparent, inclusive and non-discriminatory multilateral trading system.”* (Action Plan, 2024, p.2). Following Meloni’s ideas, the most pressing issues related to Italo-Chinese economic relations are the lack of balance and reciprocity in trade and investments between the parties: in PM’s words, *“the aim now is to strengthen cooperation but in a balanced way with regard to both commercial and direct investments [...]. We want to work to remove obstacles to the access of our professions to the Chinese market and ensure equal treatment for our*

companies” (Meloni in Palazzo Chigi, 2024a). As a consequence, the Action Plans includes these elements, in page 4: *“the parties agree on the importance of intensifying and rebalancing trade, exploring the potential of bilateral trade and continuing to stimulate two-way investment flows in a transparent and level playing field”* (Action Plan, 2024, p.4). The rest of the first section delves into other platforms of cooperation, referring also to side agreements signed during Meloni’s visit in China, such as sustainable development, intellectual properties, geographic indications, e-commerce, agriculture, food security and cooperation in third markets.

The other parts of the Plan are relatively shorter. The second is dedicated to financial cooperation: in this field, the signatories express their interest in increasing their communication and coordination on macroeconomic policy, global governance and finance, continuing to expand Italo-Chinese financial relations. In this field, industrial investments and cooperation is welcomed by both parties, expressing also a particular view over “Green Finance”. This term expresses the fact that parties *“express interest in strengthening financial cooperation to accelerate the green transition”*, following the G20 Sustainable Finance Roadmap (Action Plan, 2024, p.8). The third part touches the topics of scientific innovation, technology and education, organizing scientific and technological cooperation, including annual events like the *"Italy-China Science, Technology, and Innovation Week,"* and supports joint research in areas such as sustainability, polar studies, and biodiversity, opening also for more cooperation in the field of space, especially through the partnership between the China National Space Administration (CNSA) and the Agenzia Spaziale Italiana (ASI). It also strengthens partnerships between universities, through the *“China-Italy University Rectors' Forum”* and promotes cultural and language exchanges (Action Plan, 2024). The fourth states that the parties, given their adherence to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change' and the Paris Agreement, agree to cooperate in areas of *“environmental protection, raw materials and clean energy technologies, energy efficiency, climate change response, biodiversity conservation, circular economy and capacity-building”*, sharing the necessity to achieve the goals of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Action Plan, 2024, p.11). The fifth part underlines the will of the parties to deepen the relations on medical research institutes and health organizations, also strengthening the exchange and dialogue between personnel and research on a variety of topics such as chronic disease prevention, digital health, and support to the WHO. The last part is dedicated to the cultural relations and people to people exchanges. In these final pages, Rome and Beijing express the will to promote collaboration on the fields of museums management, cultural heritage, archaeological research, tourism easing, driving license recognition, sport including the 2026 Milan-Cortina Winter Olympics,

calamity management and the fight against illicit trafficking and organized criminality (Action Plan, 2024, p.15-16).

As evident from this analysis, the 2024 Action Plan embodies an articulated and eclectic agreement between Rome and Beijing. This document is particularly significant as it codifies the major interest of the parties and shows the direction of the dialogue between them. In this study, it is pivotally necessary to acknowledge that this outcome was not given for granted: since the exit of Italy from the BRI, China could have used a completely different approach on Rome. Having acknowledged this, it is therefore important to critically assess this new Action Plan comparing it with the 2019 Memorandum of Understanding.

4.1.3: The 2024 Action Plan as a moral heir of the 2019 Memorandum

The third sub-section is intended to delve into a comparative analysis of the two different agreements signed between Rome and Beijing: the Memorandum of Understanding of 2019 and the Action Plan of 2024. This study is aimed at developing a deep examination on the differences between the two documents, highlighting the distinctive approaches used by the Conte and Meloni's governments. The comparison will arguably shade a light in concrete terms on the transformation of the Italian priorities and position towards China, including Rome's renewed will to be more included in Atlantic and European affairs. In order to offer a clearer and less biased analysis, the structure of the study will be organized as follows. Firstly, the comparison will delve into the formal and legal significance of the two documents; secondly, the analysis will be devoted to the differences in the contents; finally, the attention will be focused on the scrutiny on the consequences and inner meanings of the two. In conclusion, having analyzed the differences and the similarities of the documents, this sub-section will answer the question whether the Action Plan can be considered as a moral heir to the Memorandum.

First, it is important to analyze the formal context of the two documents to truly appreciate the difference by their legal nature. As already stated in the second chapter, the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) represents a non-binding agreement, aiming to create general guidelines for cooperation between two parties. In this sense the signatories can modify the agreement, as occurred in the case of Italy and China, or terminate it on agreed terms (Calamita, 2019). On the other side, the Action Plan (AP) represents a slightly different example: the document in fact is a source which is usually attached to an already existing agreement. The AP is generally aimed therefore to deeply

explain the terms of a cooperation between the parties in more specific terms, assigning roles and time limits, adopting a more operational nature. In terms of bindingness, the AP aligns with the force of its document of reference, assuming its eventual binding nature; same occurs with the modifications (UN OLA, 2000). In this specific case, the AP signed between Italy and China in 2024 represents the updating of the Global Strategic Partnership of 2004, which has constituted the reference framework for the development of the relations of the two countries since then (Tajani in MAECI, 2024a). Another important formal difference is the time span: the MoU had five years of validity, and its continuation was subject to silent approval by parties, while the AP has a shorter time span, and the document does not formally include any explicit possibility of extension. From this quick formal comparison, it is already possible to recognize a meaningful difference in the significance of the two agreements.

Secondly, having studied the form of the two agreements it is now necessary to delve into the content of these: the first element that it is worth mentioning is the length of the documents. In their official Italian versions, retrieved from governmental websites, the MoU counts seven pages, while the AP seventeen: this aspect seems in line with the statement made on the previous paragraph, as the MoU represents more general guidelines while the AP activated a more precise and specific path. This paragraph does not aim to explain the content of both documents, instead, it wants to underline some of the most relevant differences between the two, mainly the topics of the EU, Infrastructures and Sustainability.

Starting with the first, given Italy's membership to the European Union and the Chinese interest towards this latter, the EU is addressed in both the documents, however, significant differences emerge. In the MoU, Italy is more treated as a singular entity, leaving its European status apart. The EU is in fact scarcely mentioned in the Memorandum. The European Union comes cited almost exclusively in its territorial sense, making it a sort of synonym of Europe in its geographic meaning: it is possible to find remarks on the "*UE-China connectivity platforms*" (MoU, 2019, p.2), and "*terrestrial and maritime communication routes between Europe and Asia*" (MoU, 2019, p.1). This comes as no surprise, considering the fact that Italy's participation into the BRI represented for China a great opportunity to ease its access to European infrastructures and markets. Cooperation with third parties is mentioned in page five of the document. From this, it is easy to perceive the Chinese interest vis à vis the important geographic location of the Italian Peninsula and the possibility of enlargement of the Chinese presence at the center of the continent. Therefore, the MoU focused heavily on physical infrastructure projects and maritime connectivity as part of the Belt and Road Initiative, both at the

Italian and European level. On the other hand, in the new AP, the European Union is addressed more politically, especially in the first pages of the plan. Here, the parties explicitly mention different intentions linked to the EU-China fields, as the support of “*China-EU high-level dialogues in the areas of strategic, economic-trade, environmental, respective human rights, digital and civil society relations*”, mentioning also the multilateral coordination on the fields of “*global challenges such as climate change and energy transition, public health, international security and peace, and stability*” (Action Plan, 2024, p.2). Moreover, the understanding of human rights discourse and the necessity to increase cooperation on bilateral and multilateral economic relations are also mentioned, both in terms of trade and respect for international organizations and standards (Action Plan, 2024). Therefore, from the analysis of the significance of the EU in the two documents, it is possible to deduct a double change of perspective. First, in the AP Italy is treated as a member of the EU, differently from the MoU; secondly, the role of the EU is inverted, from mere geographic “*object of conquer*” in the MoU, to a necessary political subject in the AP, for which the intercession of Italy is necessary. It is clear in fact that, since the MoU raised concerns within the EU for potentially undermining European unity, the new agreement should have taken Brussels more into consideration.

Secondly, the topic of infrastructures: as already stated, the MoU presents a number of references to this topic, as represented one of the central elements of the agreement. One of the most relevant ambitions was to develop cooperation and synergies between the BRI and the Italian and Trans-European transportations networks (MoU, 2019). Indeed, with the termination of the MoU, all the BRI related projects in Italy stopped, and therefore, in the AP, the topic is mentioned just once, with the general wording: “*multilateral development banks in supporting investments in infrastructure and connectivity and in promoting sustainable development*” (Action Plan, 2024, p.8). Thus, in the AP, the topic of infrastructures still remains object of discussion, however with a doubtless minor resonance than in the MoU.

Third relevant difference of the two agreements is related to sustainability and green development. Truth be said, the MoU once mentioned sustainability through generic wording, especially related to the field of infrastructures and transports. This topic, given its growing global significance and politization, has been enlarged in the AP. In fact, it is mentioned among the fields of cooperation as “Green Finance” (Action Plan, 2024, p.8) and “Green and Sustainable Development” (Action Plan, p.11-12), signaling the will to advance in the development of technologies and policies for the environmental protection, in light of the UN 2030 Agenda. According to the AP, this can occur also

through joint research initiatives, including the topic of artificial intelligence, health, biotechnology, and aerospace, focusing on a more knowledge-driven approach.

However, among many differences, a strong omni-present element must be highlighted in this analysis: economy and trade. If the two agreements differ in a number of elements, the economic section remains highly coherent: both the MoU and the AP mention the will to increase respective trade and investments flows, to fix the excessive macroeconomic imbalances, to promote equity and avoid protectionisms (MoU, 2019, p. 2-4 Action Plan, 2024, p. 4-5). Consequently, on the one hand, the MoU appears more concentrated on physical infrastructure projects, maritime connectivity, and trade; on the other hand, the Action Plan expands the cooperation to include sustainability, renewable energy, green finance, and scientific research, while excluding excessive focus on BRI approach, marking a *de facto* transition from an infrastructure cooperation to culture and sustainability.

