

THE GLOBAL
PEREGRINE



How China Turned Crisis into Opportunity in Italy

Opinion

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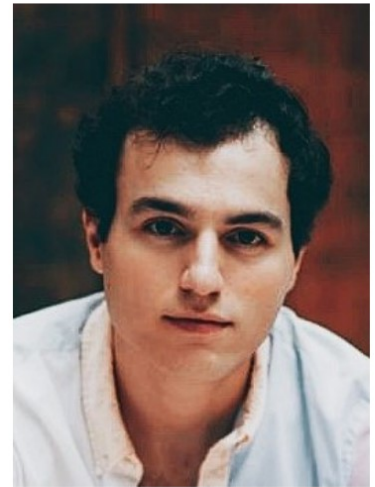
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Italy's disapproval of the European Union during the COVID-19 pandemic has been sharp and prompt. 77% of Italians believe the EU will not help during the crisis and 72% say it has not helped[1]. Given its status as the third-largest economy in the trading bloc, this presents a serious challenge to the integrity and cohesiveness of the Union's wider security posture. Italy is, thus, seen as Europe's 'backdoor', the continent's corruptible doorman who, given the proper incentive, will allow Chinese and indeed Russian interests to pervade.



"[The] Italian parliament is afraid to talk about China at the moment, given Movimento 5 Stelle's close ties with Peking"[2], says Antonio Tajani, vice president of Forza Italia. Tajani is, of course, referring to Italian foreign minister Luigi Di Maio's signing of the Silk Road agreement in late March 2019. Di Maio, then deputy Prime Minister and leader of the anti-establishment M5S party, defied the advice of his European allies and, with the agreement, opened the door to a Chinese economic partnership.

Pino Cabras, head of The Five Star Movement (M5S), has asserted that no superpower holds the key to hegemony yet so it is important for Italy to keep its doors open to everyone. The Italian public shares this sentiment and seems to have warmed up to China, particularly following the worst of the coronavirus pandemic in Italy. In a poll held in late April 2020, 52% of Italians named China as Italy's closest ally[3], a shocking figure given the 42-percentage point jump from 10% in 2019.

So, what has actually transpired between the two nations to make such a startlingly positive impression on the Italian public? The answer has partly to do with how little the European Union has done. At the height of the global pandemic, with a death toll in the tens of thousands, Italy's emergency financial requests to the EU were initially rejected.

The European Central Bank's new head, Mario Draghi's successor, Christine Lagarde, additionally made matters worse by issuing no promises to protect Europe's most vulnerable economies, shattering Italian bonds in the process. The result was a state of bitter entrapment; Italy felt chained to a Union of pure pageantry, as when the time came for its closest allies and partners to extend a hand, they instead kept theirs firmly in their pockets.

Chinese public relations in March and April focused entirely on changing the narrative on the pandemic, shifting its role from the country of origin to the country that came to everyone's rescue. China magnified any PPE coming into Italy as a benefit of their privileged relationship under the Belt and Road Initiative, calling it the 'health silk road' and, wrongly, touting the shipments as aid when they had been paid for weeks prior[4] by the Italian Civil Protection Department. The tactic appears to have worked despite the embarrassing efforts from China's Global Times at the beginning of the pandemic to pin the blame on Italy for the outbreak, latching onto an interview given by Italian doctor Giuseppe Remuzzi[5].

China was not alone in using benevolent disinformation during Italy's outbreak. Russia too, flexed its soft power by rolling a military convoy loaded with PPE through the little streets of Italy's Northern regions. Russia paid €200 to Italians willing to make videos of gratitude towards Putin, one of which was of an Italian man taking down an EU flag and replacing it with the Russian tricolor and a sign saying "thank you Putin"[6].

Despite its bombastic mask diplomacy, China still managed to sweeten perceptions. News of the West's losing battle to hang onto a key NATO partner and EU member will likely be disappointing to Washington after it poured \$100 million into helping Italy through the crisis, and Merkel's Germany[7] which provided Italy with the vast majority of its imported PPE. In contrast, China made sure no finger it lifted in helping Italy went

unnoticed. Every box of PPE was labelled 'the friendship road knows no borders'[8].

Chinese twitter bots generated nearly half of all posts under the hashtag #forzacinaeitalia[9] ("come on China and Italy") and China's foreign ministry spokeswoman even posted a video on Twitter[10] of Romans applauding on their balconies to a dubbed Chinese national anthem and insisting there were chants of "grazie Cina" (thank you China).

Nevertheless, the subject remains a precarious one to broach in the Italian parliament, particularly as tensions between the US and China are mounting. One might expect President Biden to adopt a Bush-era ultimatum on Chinese relations, calling upon his NATO allies to be either 'with' him or 'against' him in the near future, a decision which will surely test Italy's resolve and true diplomatic intentions. Although Italy's new Prime Minister, Mario Draghi, is pro-US, close relations between the United State and Italy will be critical in the months to come, particularly as the US and China engage in tit-for-tat diplomacy over the banning of Huawei 5G.

1 https://www.adnkronos.com/il-sondaggio-fiducia-in-ue-crolla-anche-fra-europeisti_3212mJtCFBTR3HapU3NYGM

2 https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2020/05/05/news/scontro_usa-cina_politica_italiana-255711587/

3 https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2020/05/05/news/scontro_usa-cina_politica_italiana-255711587/

4 <https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/chinas-disinformation-campaign-in-italy/>

5 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/beijing-twisted-my-words-on-coronaviruss-italian-origin-says-scientist-giuseppe-remuzzi-6twwhkrvn>

6 <https://www.politico.com/news/2020/04/21/russia-coronavirus-offensive-200199>

7 <https://thediplomat.com/2020/06/chinas-disinformation-campaign-in-italy/>

8 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/31/china-isnt-helping-italy-its-waging-information-warfare/>

9 <https://time.com/5814940/china-mask-diplomacy-falters/>

10 <https://twitter.com/SpokespersonCHN/status/1239041044580188162>