Thirdly, as explained in the introduction, the analysis will now focus on the inner meanings of the two different sources. While both agreements underlined Italy's desire to strengthen economic and diplomatic ties with China, they reflect different priorities and approaches to global challenges. Signed under two Italian governments with differing views on China, these documents illustrate how bilateral relations evolved in response to shifting geopolitical and economic landscapes. As already noted in this thesis, the signature of the BRI MoU in Italy faced a wave of criticism, caused by the potential increase of Italy's reliance on China and the weakening of the country's transatlantic relations: this could have potentially allowed Chinese influence to expand in Europe, in a moment in which the European Commission was for the first time strongly standing against Beijing. In 2019, the input given by the victory of the anti-systemic Five Star Movement, the economic necessity and the increasing perceived weakening of the western allies convinced Italy to look for a new economic partner. In just five years, a number of governments had changed, and political priorities have transformed together with the scenario in Europe: a Pandemic and a War had occurred in the continent. These aspects have convinced the Meloni government to bring forward her plan to terminate the BRI MoU. At this stage, the Meloni government had the task to destroy and rebuild the relations between Rome and Beijing in an advantageous direction for both countries, without threatening the western allies, as occurred after the signature of the MoU. At this stage, as evidenced by Cuscito, *"Today, Italy and China have evidently different agendas. Rome wants to revive economic relations. Beijing wants to minimize the damage to its soft power generated by Italy's abandonment of the BRI and increase its presence on the peninsula as a connection point between the American sphere of influence in Europe and Africa"* (Cuscito, 2024). The two countries both needed to renew

their relations, so the Action Plan represented the best way to do it: not creating a new start, but drafting a new shared agenda based on their previous 2004 Strategic Global Partnership, transforming a *de facto* restart into a reprise of an already existing partnership.

This is the reason of the importance of the Action Plan: it perfectly represents a significant evolution in the diplomatic and economic relations between the two countries, but most of all a true strategic turning point. The new plan aligns, much more than the MoU with Italy's commitments to the European Union and Atlantic Alliance, demonstrating an approach of national strategic autonomy seeking at the same time to benefit from China's economic opportunities without destabilizing European unity or transatlantic partnerships. The 2024 Action Plan is therefore a comprehensive Italian attempt to navigate the complex international scenario, reheating cooperation with China in sectors such as innovation, sustainability, and culture, while dissociating from Beijing on more political issues, mitigating the concerns originated out of the 2019 MoU; synthetically, the Action Plan permitted a redefinition of Rome's relationship with Beijing in a way consistent with its allies' aspirations and worries.

To sum up, the Action Plan of 2024 signifies a strategic evolution of the Italo-Chinese bilateral relations: moving from the infrastructural focus of the BRI MoU towards a more complex and eclectic set of guidelines, it recalibrates the Italian ambitions of better addressing contemporary global challenges. In conclusion, can the 2024 Action Plan be considered a sort of "moral heir" of the 2019 Memorandum? Following the assumptions drawn in this analysis, this hypothesis cannot be sustained. On the one hand, it is true that the Action Plan and the six core agreements "*replace the Memorandum of Understanding on the Belt and Road Initiative*" (Cuscito, 2024), filling the void created by the extinction of the MoU with a new guideline for Italo-Chinese bilateral relations. At the same time, this research has shown the radical differences between the two documents, especially in terms of legal significance, operational content and most importantly their differing strategic implication, making them impossible to compare.

Therefore, especially for the Italian side, the 2024 Action Plan cannot represent a moral heir of MoU; instead, it embodies a conscious evolution of the Rome-Beijing relations, shaped on the will to reorient towards a more balanced approach on the issue. In synthesis, with the Action Plan, a true restyling of the Italo-Chinese relations had begun.

Section 4.2

Italy's pivot to the world: Rome's new global China-related initiatives

Since the signature of the Action Plan between Italy and China, Rome has opened a pivotal moment of recalibration of its geopolitical and economic strategies. In this context, the Meloni government is trying to push beyond traditional frontiers of action, reaching new geographic areas and cooperation along with its traditional partners. This sub-chapter explores therefore how Italy's strategic foreign policy planning aligns with current global developments, highlighting its ambition of regional power and strategic autonomy. Italy's new pivot aims to reshape its influence, also by participating in limiting China's growing worldwide power, showing a renewed self-consciousness of its international role. In this process, Rome's renewed attention over the African continent, the Indo-Pacific and the Enlarged Mediterranean, represent three interesting operationalizations of this concept, explaining how Italian foreign policy has matured a global perspective.

4.2.1 The Mattei plan: strategic diplomacy beyond development cooperation

In this first sub-section, the thesis will analyze the Italian Plan for Africa, the Mattei Plan, named after Enrico Mattei, the founder of ENI. The study will be carried out with a critical viewpoint, aimed at assessing whether this initiative could eventually represent an Italian alternative to the Belt and Road Initiative. In the specific, rather than establishing a direct comparison between BRI and the Mattei Plan, the aim of this study is to evaluate if the latter represents a real strategic recalibration of Italy's foreign policy, capable to better serve Italian geopolitical, economic and strategic priorities, while strategically reducing Italy's reliance on China. The Belt and Road and the Mattei Plan are certainly two different policies, moved by different interest with opposing strategies, however, a comparison of the two will show the eventual strategic and political similarities: in light of this, would it be therefore possible to define the Mattei Plan as a development policy or a counterweight against China?

At the beginning of this analysis, it is necessary to underline that the Mattei Plan (MP) does not represent an exclusive Italian initiative. While discussing the MP, it is compulsory to mention the broader framework of the EU Global Gateway. The latter is a key EU policy, enacted by the Von Der Leyen's Commission I in 2021. Following the wording provided by the website of the European organ, the "*Global Gateway is a new European strategy to boost smart, clean and secure links in digital, energy and transport sectors and to strengthen health, education and research systems across the world*" (European Commission, n.d.). In simpler words, it represents the first European

infrastructure plan of a global nature and aims to increase Europe's connectivity with the rest of the world, avoiding the creation of dependencies. More in the specific, the plan aims to mobilize around €300 billions of investments around the world, supporting the development of “*high-quality, sustainable infrastructures, which comply with the highest social and environmental standards, in line with the values and norms of the EU*” (French Embassy in Papua New Guinea, 2023). Apart from its aim of supporting the development of links between Europe and the world’s nations, some scholars argue that the project can be also considered “*an alternative investment model to that proposed by Beijing and other countries*”, especially in Africa (Gili & D’Ambrosio Lettieri, 2023, p.2).

This idea is reinforced by the evidence that Chinese cooperation with African countries, as well as Russian strategic commitments and private security engagements had already been expanding in the continent since long time (Tellidou, 2024). One notable example of Beijing’s presence in Africa is the traditional January visit to the continent of the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs. For the past thirty years, China has consistently prioritized Africa as the destination for its Foreign Minister's first trip of the year, underscoring its commitment to the continent. This trend has firmly established China as Africa's leading partner, at a time when western powers have directed their focus elsewhere (Haski, 2024). In 2024, Wang Yi visited Egypt, Tunisia, Togo e and Ivory Coast (Natale, 2024): these destinations were specifically chosen to consolidate Chinese geostrategic influence in regions increasingly critical in the competition with the West (Colarizi, 2024). More recently, in January 2025, Wang Yi visited Namibia, the Republic of Congo, Chad, and Nigeria. Unlike other countries, China avoids designating priority countries in Africa, adopting instead a general commitment to the continent. According to an article published on The Diplomat, Beijing’s strategy on Africa, characterized by diversification, innovation, non-discrimination, has strengthened the quality of China-Africa relations, cementing China’s position as a key partner in the continent for over three decades (Adebayo & Chen, 2025). On the other front, a renewed sensitivity to African issues was brought back in the West since Biden’s administration. During his leadership, the United States sought greater engagement in the African continent, as evidenced by the visit of Antony Blinken, the US Secretary of State, in Nigeria, Cape Verde, Ivory Coast and Angola on January 2024, promising more involvement by the USA in the area (Natale, 2024). Along with the US example, the EU launched its global development project. The initiative is part of the broader goal of developing strategic autonomy for the EU by strengthening its economic and political ties worldwide and reducing overreliance on a limited number of states (ISPI, 2023). Within this framework, the EU Global Gateway aims to attract private investment by leveraging initial public funds to create a multiplier effect with the aim of boosting economic growth. To do so, the Commission aims to

strengthen public-private partnerships by allocating funds and providing expertise, using local resources and labor. (Gili e D'Ambrosio Lettieri, 2023). Based on this European initiative, some EU member states have adopted their own national versions of the plan: in the Italian context, the MP aligns with this European tendency. According to President Von der Leyen in fact, “*the Mattei Plan fits perfectly into our European Global Gateway; it is our plan for Africa*” (Von der Leyen in RSI, 2024). But what does the Italian Plan envisage?

The Italian major application of the European Global Gateway, the already cited Mattei Plan is “*Italy's strategic diplomacy, development cooperation and investment project to strengthen and renew ties with the African continent*” (MUR, 2024). With an initial funding of 5.5 billion euros from the National Climate Fund and the Development Cooperation Budget, the plan was officially formalized with a decree converted into law in January 2024 by the Meloni Government (Fattibene & Manservigi, 2024). Its initial phase is composed by different projects in specific countries: Egypt, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Côte d'Ivoire, Mozambique, the Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia and Kenya (MUR, 2024); this list has been recently enlarged, with the inclusion of Angola, Ghana, Mauritania, Senegal e Tanzania (Bozzacchi, 2025). The plan has been internationally inaugurated in January 2024, during the Italy-Africa summit held in Palazzo Madama, attended by 46 African countries and at the presence of the EU's officials, such as Ursula von der Leyen (Natale, 2024). According to PM Meloni, Piano Mattei's main goals are targeted around six different sectors of intervention: health, education and training, agriculture, water, energy and infrastructure (Meloni in Palazzo Chigi, 2024b). The major action of the plan includes the creation of new projects and the active maintenance of already ongoing initiatives in a “*non-charitable and non-predatory spirit*” adopting instead a “*peer-to-peer cooperation approach*” (ISPI, 2024). According to some analysts, the plan will be successful in case of avoidance of the “*top-down approach driven by the old donor-beneficiary paradigm [...] fostering instead an incremental approach where key goals and targets are co-designed between partners*” (Fattibene & Manservigi, 2024). Despite the high participation to the event, MP was not warmly welcomed by all the parties: an example was the intervention of the African Union's Commission President, Moussa Faki Mahamat in January 2024, where he claimed that “*we would have liked to have been consulted*”, expressing a strong criticism over the lack of communication on the matter and assuming the intention of African countries for granted (Muliro, 2024). “*I would like to stress the need to move from words to deeds, understand that we can no longer be content with mere promises, which are often not kept*” he added (RSI, 2024).

Hence, the MP results one of the biggest Italian development projects: however, apart from the eventual output in the African continent, it is also important to consider the Italian interests in creating and carrying out the plan. Rome in fact is supposed to largely benefit from its enactment, especially in three pivotal sectors: energy, migrations, and politics.

Starting with the topic of energy: according to a position paper published by the Italian Foreign Affairs Ministry with the support of major Italian think-thanks: *“the aim [of the plan] is to combine two needs, the African need to develop energy production and the European need to secure new energy supply routes”* (MAECI, 2024b, p.6). According to the Italian Ministry therefore, the plan represents a win-win answer in the field of energy, both for Africa and Europe. On the one hand, Rome, and eventually Europe, will support the African continent to develop its energy potential; on the other side, given the current European necessity for energy source diversification, Italy’s geostrategic location in the Mediterranean can represent a great opportunity for the country in the field of energy, becoming eventually *“an energy hub, a bridge between Europe and Africa”* (MAECI, 2024b, p.6). In simpler terms, Italy’s *“Mattei Plan aims to revitalize and expand energy partnerships with African nations, ensuring that Italy can tap into the continent’s rich reserves of oil, natural gas and renewable energy sources”* (Varvelli, 2024), securing a strategic priority for Europe. This ambition is however criticized by different associations, such as Legambiente, which openly wrote that the Mattei Plan *“is a short-sighted vision of the country’s energy future and the concept of ecological transition”*, using polluting resources and creating new dependencies (Legambiente, 2024).

A second fundamental issue for Rome concerning the Mediterranean and the Plan is migration: the same position paper by the MAECI mentions migration as a non-primary aim of the MP, admitting the necessity of other tools to manage the phenomenon. The problem concerned is the *“migratory hump”* (MAECI, 2024b, p.13), according to which, in the short term, migrations flows will not diminish accordingly to the increase of national GDP generated by the development in Africa (Villa & Villafranca, 2018). Despite this concept, there is however relative optimism on the long-term consequence of the Plan: by moving production in the continent and creating opportunities and value, it is possible to mitigate migration flows in the long run (MAECI, 2024b). Furthermore, according to Giro, the former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Italy under Renzi Government in 2016, it is important to not fall into mistake: *“A Marshall plan of aid is not enough: a long-term industrial project is needed”* (Giro, 2023), emphasizing the necessity of long-term development in the area instead of a mere deployment of resources.

A final element of great interest for Italy is the political significance of the Piano Mattei: as already explained for the EU Global Gateway, the increasing activities of China and Russia in the African continent represent a critical issue for Europe and for Italy as well. According to some scholars therefore, the MP was crafted also as a strategic response to the current geopolitical competition in the area: the policy in fact aims to strengthen the role of Italy in the continent, supporting the recent renewed interest of western states in the area, trying also to counterbalance the fading role of partners in the region, such as France (Varvelli, 2024). At the same time, Italian scholars, such as Curzio underline the fact that *“China is crucial for Africa's development and therefore the EU (but also Italy) should not overestimate itself as a global power”* (Curzio, 2024). As shown, Rome is interested in the perpetuation of the plan, however, how was it perceived by China, and how does it practically differ from the BRI?

Even though the Mattei Plan and the Belt and Road Initiative embody two different policies, both for their origin and scope, it is possible to compare the two and to find both notable distinctions and shared objectives. Let's first recall the original aim of the two projects: the BRI was originated in China in 2013, with the precise scope to develop global trade, also by enhancing infrastructure connectivity in more than 140 countries. The main focus of the Chinese plan was originally the construction of massive infrastructures to ease trade and transportations, which would have benefitted both the donor and the receiver country, creating a win-win dynamic. Differently, the MP represents the Italian enactment of the EU framework of sustainable and strategic investments advanced by the EU Global Gateway, emphasizing its peer-to-peer approach. Moreover, the plan offers a broader section of topics, focusing on further issues such as health, education, agriculture and others, with a significant attention on ecological transition. Therefore, unlike the BRI, the MP generally focuses on smaller-localized development initiatives that envisages environmental and local standards. On the economic point of view, apart from the evident difference in the number of investments, the funding model is generally dissimilar: MP aims to combine public and private investments, in contrast with the predominantly state-led financing characterized by the BRI (Vaggi, 2024). These fundamental operational and economic differences perfectly capture the broad diversity of the development approach between China and the EU, picturing also a sort of race dynamic in shaping the future of African development, and consequentially, its trust. At the same time, the two projects are similar in their scope: despite these differences, both initiatives aim to increase influence and develop economic relations with the African states. As a matter of facts, both the MP and the BRI, have specific ambitions in the continent. Italy's emphasis of becoming an energy hub and to develop economic

relations with Africa mirrors China's goal of securing trade routes and economic partnerships with the continent. Therefore, both projects evidently reflect broader geopolitical ambitions of their respective nations, offering to the plan a critical strategic importance. However, given the Chinese presence and interests in Africa, it is also interesting to mention the perceptions of Beijing on the Piano Mattei. In an interview, Li Anshan, honorary president of the Chinese Society of African Historical Studies and advisor to the Chinese leadership in the 1990s, stated that *"If the goal is to serve the African people, any development project is welcome and there is plenty of room for cooperation [...] the important thing is that the partnership is equal"* (Li in Colarizi, 2024). Moreover, according to some Italian scholars, excluding China from the game may not be the best alternative: a Mattei Plan coordinated with China could potentially lead to improved results (Curzio, 2024).

In conclusion, the Mattei Plan represents a pivotal element of Italy's foreign policy under the Meloni Government. It marks the intention of Rome to play a role of proactive actor in Africa, with the ambition to gain strategic prominence, coherently with Brussels' ambitions. Although distinct in scope and methodology, the Mattei Plan and China's Belt and Road Initiative share the same goal of strengthening their economic and geopolitical ties with the African states. However, the first's emphasis on sustainable, localized development and peer-to-peer cooperation may offer a potential alternative to the criticized approach of the second. The plan will potentially reach a significant level of success, for all the contracting parts, at the condition whether it remains inclusive, mutually beneficial and most of all, avoids past mistakes relatable to other development paths in the continent. Instead, the ability of the Mattei Plan to balance Italy's strategic interests with support for Africa's development will determine whether the plan will be remembered as a solid development policy from Rome or a mere counterbalance to China's growing influence in the continent.

4.2.2 The Indo-Pacific: a new (quasi) official frontier for Rome

This second sub-section will be focused on the study of the Italian policy in the Indo-Pacific, analyzing the level of engagement of Rome and its allies on the field, understanding the dynamics of the region. In this sense, this passage will research on the existence of an Italian Indo-Pacific strategy, also in a comparative approach, analyzing the situation in the area. As a matter of fact, the Indo-Pacific has never been part of the traditional priorities of the Italian Foreign Policy (Menegazzi, 2023), but the growing cruciality of the area in economic, political, and strategic terms may be bringing Rome to develop as soon as possible an Italian approach to the Indo-Pacific. Therefore, the question

to be answered in this section will be whether the Indo-Pacific will potentially acquire a new importance for Rome becoming a new frontier for its national foreign policy.

To start this analysis, it is first necessary to mention the highly peculiar value of the term *Indo-Pacific*. This wording has not in fact a specific geographic origin, instead, it was born out of the political sensitivity of Shinzo Abe, former Prime Minister of Japan. In 2007, during a visit to the Indian Parliament, Abe delivered his famous speech “*Confluence of the two Seas*” (the Indian and the Pacific oceans), expressing the need of a strong cooperation between the two countries in the broad area of the Indo-Pacific (Hu and Meng, 2020). Since then, the two states started to consider the political advantage of symbolically merging the two seas in one, opening for a new era of cooperation in the region, evident in the later dialectic of the “Arc of Democracy”: a solid cooperation between likeminded states in the Indo Pacific, promoting western values in the area (Ching, 2008). Therefore, the Indo-Pacific easily became synonym with a region characterized by the presence of friendly western allies, stretching from India until the coasts of the West Coast of the USA: including virtually the four members of the QUAD, in a non-declared anti-Chinese function (Termine & Poti, 2023). Being the Indo-Pacific a mere political definition, it can be differently interpreted by other points of view: this is the case of Beijing. China’s vision of the term is extremely negative, as it evokes a threat posed by western allies in the region and consequently a vulnerability; opposed, Beijing prefers to adopt the term *Asia-Pacific* (Termine & Poti, 2023). Lastly, India’s vision rejects the definition of the region as anti-Chinese: New Delhi’s visualization of the area is focused more on an issue-based alliance (Barthwal-Datta and Chacko in Termine & Poti, 2023), shifting its center of gravity in the Indian Ocean including also the African Eastern coasts. Done all these premises, a proper definition may be the following: “*The Indo-Pacific is anything but a clearly defined geographical area: on the contrary, it is configured as a perimeter politically and strategically defined, first and foremost, by the United States as the arena where their confrontation with the People's Republic of China takes shape*” (Termine & Dell’Era, 2023, p.3).

Having clarified the nature of the topic, it is now necessary to understand its prominence: therefore, why is the Indo-Pacific so significant today? In the simplest terms, it is possible to state that the region is relevant due to the growing economic, demographic, and political importance of the states operating in the area (Termine & Dell’Era, 2023). More in depth, it is possible also to take into consideration that the region’s economy (excluding the USA) reflects the 35% of the world’s GDP, (MAECI, 2024d) and that its population counts for 60 % (4.3 billion people) of the world's people (UNFPA, n.d), showing the economic and demographic criticality of the region. Moreover, the

enormous political relevance is also awarded by the USA-China opposition, that finds here its major theater. Furthermore, the region hosts more than half of the global maritime trade and represents a strategic area due to the important presence of a number of straits (Abbondanza & Termine, 2023).

Having also easily clarified the reasons of the centrality of the Indo-Pacific region, it is now necessary to understand the position of Italy in the area. Despite an increasing number of states taking part to the debate in the Indo-Pacific, the European presence results highly lacking: at the exclusion of France Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, Czech Republic and Lithuania, no European state has yet presented a clear national Indo-Pacific Strategy (Abbondanza & Termine, 2023). To be noted is that the European Union drafted its document in 2021, offering an important element of reference for further development of national strategies. In this sense, seven are the pillars identified by Brussels: “*sustainable and inclusive property, ocean governance, digital governance and partnerships, connectivity, security and defense, human security*” (EEAS, 2024). In this framework, Italy has not yet published an official document envisaging its national strategy for the Indo-Pacific: the country in fact results relatively late comparing to other European counterparts in this field. Despite the lack of this important document, Rome has not remained passive to the topic, instead, it has arguably moved important steps on the issue. Chronologically, it is therefore first important to mention: *The Italian contribution to the European strategy for the Indo-Pacific*, document published in 2022. Through it, Rome declares its alignment with the European position in the Indo-Pacific, listing its national commitments on the topics of the European strategy. The document also points out more general commitments of Rome to the area, stating that “*We intend to pursue our action in the Indo-Pacific within a framework that holds firm to the core values that inspire the Union and its Member States: support for multilateralism and regionalism; protection of human rights, democratic processes and the rule of law; a rules-based international order; combating climate change; free, fair and level playing field trade; social, environmental, fiscal and financial sustainability; transparency; and inclusiveness*” (MAECI, 2022, p.1). Secondly, as a further step, it is important to mention that on May 2023, the Italian Chamber's Third Committee on Foreign and EU Affairs asked to conduct an investigation into the topic of the possible role of Italy and European countries in the Indo-Pacific. The process has taken place until April 2024, date of the publishing of the report relative to the inquiry by the special Standing Committee on Foreign Policy for the Indo-Pacific, set up in 2023 by the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Chamber of Deputies (Camera dei Deputati, 2024a). The result of this research, given also by the intervention and contribution by Italian and global academics, as well as ambassadors and political officials, has shown the current state of art of the question, offering a scheme of the Italian priorities and activities in the Indo-Pacific. The report

explains that Rome has generally strengthened its diplomatic representations in the region, enlarging the personnel of the Italian Embassies and Consulates in the area. Moreover, a key concept to be mentioned is the “*inclusive vision*” (Camera dei Deputati, 2024a, p.3) that Italy wants to adopt in the area. In practice, the latter underlines the will of Rome to act by involving all regional actors, both bilaterally and multilaterally. This means, on the one hand, to keep on strengthening the relations with traditional like-minded allies, such as Japan, with which Italy is developing the Global Combact Air; on the other hand, Rome aims also to reheat the relations with new potential partners, such as the United Arab Emirates and India. Furthermore, given the national inclusive approach, the document mentions also the necessity to continue the interactions with China, as Beijing, despite the political confrontation with the West: “*remains an indispensable interlocutor in the face of major global challenges*” (Camera dei Deputati 2024a, p.3). Finally, the document includes also the topic of maritime security in the region, mentioning the naval campaign of the *Francesco Morosini* Offshore Patrol Vessel, participating in major naval defense industry events and port calls in twelve countries (Camera dei Deputati, 2024a).

Therefore, from the one-year investigation, the result is that Italy intends to deploy an Indo-Pacific approach based on the maintenance of relations with traditional and new partners, focusing on the fields of defense, rule of law and multilateralism. Despite this orientation represent a strong starting point, a formal program still lacks at the national level. Moreover, apart from these factors, according to Abbondanza, there are three lines on which the Italian Government would be already moving with the aim to increase its national presence in the area from at least five years: the economic, the strategic and the diplomatic directives. In economic terms, Abbondanza argues that Rome increased trade with the region's largest trading powers by around 16% over the past 10 years. Moreover, strategically, Italy has gradually reinforced its national commitment to the regional stability and the respect of the rule of law in the area, mentioning the already cited Morosini Vessel, passing through the international waters (therefore exercising its freedom of navigation) of the South China Sea. Finally, as already identified in the document from the Italian Chamber of Deputies, Rome has progressively strengthened the relations with the regional powers in the area: the country has in fact concluded strategic and development partnerships with the major powers in the region (Abbondanza & Termine, 2023): among others, it is also possible to include the 2024 Action Plan.

Therefore, if, on the one hand, the lack of the official Italian strategy for the Indo-Pacific does not stop the country to advance in developing its presence in the region, on the other side, its absence creates a certain element of vagueness in the operational field. The publication of an official strategy

will be likely to strengthen the Italian efforts in the area, by rationalizing Rome's intentions, making them clear to allies and regional partners, creating a strategic compass for the future governments: in fewer words: *“the development of an Italian strategy for the Indo-Pacific would represent a significant advancement for the foreign policy of the state”* (Abbondanza & Termine, 2023, p.63).

In synthesis, this sub-chapter has provided an overview of the Italian role in the Indo-Pacific and the ongoing discussion on the publication of an official national strategy for the region. While the Italian presence and commitments in the area seem gradually on the rise, a clear strategic compass remains absent. It is therefore important not to underestimate the political nature of this decision, which will likely award Italy with a more advanced role to the area. In this context, Italy's relatively late response can maybe reflect a cautious approach, driven by the desire to maintain opened channel of communications with all the parties. By avoiding the publication of a document which, after all, will strengthen Italy's role as a western country and western aligned state, Italy may be trying to balance its ambition to serve as a Chinese contact point in Western Europe. A clear foreign policy statement can potentially contribute to the harm of Rome-Beijing relations, inciting Italy to adopt a more measured approach. However, Italy is unlikely to act unilaterally in this arena, favoring alliances over nationally driven initiatives: therefore, time and political stress by both parts will make this issue clearer.

4.2.3 The Indian-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor: a potential alternative to the BRI

In this final sub-section, the thesis will discuss one of the most interesting global initiatives: the Indian-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). This new plan aims at fostering economic connectivity between Asia, the Arabian Gulf, and Europe. Conceptualized as an alternative to China's BRI, IMEC underscores a strategic and economic rebalance in the Mediterranean Sea and the Indo-Pacific, also enacting the Italian strategy of the Enlarged Mediterranean. Therefore, this study aims at exploring the potential of the IMEC, analyzing its proper opportunities and challenges, with the aim to answer the question whether the IMEC can represent a feasible alternative to the BRI in the region.

It all started at the event of the G20 Summit in New Delhi in September 2023: at that time, Saudi Arabia, European Union, India, United Arab Emirates, France, Germany, Italy and the United States signed a Memorandum of Understanding, committing to establish the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). The plan envisages the establishment of an economic corridor aimed at

facilitating trade between Europe until India, creating naval infrastructures and land networks through the Mediterranean and the Arabian Peninsula, deliberately excluding China. The corridor takes its inspiration from the old Spice Route, stretching from India until Europe, effective until the British division of the Indian Peninsula at the end of the 1940's (Rizzi, 2024).

According to the Memorandum, available on the website of the White House, this corridor “*will secure regional supply chains, increase trade accessibility, improve trade facilitation, and support an increased emphasis on environmental social, and government impacts*” (White House, 2023). The intents of the states go beyond trade: in fact, the plan also envisages the posing of undersea cables and hydrogen pipelines to ease energy and communication infrastructures (The White House, 2023).

IMEC and its connections

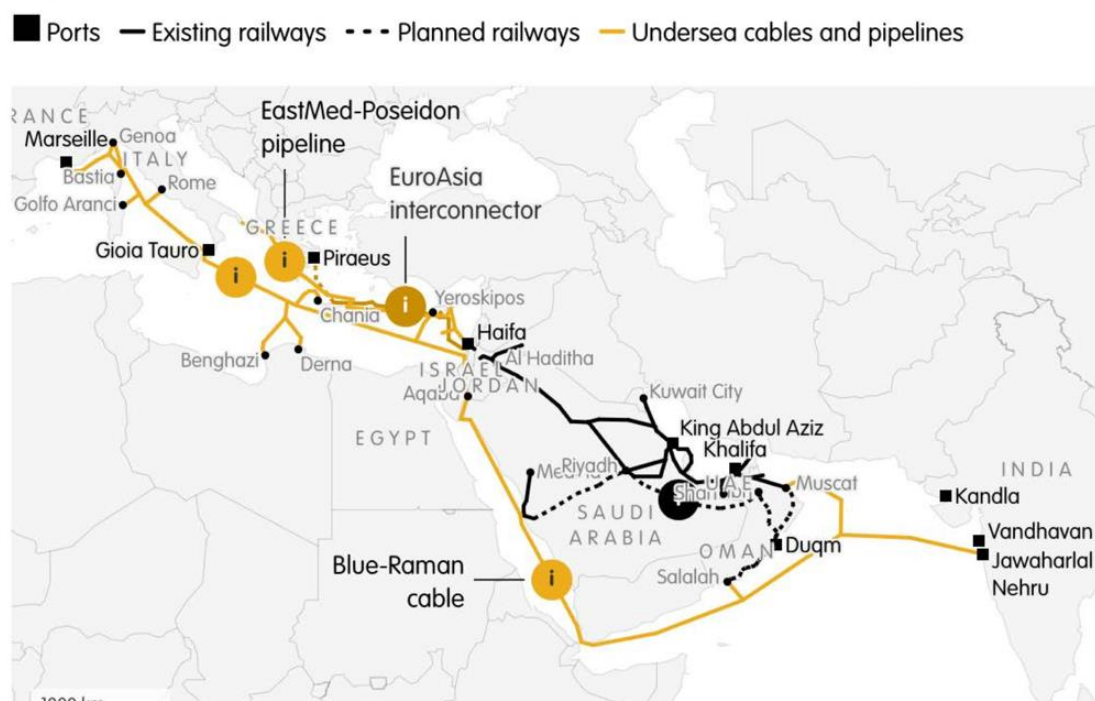


Figure 5 (Rizzi, 2024)

The project in this sense represents the will of the signatory states to stimulate growth, promote energy and data infrastructures and, finally, reduce dependence on China's BRI by diversifying partnerships and supply chains. These ambitions all come into alignment with European Union's Global Gateway. Therefore, in a few words, the IMEC can be described as an “*attempt to reinforce in an anti-Chinese key a strategic partnership around the Middle East, in which the geopolitical confrontation between China and the West goes beyond mere oil interests*” (Marconi & Sellari, 2023, p.13). Truth be said, IMEC and BRI are extremely similar: they are focused on infrastructure development aimed at increasing trade and creating global chains, with the final aim of acquiring regional and global influence. States taking part to the potential IMEC will gain in shortened trade routes, cheaper price of transportation, strategic partnerships with regional actors, economic growth and an updated system

of energy and digital connectivity. Apart from economic positive outcomes, the corridor will contribute to help the American effort to contain Beijing, reassuring its regional allies in the area and making the states economically interdependent through a remodulation of their supply chains. If the project will be concretized, the biggest winner will maybe be India, as New Delhi will gain a key influence on the area, adopting an even stronger stance against China (Lanzara, 2024; Rizzi, 2024). Therefore, the two projects, more than similar, seem antagonistic, as they are converging on a single goal: controlling and influencing of one the most important global economic routes (Marconi & Sellari, 2023). Having explained the advantages of the project, the main question now arises: why is it the corridor still not operationalized?

There are two different answers to this question, one is easier and the second is more complex. Starting from the first: the reason is to be found in regional geopolitical instability. The Memorandum has been signed in September 2023: less than one month later, the attack by Hamas of the 7th of October at the Nova Festival in Israel was moved, opening the war in the region. The problem is that the Israelian ports, majorly the one of Haifa, were the key elements of the corridor in the Middle-East. Some analysts define the current war as a cause of natural death for the corridor, but the majority of them do not agree with it. According to Rizzi in fact, despite the conflict, the strategic and economic ambitions of the IMEC Memorandum signatories remain unchanged; however, the tensions have evidently retarded the realization of the corridor (Rizzi, 2024). A second and more complex answer to the question is China: more specifically, the presence of Beijing all along the way, especially in the critical focal points of the ports of Haifa and Piraeus. Exactly due to this issue, Italy's participation to the project brings added value, as the country recently terminated its BRI partnership, representing a feasible European alternative to Greece. On the other hand, the signatories' countries of IMEC are not capable of ignoring their relationship with China, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which are part of the BRI. It is true that Beijing remains a pivotal partner for the MoU signatories, as they are result being greatly reliant on Chinese exports in critical sectors, which make China an almost indispensable partner (Politi, 2023b). Of course, there are also other issues that influence negatively the creation of the IMEC. Here they are fast mentioned: the opportunity to include Turkey in the plan given the threat Ankara is posing on the initiative (Rizzi, 2024), the problem of the economic financing of the corridor (Politi, 2023b), the diplomatic tensions between Riyadh and Tel Aviv (Rossi, 2024) and the destabilization of the Red Sea due to Houthi militias in Yemen (Gili, 2024).

As a matter of fact, since the signature of the Memorandum, the plan has not witnessed any concrete sign of operationalization. Despite so, there is still some optimism on the realization of this project.

During his intervention at the MED Dialogues Conference in Rome, the Indian Minister of Foreign Affairs Jaishankar defined the corridor as a “*game changer*” of the balance of power in the region, noting also that India, Saudi Arabia and UAE, despite the war in Gaza, are already working on some agreements on the eastern part of the corridor (Jaishankar in DD India, 2024). From the western countries, while Greek President Mitsotakis has already emphasized the necessity of the plan and the importance for a better connect between EU with India, the French President Macron had already appointed a French special envoy for IMEC at the beginning of 2024 (Rizzi, 2024). Similarly, during the audience at the Indo-Pacific Standing Committee of Italian Chamber, the Undersecretary of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Giorgio Silli, stated that the Ministry was currently working on the appointment of an Italian focal point for the project (Silli in Camera dei Deputati, 2024b). Therefore, despite the operational limitations imposed by the current situation in the Middle-East, states parties have not forgotten their intentions on the IMEC, Italy included. In this context, Italy has shown its great enthusiasm for the project, as the country wants to play a leading role in the IMEC initiative through its major ports, especially the one of Trieste, with the aim of unlocking enormous potential for its economy, businesses, and trade (Meloni in Press Mare, 2024).

More in depth, in Rome’s eyes, the IMEC perfectly aligns with the Italian will to redefine its role in the Enlarged Mediterranean, representing a concrete element of the Italian strategy in the Indo-Pacific. In fact, today, Italy moves towards a process of reimagining its geopolitical and strategic space, in particular aiming at enacting the concept of the *Enlarged Mediterranean*. Developed during the 1980s, this wording represents the virtual enlargement of the national geopolitical area of action. Put simply, Rome is moving towards an enlargement of the limits of its influence into the Mediterranean Sea, reaching the Indo-Pacific through the Suez Canal and the Red Sea. This intention steams from the awareness of today’s risk to Italy’s maritime economy, which includes the transportation sector and sea exploitation. Consequently, acting beyond the Red Sea’s symbolic choke point represents today a tactic for Italy to safeguard its maritime interests (Zampieri & Ghermandi, 2024). IMEC will therefore create maritime connectivity, consequently generating an increase of regional economic integration, new business opportunities, and diversification of sources. Additionally, it will enable Italy to intensify the already existing and fruitful relations with many Middle Eastern players gaining influence in the area (Politi, 2023b).

As explained in this section, the IMEC potentially represents one of the most important game changers in the dynamic of the region. Its negotiation had already brought to important considerations on the future benefits for the Italian presence in the region, explaining the national enthusiasm for the initiative. As Italy, both European and regional partners seem relatively aligned on the effort to

concretize the plan, offering to all the signatories an optimistic estimate of the result of the project. In conclusion, the potential benefits of IMEC may be considered both as economic and strategic advantages for Italy and Europe. Yet, the project still presents some uncertainties that lead to potential risks: the initial enthusiasm is limited by economic, logistical and political issues that may potentially jeopardize some sections of the initiative, temporally or permanently. The important aspect to underline in this thesis were therefore that: first, the project has a number of potential positive effects for Italy; second, the governments are still highly interested in the realization of the plan; third, if applied, the plan will represent a fundamental strategic element to oppose Beijing's influence in the area; fourth, if IMEC will be put into action, Italy will cover a central role in this project.

Section 4.3

The evolving global chessboard: same faces, renewed strategies

This final section delves into the study of the evolving international chessboard, analyzing the latest political dynamics related to Beijing. It will begin by exploring the new China policies by the United States, with the aim to understand the new White House tenant's stances on the issue and to assess whether President Donald Trump will be likely to impose a tougher challenge on Beijing that in the past. Secondly, the discussion will shift towards the analysis of the second mandate of EU Commission's President Ursula Von der Leyen, reflecting on the possibility of a more definite and shared EU policy on China. Lastly, the final section will study the current challenges and opportunities that characterize the third Xi Jinping's mandate in China, focusing, especially on 2025.

4.3.1 Trump II: strengthening the American stance against Beijing

This first sub-section will delve into the study of the renewed China policy of President Donald Trump's second mandate. During his first government, the tycoon had already shown a strong stance on China, recognizing the opposition to Beijing as one of Washington's priorities. On the 20th of January 2025, President Trump performed his swearing to Capitol Hill, opening a new *golden age* for the United States. Therefore, how will the President approach the current international situation, and how deeply will the Trump I differ from Trump II on China?

“The golden age of America begins right now, from this day forward, our country will flourish and be respected again all over the world [...] We will not allow ourselves to be taken advantage of any longer. During every single day of the Trump administration, I will, very simply, put America first.” (Trump in CBS News, 2025). With this speech, President Trump has started his second mandate at the White House. Despite the shortness of the introduction, the message is extremely clear since the beginning: he is determined to bring back the USA to its hegemonic position in the global chessboard, avoiding any disadvantage for the country, promising to simply make it always the absolute priority of its office. This wording would be already sufficient to recognize the stance of Trump II on China, however, this thesis wants to dig deeper on the topic to understand the new Washington’s priorities on Beijing. Before to start, it is indeed necessary to clarify that this analysis comes mainly from the Study of Trump’s electoral campaign and his program: it is therefore important to bear in mind that, at the time of the writing, these points still represent a program of intents more than an enacted policy. In this sense, Donald Trump’s II program on China is generally synthesizable in three macro areas: trade and economic policy, critical dependencies, and defense and security.

Starting with the topic of trade and economy, it is necessary to recall that, during Trump’s first office, the Republican President escalated a trade tension with China, which eventually became a trade war. The situation has not been fundamentally resolved by President Biden and it has never come to an end. The future approach of the White House is clearly to continue the competition with Beijing on this front, by eventually increasing the tariffs on Chinese commodities (García Bercero et al., 2024). It is not a secret that this tool will be largely used during the second Trump’s presidency, as he stated that *“Tariff is the most beautiful word in the dictionary”* (Trump in The Guardian, 2024); however, it is also important to observe that the President has promised a 10-20% tariff on imports from US partners, including the European Union: *“they [the EU] treats us very, very badly, so they’re going to be in for tariffs,”* Trump recently stated (Trump in Partridge, 2025). The imposition of tariffs is also confirmed in the speech of the 20th of January 2025, as *“Instead of taxing our citizens to enrich other countries, we will tariff and tax foreign countries to enrich our citizens”* praising the effects of these economic tools for the American people and economy. This will be likely to be applied, *de facto* ignoring its WTO commitments (García Bercero et al., 2024). On the same matter, Trump’s II administration is also considering revoking to Beijing *the most favored nation trade status*: it was granted in a moment of global optimism, when China joined the World Trade Organization in 2001. This status was aimed to provide mutual low tariffs and bilateral trade benefits: removing it will officially proclaim the American’s will to continue in the direction of the trade tensions with the

Asian country. Overall, it is therefore possible to state that, both these measures reflect a clear will to intensify trade restrictions on China (Kubersky, 2024).

Second, Trump II government appears strongly determined in annulling any sort of critical external dependency. In this sense, Trump's work will be aimed at avoiding overreliance on foreign countries, especially on China. Some of the most important sectors on which this policy will be enacted are the critical areas of health and technology. In this sense, apart from new tariffs on Chinese-produced medicines, the new US President wants to further increase the control of American exports of semiconductors to China, avoiding the acquisition of these technology by Beijing. Moreover, the US President called for a restriction on Chinese investments on the American real estate market and industries, in order to avoid overdependence on Chinese assets (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.b). Trump's policy does not just focus on a limitation of imports and exports but aims also at the relocation of production in the USA: in his speech of the 20th of January, he has clearly stated that "*America will be a manufacturing nation once again*" (Trump in CBS News, 2025). This was related especially to the unexploited American carbon (oil and gas) resources, which the President has promised to use internally, and trade externally, avoiding energetic dependency on foreign producers. (Trump in CBS News, 2025). At the same time, other examples are clear in the program, such as the will to push the production of essential medicines in the USA. Even more interestingly, Trump will be willing to block the imports of smart cars presenting Chinese-produced softwares, as they are considered dangerous for national security: "*cars today aren't just steel on wheels, they're computers,*" stated Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo, the United State Secretary of Commerce under the Biden Administration (Raimondo in France 24, 2024). To avoid further tensions with China and security threats, United States will instead incentivize the Chinese automakers to open new firms and produce directly in the USA, employing local labor force. This will allow the selling of these products on the American territory, as they will be produced in line with the national American legislation and security guarantees (Nastri, 2025). Again, these are just few examples that show Trump's II determination to stick to his *America First* paradigm.

Third and last topic of this analysis is security and defense. In this area, the strength of the American stances does not result less sharp: "*We will measure our success not only by the battles we win but also by the wars that we end. And, perhaps most importantly, the wars we never get into. My proudest legacy will be that of a peacemaker and unifier*" (Trump in CBS News, 2025). Through this words, President Trump underlined that the United States will highly influence the sorts of the ongoing conflicts and will also protect the US citizens by not joining potential new fights. This wording,

despite its powerfulness, results also highly ambiguous, especially on two points. The first one is represented by Taiwan. On the topic, the US has registered a growing “*ambiguous stance*” (Matthews, 2025): Taipei has always been a USA’s traditional ally vis à vis China and the first Trump presidency proven it. Let’s recall as an example the famous Trump-Tsai phone call in December 2016, after the first election of the tycoon. Eight years later, the situation seems somehow changed: in beginning 2024, answering the question of whether to defend Taiwan in case of a Chinese attack, Trump stated that “*Taiwan should pay us for its defense*” (Trump in Chu, 2025). This statement refers to the fact that, according to Washington, Taipei should increase its military investments: from 2.5 % of its national GDP to 10 % (Chu, 2025), implying also that these investments should be done in American arms and defense tools (Satake, 2024). This provocation, added to the statement saying, “*the wars we never get into*”, adds a degree of ambiguity to the real position of the American government in the case of an attack on Taiwan. Furthermore, Trump’s recent stances on Greenland and the channel of Panama sound also relatively incompatible with the possibility that Washington would protect the independence of Taipei. Some scholars argue that the President’s commitment to his renewed *America First* policy might lead to prioritizing US national core interests over those of smaller allied states. This attitude can be potentially damaging for Taiwan, as Trump’s interests would be now more focused on maintaining the status of the USA as a free actor in its own sphere of influence (Collinson, 2025). Contrarily to the uncertain strategic vision, the economic consequences of a potential Beijing’s attack to Taipei are clear: in case of a Chinese armed intervention on the island, Trump promised to rise American tariffs on Chinese products up to 150% – 200% (Kubersky, 2024). The second factor of ambiguity is the future of the American role into the Atlantic relations. Despite not being a core China-related affair, the topic results critically central in this analysis. Definitively, Trump’s conflictual relation with NATO is not new: during his first term in office, the Republican President has shifted his foreign policy on a more nationalistic approach, showing his clear opposition to NATO’s collective defense and accusing western countries to gain financial advantage on Washington’s protection as they were failing to meet the established financing requirements of the organization’s guidelines (2% of GDP). Under his second term, Trump’s ambition will probably focus on the will to reconsider the US’ role into the Atlantic Organization, contemplating also to reduce Washington’s involvement in the bloc (Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.b). This case will certainly represent a hard blow for NATO’s members, which are already opting for new alternatives: the clearest example is the EU’s renewed discussion on a European Defense Policy. In summary, Trump’s II will reinforce ambiguity in defense strategies, notably on Taiwan and NATO.

In conclusion of this sub-section, it is possible to state that President Trump's second mandate shows an intensified version of the *America First* approach, characterized by strengthened trade restrictions, reduced foreign dependences and a more ambiguous approach to defense and security affairs vis à vis China.

4.3.2 Von der Leyen II: towards a better-defined EU China policy

This subsequent sub-section will be based on the analysis of the second Von der Leyen's term as the President of the European Commission. Already during her first mandate in office, the President had deeply worked on the topic of the EU-Chinese relations: as already stated in this thesis, some months before the inauguration of the first Von der Leyen Commission, Brussels had published the famous *Strategic Outlook on EU-China relations* of 2019, stating that China was a partner, a competitor, and a rival (European Commission, 2019). A part of the section will therefore aim at studying and understanding the novelties of Von der Leyen's incoming Commission, using the same unit of analysis used for Trump II office. Finally, it will also draw a comparison between the two: this will be essential to clarify the field of action of Italy, as both the US and the EU politics represent two influential sources for Rome's motion in the international arena.

Apart from the already cited *Strategic Outlook*, China has been more recently mentioned in the programmatic document of the new European Commission: *Europe's Choice, Political Guidelines for the next European Commission*. The file represents the synthesis of Ursula Von der Leyen's ambitions for her new office: here she points out the “*more aggressive posture and unfair competition from China*” and the consciousness that “*its relations with Europe reflect a shift from cooperation to competition*” (Von der Leyen, 2024, p.25). Therefore, the President explains that China has adopted a more hostile approach against the Union, using new tools such as the “*weaponization of all types of policies, from energy to migration and climate*” (Von der Leyen, 2024, p.25). This vision contrasts the Strategic Outlook in which China was considered also as a partner, signaling an evolution for the worst of the EU-China relations. Additionally, the document includes other references to China, as the necessity for the EU to protect Taiwan, the will to contrast Beijing's increase military spending and the need to counterbalance the Chinese monopoly on raw materials and chips (Von der Leyen, 2024). Done these premises, it is therefore necessary to point the general ambitions of EU politics vis à vis Beijing: as in the case of the USA, those can be grouped in trade and economic policy, critical dependencies, defense and security.

Beginning with the topic of trade and economic policy, the new Commission will deal with important challenges: the most complicated but fundamental is the negotiation of a shared policy between the member states. This represents, since the creation of the Union, an issue for the European dream; in the EU-Chinese relations, this represents even a bigger challenge, as Beijing prefers to network with national governments separately. This contributes to the fragmentation of a clear and direct EU action on China, making states to prefer bilateral dialogues with Beijing. China is extremely aware of these circumstances and for this reason it will unlikely change its approach to the European Union. As an evidence on this topic, it is necessary to mention the vote of the European Council in October 2024 on the tariffs of Chinese EV. As in the case of the US, the Union dedicated long time to debate the opportunity to impose tariffs on Chinese products: the most relevant element in this sense was the discussion on electric vehicles (EV). The problem of this specific commodity, apart from the security threat already identified by the US, was the perceived unfair practice of trade competition that China was imposing on the Union. In the specific, after months of investigation, the European Commission has concluded that Chinese manufactures received consistent national funds from Beijing, with the consequence of lowering the market price of Chinese products, resulting in a distortion of the competition in the European markets (Katanich, 2024). Additionally, looking at EU-China trade relations, the balance results highly skewed in Beijing's favor, €291 billions in 2023 (Casanova, 2024a). Long story short, all the premises for the imposition of the tariffs were present. During the EU negotiation on tariffs, Chinese Minister of Commerce Wang Wentao visited several European countries in an attempt to negotiate with national governments the elimination of these taxes. Some progress was registered in Germany and in Spain, while opposition arose in Italy (Fappani & Martin, 2024). The results of this approach were fruitful, not in the sense of blocking the tariffs, but to spread political fragmentation among EU governments. This situation was in fact evident by the results of the October's vote on the imposition of the tariffs on Chinese EV: 10 members supported the measure, among which Italy, France and Poland; 12 abstained, and 5 voted against, among which Germany and Hungary (Demarais, 2024). Remaining on the topic of trade, another pressing issue is represented by the potential trade war between China and Europe, triggered by the tariffs on EV cars. On this topic, Commissioner for *Clean, Just and Competitive Transition*, the Spanish Teresa Ribera is willing to escape from this possible trade war, by creating a competitive European electric vehicle industry and consequently reducing reliance on China. However, the Latvian Commissioner for *Economy and Productivity, Implementation and Simplification*, Valdis Dombrovskis, has shown a less optimistic view on the issue, as the EU is currently more likely to maintain its tariffs against China, as envisaged by the majority position expressed in the Council (Fappani & Martin, 2024).

Another important element to recall in this discussion on trade is the already mentioned EU-China Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI). This agreement, which is currently pending for the European Parliament's approval, was close to reach its operationalization, with the intent to ease investment conditions between EU and the Asian country. However, as already explained in chapter two, controversies on Human Rights have blocked the conclusion of the pact. On the one hand, the new Commission can potentially represent a trigger for a new renegotiation of the terms; however, this scenario results extremely unlikely, given the French *Industrial and Economic Security* Commissioner Stéphane Séjourné's opposition on the issue. As a matter of fact, he priorly served as the leader of Renew Europe party in the European Parliament, and he had supported the idea of boycotting the CAI since the beginning, stating that "*With the help of our trade weapons, let's persuade China to respect human rights*" (Séjourné in Le JDD, 2021). The result of this blockade was therefore the downturn in the EU-China economic relations, already threatened by the China's zero-Covid policy of the time, the strong state control, and the continuously shrinking market opportunities in the EU (Lizzi, 2024). Therefore, Brussels' tendency of responding fragmentally to China's trade practices underscores the challenges of addressing economic dependence and protecting the Union's strategic interests.

According to some scholars, the previous European aspirations for stronger economic ties with Beijing have progressively transformed into "*concerns about dependence, the weaponization of critical infrastructural nodes and a renewed attention towards risk management*" (Lizzi, 2024). Therefore, shifting the attention on the field of critical dependencies, the European Union coined the neologism *De-Risking*, which has already been discussed in the chapter two of this thesis. Regarding this policy, the new EU Commission faces a significant and intrinsically difficult challenge: to intensify its de-risking while strengthening its global competitiveness and shielding from imbalanced competition from Beijing (Garcia Herrero & Vasselier, 2024). On this issue, the major burden will be held by the already mentioned Commissioner Ribera: her role will be targeted on the implementation of the Draghi Report on Competitiveness, with the aim of limiting external dependencies and supporting EU companies to compete globally while following decarbonization goals (Fappani & Martin, 2024). The policy of de-risking will not be tackled exclusively by the Spanish Commissioner, as it represents one of the major goals of this Commission, it will be undertaken organically. While the previously mentioned Commissioner Séjourné will focus on bolstering EU industry, securing supply chains, and diversifying critical raw material sources, the Finnish *Technology Sovereignty, Security, and Democracy* Commissioner, Henna Virkunnen, will work to decrease Brussels' dependency on Chinese technology (Chimits & Stec, 2024). Another

aspect to be considered in this sense in the Von der Leyen I Commission has directly engaged in a competition with China through the EU Global Gateway: the initiative will support the EU in improving diversifying its supply chains and increasing its global network (Casanova, 2024a). In her 2024 program, Von der Leyen addresses the initiative, claiming that “*We will take Global Gateway to the next level*” (Von der Leyen, 2024, p.27) by strengthening the existing partnerships and enlarging the network of partners, reaching countries in the Indo-Pacific and South American regions. Therefore, EU’s future work is directed on maintaining a delicate balance between enhancing competitiveness and reducing dependence on China in a number of fields, while safeguarding its economic and strategic interests.

Third and final element is the EU defense and security external policy. On this issue, Von der Leyen II Commission is willing to acquire against China a stronger stance than before: to this aim, the Estonian Kaja Kallas was appointed as the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. Her stance on China appeared already clear at the 2024 Parliamentary Elections, where she defined Beijing as a covert actor seeking to alter the international order (Sanjaya, 2025). HR Kallas has always voiced the necessity of a stronger EU policy on China, mentioning human rights issues, the strong Beijing’s influence on the EU and the country’s support for Russia in the War in Ukraine. On the issue, Kallas blamed Beijing for its fundamental help to Moscow: “*China has to suffer the cost of its support for Russia, without which Moscow could not conduct the war in Ukraine with the same force*” (Kallas in ANSA, 2024). At the same time, during her office in Estonia, she had previously admitted that “*China is an important actor, but given the scale of the conflict with Russia, we can’t make China our adversary. We can’t afford that*” (Kallas in Groupe d’études géopolitiques, 2022).

Another critical topic for the external action of the new Commission is the management of the Brussels-Washington relations. Already as Estonian Prime Minister, Kallas has voiced on the importance of the strategic alliance between these two key global actors. During her precedent office, she co-signed a letter warning about the threats of the Chinese presence in the Baltic country, advising also for the realization of a US-EU infrastructure project adversary to the BRI. This all, despite Tallin’s membership to the Chinese initiative since 2016 (Fappani & Martin, 2024). On the economic side, the US Presidency’s intention to put tariffs on European goods made Kallas state that “*There are no winners in trade wars: if there is a trade war between the US and the EU, the one who will be laughing is China*” (Kallas in EU Debates, 2024). Furthermore, on the field of security and defense, HR Kallas has commented on the need to substantially increase the Union’s defense spending to

“prepare for the worst and be able to defend itself, alone if needed, against a belligerent Russia”; on this topic she agreed with the criticisms from the US President : *“President Trump is right to say that we don't spend enough.”* (Kallas in Euronews, 2025) She has then mentioned some statistics, describing that EU MS have in average allocated of 1.9% of their national GDP to defense, while Russia have touched the 9% (Kallas in Euronews, 2025). As a matter of fact, security and defense represent pivotal new challenges for the Union, as well as new elements of action for the Commission; this is witnessed by the recent inclusion of the new Commissioner of Defense and Space, Andrius Kubilius. On the issue, the new Lithuanian Commissioner has voiced on the necessity to increase the defense spending in the Union, claiming that *“5 to 6% of GDP in defense is what is needed”* (Kubilius in ANSA, 2025a). This necessity comes from the consciousness that *“the gaps in our defense capabilities are very, very serious: We can no longer afford a fragmented approach, we need ‘big bangs’ to increase defense production and acquisition”* (Kubilius in Euronews, 2025). Through these words, the Commissioner underlined that the defense field in Europe is lacking a concrete political initiative by the states. Therefore, after this brief analysis, it seems that the major problem with the Union is not the lack of ideas, but the absence of a shared European pragmatism in policy-drafting and decision-making.

At the same time, a sort of pragmatism can be spotted in the new European leadership, as the EU vision on China is arguably changing. Recently, while delivering a speech at the North Atlantic Council, Commissioner Kubilius stated that *“Now we are facing not only an aggressive Russia. North Korea and Iran are in the same Axis of Aggressive Authoritarians. China is not far away”* (Kubilius, 2025, p.2). This wording, based on Von der Leyen’s programmatic document of 2024, clarifies the European perception of China, defined not as a direct enemy but somehow compatible with this definition. What is undeniable is that the current situation necessitates a cooperation among all the EU members and external allies on the construction of a shared EU-China approach (Garcia Herrero & Vasselier, 2024). However, while a European understanding of China is longed, national interests continue to jeopardize EU’s ability to present a cohesive stance (Fappani & Martin, 2024). Therefore, having analyzed all these differing factors, the more ambitious and coherent approach that Brussels may adopt seems that *“to manage coexistence with China, while staying true to its interests, principles and values”* (Garcia Herrero & Vasselier, 2024).

In conclusion to these two sub-sections, the comparison between the second terms of Trump and Von der Leyen’s II governments vis à vis China comes simple. On the one hand, Trump’s administration is likely to focus more on escalating trade tariffs, reducing critic dependencies and maintaining an ambiguous position on its allies’ defense. On the other hand, Von der Leyen’s new Commission puts

more emphasis on de-risking, strengthening the EU competitiveness and uniting EU MS under a coherent European policy towards Beijing. This general evidence reflects the period of high tension in the international chessboard also between the United States and the European Union, where all actors aim to safeguard their own interests while managing the challenges posed by China. This relation, once iron-strong is now gradually losing its stance, both due to national priorities and political fragmentations among the main players. In this scenario, Italy must find its equilibrium, in order to satisfy its national interests, but also its allies’.

4.3.3 Xi Jinping III: challenges and opportunities in 2025

The final sub-section of this chapter aims to delve into the current situation in China under Xi Jinping’s leadership. Following his reconfirmation for an historical third mandate in 2023, Xi has solidified his role as a central figure, shaping targeted domestic policies and international ambitions. The continuation of his role consolidates his power, opening for new challenges and opportunities for the Asian state. The study will therefore focus on the major topics and strategies that Xi’s leadership is going to face during this year. To answer the question of the introduction, it is necessary to provide a general understanding of the situation in China, dedicating the focus to the significant transformations of recent years. In this analysis, 2025 represents a crucial year for Beijing, as economic, political, and demographic issues are arising in the country, as well as new prospects for growth. This section will therefore focus on: Chinese economy and trade, innovation and technology, political alliances, and finally, demography.

As first, as explained in this thesis, the topic of economy and trade represents a characteristic element of the Chinese foreign policy. In this sense, 2025 represents a crucial moment for Chinese economy, considering the progressive decrease of Beijing’s financial growth through time. The natural question to be asked is whether China, after 2014, will register a new economic “*new normal*”. Since 2014, the government has launched new economic reforms designed to improve the level of consumption in the country. However, these revealed not being particularly successful: 2025 projections foresee a decreasing level of economic growth, standing around the 4.5% (Yao, 2025). According to some analysts, the major responsible for these trends are the threats of new US tariffs: “*Potential U.S. tariff hikes are the biggest headwind for China's growth this year, and could affect exports, corporate capex and household consumption*” (Yao, 2025); in fact, “*tariffs could affect exports, the primary driver of growth given weak domestic consumption and high indebtedness*” (Fasulo and alt. 2025). On his side, President Xi has shown his confidence that China will be able to achieve the economic growth target of 5%, keeping its role of “*engine of world economic growth*” (Xi in Xinhua, 2024b).

As a matter of fact, in September 2024, China has fueled new policies to stimulate economic growth in the country, such as interest rate cuts, financial support against the real estate crisis and increased public spending, aiming to reach the 5% target (Greeven, 2024). However, given the prospects of the revival of Trump's trade war, Beijing must be prepared to oppose the eventual negative consequences of the American tariffs. In this sense, diversification of trade routes and partners will be an important strategy: global initiatives such as the BRI are expected to gain a renewed centrality in the Chinese perspective, with the aim to develop further partnerships and find new markets. In the same way, antagonist initiatives to the BRI, such as the IMEC, or limitations to Chinese market dominance such as the EU tariffs on EV, are negatively seen by Beijing, as they will harmfully impact on the country (Greeven, 2024). According to some predictions by ISPI researchers, China will be willing to negotiate an agreement on tariffs with the US, in order to enact internal reforms and stabilize a dialogue with the American counterpart (Fasulo and alt. , 2025); however, in turn, China could also engage into a more responsive approach, targeting Washington and Brussels with new tariffs, further escalating the ongoing trade war.

As explained in the previous sections and chapters, western countries will continue to try to de-risk from China; however, Beijing still remains an essential partner in specific sectors, such as the ones projected in the famous "Made in China 2025" (MIC) Initiative. This policy, enacted in 2015 by the Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang, is an initiative to reform and update the Chinese industry. It was an ambitious plan targeted with the innovation of Chinese manufacturing, increasing the quality of the production in ten specific sectors, chosen explicitly for their critical role in the future. In Beijing's ambitions, this will have secured to China a leading spot into the industry of high tech (Institute for Security and Development Policy, 2018). These ten sectors are: information technology, numerical control tools, aerospace equipment, high-tech ships, railway equipment, energy saving, new materials, medical devices, agriculture machinery and power equipment (Institute for Security and Development Policy, 2018). Truth be said, these investments have been mostly successful, as China has taken the lead on some of these sectors (Brooks & Fang, 2025). In fact, it is exactly due to this policy that China can today entertain a silent global technology war against the USA: the winner will likely gain dominance in the sector, potentially setting standards on the field (Harper, 2024). This perspective opens therefore the prospect of a long opposition between the two counties in a race for technology, paving the way for a consistent Chinese opportunity. Furthermore, China will also continue its investments on the field of sustainability and climate change: especially after the retirement of the US from the Paris Agreement, China will now represent one of the key actors in this field. In fact, scholars argue that green economy is likely to dominate the direction of Chinese economic investments this year, with the aim to promote the Chinese way to sustainable development.

Given the US's renounced leadership on the field, China is likely to gain a key position in the production of green technologies, securing to Beijing an indispensable role into the future development of these sector (Greeven, 2024).

This central role of Beijing in the field of sustainability and green technology is likely to offer to China a new network of allies. In fact, as the US strengthens its anti-Chinese sentiment, Beijing must aim to preserve a favorable global and regional sentiment to promote its economic progress. As a matter of fact, Beijing has always tried to express a good image of itself, by offering international events, such as Olympics, and providing initiatives to promote win-win cooperation among global partners. The latest policy in this sense is the recent temporarily opening of the Chinese borders to a number of foreign passports: this initiative currently permits to the citizens of 38 countries (mostly of them European) to be exempted from visa requirement if entering China for reasons concerning business, tourism, visits, exchange and transit (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Iceland, 2024). This has been evaluated by experts as a policy to attract investment and tourism, boosting both a positive economic and soft-power consequence on the anti-China narratives prevalent in the West (Fasulo & alt. 2024). China needs indeed to redeem its image at the international level, especially in the regards of its complex relation with Russia: officially China covers a neutral stance in the conflict with Ukraine, however, according to the western narrative, Beijing represents a key economic supporter of the Kremlin during these times of fight. From its support to Moscow, China has benefitted in terms of trade of cheap natural resources and supportive market measures for Chinese exports in Russia (Bogusz & Rodkiewicz ,2025). At the same time, the perpetuation of the war has increasingly affected the relations between Beijing and the West, especially with Brussels, as already explained in the last sub-section. Yet, some scholars have also advanced the hypothesis that the ongoing conflict in Ukraine would be somehow beneficial to China: the war can be considered a distracting tool for global community, avoiding excessive attention towards the Chinese situation and claims. In fact, the opportunity of having its opposers virtually occupied on other fronts leaves temporarily to China more space to enacts its reforms, one for all, the increase of the military spending. At the end, these may represent the reasons for not giving up its silent support to Russia (Harper, 2024).

As a last topic, it is necessary to mention the demographic crisis that the Chinese government is likely to face in the coming years. In 2021 the Chinese populations reached its peak; in 2022, Chinese population started to shrink. Since then, the trend remains steady (Worldometer, n.d; Al Jazeera, 2025). It is important to point out that the demography of a country has critical consequences on state performance in the long term. In fact, an aging population, with a median age of more than 40 years,

and the drop of the birth rates will likely represent an issue for the job market and the social welfare systems in China. These elements prospect for the country a future of potential crisis, threatening its national long-term economic and social stability (Greeven, 2024). Aside from the tradition left by the One Child Policy, the causes of this tendency are societal trends of delayed or avoided marriage, higher career ambitions, or migrant status, which prohibits from bringing families into the country: all of this has resulted in a decrease in fertility (EIU, 2024). As a result of the constantly reducing number of workers and an increasing presence of elderly citizens, the economy will likely enter in stagnation (EIU, 2024). In synthesis, China's fast aging population and low birth rates threaten the future of the national economic growth, labor markets, and social stability of the country.

In conclusion, China's 2025 will be focused on a series of critical challenges, especially in the field of economy, geopolitics and demography; at the same time, Beijing will have new opportunities, majorly steaming from its key role in the field of innovation, technology and green economy, apart from the changing international role of key actors like the US and the EU. Consequently, Xi's office will be centered on maintaining economic stability and strategic influence while protecting from the attacks of US leadership, the complex global situation, and the national issue with its demography. China's approach to these challenges will not only define its place in the international system, but also determine its economic future in the next decades.

Ultimately, this final section has analyzed the latest tendencies and scenarios inside some of the key actors of the global affairs. It was necessary to go through this study as future considerations on Italo-Chinese relations will necessarily be structured also on the consciousness of these national and global dynamics. In this sense, this thesis has shown the historical progress of the Italo-Chinese relations, focusing especially on the contemporary exchanges between national governments. It has also considered relevant strategic, economic and political matters, in order to offer a global understanding of the significance of the future choices of Rome in dealing with China. Having done these premises, the conclusion of this thesis will provide an attentive interpretation of the current situation of Italo-Chinese relations, based on all the topics discussed until here.

Conclusion

This thesis has broadly discussed the topic of the Italo-Chinese relations, considering both the endogenous and exogenous factors influencing the strength and the quality of this partnership. With the purpose of understanding the reasons and the modalities of an eventual transformation of approach in the Rome-Beijing relations, this thesis has structured its research as follows.

Starting with a theoretical discussion on the Rise of China, the first chapter has underlined the historical elements that characterized the relations between Washington and Beijing and the access of China into the global system. Then, the focus shifted towards a more specific analysis of the Belt and Road Initiative, specifically denoting its international significance and the major criticisms by the western countries. In the second chapter, the study concerned the discussion of the Italian decision to sign the BRI Memorandum of Understanding: here, the motivations of the Italian and Chinese interests in committing to each other were underlined, together with the skeptic viewpoint of the EU. At this point, the content of the document was described, delivering a clear prospect on the agreement. Later, in the third chapter, the debate moved towards the topic of the Italian withdrawal from the MoU: in this part, major centrality has been attributed to the discussion on the critical points of this partnership, mentioning also the complex diplomatic process of withdrawal. Finally, the last chapter has elaborated on the new form of the Italo-Chinese relations, analyzing the Action Plan of 2024 and comparing it with the MoU; the section has moreover amplified the debate on the renewed Italian foreign policy ambitions, concluding the analysis with a picture on the major challenges in 2025 global situation.

Every chapter of this study has therefore brought a different element to the discussion. Despite its solid historical chronology, this narration clearly did not represent just a mere sequential exposition of events, instead it critically analyzed the facts by considering their underlying causes and broader implications, both at the national and global level.

Notably, in the analysis of the Italo-Chinese relations, this thesis identified the 2019 Memorandum of Understanding and the 2024 Action Plan as key elements of reference. Both these agreements in fact reflect the historical framework of the global situation on a macro-level, while also revealing each state's national ambitions on a micro-level. For these reasons, both these texts represent two exceptional sources of understanding of the Italian stance on China. Given the focus of this thesis, it was therefore natural to adopt the comparison of the two agreements as a tool to deduct the essential transformation of approach by the two Italian governments vis à vis China in just five years' time. As

the first and major research question of this thesis was focused on the reasons and the tools of the modification of Rome's approach towards Beijing, the comparison between the MoU and the AP represented the starting point of the analysis.

As already discussed in Chapter 3, the reasons behind the termination of the Memorandum in 2024 arise from a complex interplay of different elements. Firstly, the most obvious, was the change of the Italian political leadership. Meloni had in fact consistently criticized the partnership since its signature, so her will to reconsider the pact came as no surprise. However, it is important to acknowledge that political conviction represented just one of the reasons of the withdrawal. As explained in the same chapter, significant economic delusion was registered in Italy during the years of the Memorandum: the balance of trade did not substantially shift and investments in Italy did not increase, corroborating the hypothesis that the agreement had basically no power in creating a system of preferential economic relations. At the same time, Rome had paid a high political price for its participation in the MoU: Italy was in fact perceived as the weakest and more corruptible element of the G7, gaining the virtual status of a potential *longa manus* of Beijing in Europe. The last element was the critical impact of external events: President Biden's renewed interests towards the dialogue with the European allies, the Covid-19 Pandemic and the War in Ukraine have evidently increased Rome's European and Atlantic sentiment, bringing to a renewed Italian stance to the western alignment. Therefore, seen the heavy political costs of the Memorandum with China, the unclear economic results of this partnership and the perceived revival of the western and European sentiments, Rome withdrew from its agreement with Beijing.

As the MoU was terminated, Rome began to demonstrate its engagement into a renewed foreign policy, committing to a strong partnership into the European and Atlantic affairs, but also curing the bilateral relations with the United States and reshaping its global role in the Mediterranean and the Indo-Pacific through the Piano Mattei and the IMEC. At the same time, it was still essential to redefine the relations with China, as Beijing still represents one of the key actors in the global chessboard. Consequently, the government decided to reengage with Beijing, creating a scheme of cooperation compatible with the new Italian ambitions; during this process, the Italian officials never stopped communications with Beijing, as shown by the campaign of official visits operated in China during 2024.

In this respect, it is necessary to state that Italian diplomacy successfully reached its goal: the negotiations did not lead to the signature of a new document; instead, they strengthened the already existing partnership of 2004. This decision symbolizes that, virtually, the Italo-Chinese relations have

never stopped; instead, they grew significantly, through the updates provided in new Action Plan of 2024. The new agreement is in fact an evolution of the 2004 Partnership, enlarging the scope of the cooperation between the two, while prioritizing Italy's interests. Unlike the Memorandum, the Action Plan was not part of a larger international initiative like the BRI: Rome therefore did not have to simply accept China's terms but had more opportunity to shape the cooperation on its standings. Therefore, as stated in Chapter 4, through the AP, Italy and China opened a new chapter of their bilateral cooperation. From the analysis of this second agreement, Rome's employment of national pragmatism is clear: Italy tried to secure economic gains while shifting the original BRI commitments towards different areas of cooperation, such as culture, innovation and sustainability. The Italian victory in this sense was demonstrated by Rome's ability to impose its interests to the counterpart, securing the economic cooperation with Beijing: trade and financial issues were in fact identified by Meloni as the primary ambitions of these negotiations. Therefore, the change of approach is evident, in the sense that, from passively accepting the BRI proposition, Italy drafted a new agreement with Beijing, in light also of its economic priorities and its allies' concerns, showing a renewed commitment to the western cause.

Later in the research, this study has analyzed a second essential key feature on these relations: the existence of strong external drivers behind Italy's attitude on China. The research has shown in fact that the Italian decision to retire from the MoU was not exclusively formulated within national political institutions; instead, it was highly influenced by a mix of economic, political, and strategic factors, both domestic and foreign. The consequent theoretical question to be asked now is: what is the rationale of the renewed Italo-Chinese relations and how can these be defined? To answer this sub-research question, it is necessary to refer to Chapter 3 and 4. This research has demonstrated the complexity behind Rome-Beijing relations, unveiling that these are not simply drafted on one equilibrium of interests. In fact, when dealing with China, Italy must consider not only its own national perspective, but also that of its allies, mainly Brussels and Washington. These external influences add complexity to the balancing act, making Italy's approach to China the result of a broader and more elaborate diplomatic strategy, covering at least two layers of influence.

As first, the Italo-Chinese relations are structured to serve both the interests of Rome and Beijing: this is evidenced by the successful theoretical result of the trade and investment emphasis in the AP. Secondly, these relations are also shaped on the broader equilibrium of western and Chinese interests: the choice to redirect the Italo-Chinese cooperation on softer topics instead of the BRI clearly reflects the European and American concerns on the former partnership. Therefore, given this complex intersection of national interests and external influences, the balancing of the Italo-Chinese relations

seems anything but easy. Hence, based on the considerations discussed in this thesis, the best wording to refer to this situation may be that of a *“fragile balance”*: the presence of at least two degrees of balancing makes the equilibrium crystal delicate. Therefore, the analysis has concluded that the Italian relations with China are characterized by a complex fragile balance, with the ambition to profit from the opportunities from Beijing, while strengthening both the European and American alignments.

Having explicated the complex equilibrium of this apparently simple issue, the study now wants to provide a further element in its analysis, by identifying the prospects for future Italo-Chinese relations within the global context. Despite the impossibility of this thesis to provide certain predictions on the future, it is however possible to identify some potential trends. The future quality of the Italo-Chinese relations is in fact paved on three different challenges: the economic, the political and the national.

Firstly, the future quality of these relations will majorly depend on the prospect of capitalizing potential bilateral trade and investment scenarios. Rome’s challenge is in fact focused on the opportunity to translate the economic promises of the Action Plan in tangible benefits, bringing added value to both the signatories states. Secondly, as stated in Chapter 4, both the European Union and United States have strengthened their stances on China. In this context, while aligning with Brussels and Washington’s vision, the political challenge for Rome will be to continue to exercise the fragile balance, preserving an open distinct channel of dialogue with Beijing in order to continue to profit from the agreement while not dissatisfying its allies. Third, further complexity is given by Italy’s national position in between Washington and Brussels’. As stated at the end of Chapter 4, US and EU’s ambitions are gradually developing a divergence: Trump II made stronger stances on China, threatened imposing tariffs on the EU and prioritized bilateral relations over multilateralism; at the same time, the EU has heightened its stance on China too, however with the ambition of creating a solid European stance against Beijing and promising economic reactions to US tariffs. What is important to state is that a divisive perspective of national vs European approaches may be on a rise, especially for Rome. In fact, on the one hand, Italy’s Prime Minister has cultivated a strong bilateral relationship with Washington, as evidenced by her presence at the ceremony at Capitol Hill and the number of exchanges with the new American government (Balmerr, 2025); at the same time, as member of the European Union, Rome should promote the creation of a unified European voice in the dialogue with Washington, preventing the fragmentation of the European states’ initiatives into separate bilateral relations with the USA. In simpler words, Meloni is now potentially in front of the opportunity of positioning herself as a bridge between the USA and the EU (Balmer, 2025). However, this position reveals potential risks: if Italy aligns too closely with Washington, it will likely pursue

a bilateral relation with Beijing that is firmly anchored to the US' stance, undermining the European unity and weakening the EU's posture on China. Instead, if leaning towards the EU, Rome will actively contribute to the ambitious implementation of a EU shared policy on China, but at the cost of jeopardizing its privileged position with Washington. Both approaches carry consequences, and neutrality is not feasible. According to Tocci, it is impossible for Italy to balance EU and US interests at the same time; indeed, Meloni will always "*choose national interests over European ones*" (Tocci in Balmer, 2025). Therefore, in the long run, it is possible that Italy will find itself in a difficult position, adding a third level of complexity to the already fragile balance of its foreign policy, made out by the American and European Union's divergent approaches on China.

Additionally, it is important to consider that the future of the Italo-Chinese relations will also depend on domestic political stability and unpredictable external factors, such as new global challenges like the Covid-19 Pandemic or future geopolitical developments as the War in Ukraine. These unforeseen events had a strong impact on Italy's decision to retire from the MoU, and it is likely that new challenges will once again influence this course.

In conclusion, Italy's relations with China will likely continue to remain dynamic and multifaced, evolving under the influence of both domestic and international factors. As demonstrated in this thesis, Rome has undergone a significant transformation of its approach vis à vis Beijing, driven by a combination of economic priorities, political considerations, and global dynamics. Looking ahead, Italy will face the challenge of maintaining its national interests, the priorities of its western allies and the need of communicating with China. On the one hand, Rome must pursue economic cooperation with Beijing, an essential partner for trade and investment, while on the other side, it must align itself with the shared concerns of the European Union and the United States, particularly in the context of growing geopolitical tensions. Therefore, this fragile balance will require a diplomatic strategy capable of strongly safeguarding Italy's economic growth, protecting its commitments to the western alliance, and maintaining opened channels of communication and pragmatism with all the parties.

Ultimately, the future of these relations lies in the subtle art of diplomacy: if Rome successfully manages this fragile balance, Italy will not only strengthen its position in the western alignment, but it will also profit from its partnership with Beijing. By handling these challenges wisely, Rome can protect its long-term interests in an ever-changing world, ensuring for Italy a significant role in the future of the global chessboard.

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