


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# China's pursuit of international status through negotiated deference: an empirical analysis of Italy's parliamentary attitude

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## Abstract

Italy's controversial decision to sign a Memorandum of Understanding for collaboration on the Belt and Road Initiative with China in 2019 has been widely debated. This article seeks to break new ground by offering a theory-informed contribution investigating the rationale behind Beijing's own commitment in the negotiations leading to the signing of the BRI MoU. It argues that the Chinese government accepted the risks involved in the process for the sake of promoting an accelerated advancement in China's positioning in the international status hierarchy through negotiation of deference against agency with Italy. The article empirically probes the extent to which such a strategy of status enhancement on China's part is sustainable over time. Based on a content analysis of all China-related political stances expressed in ordinary non-legislative policy-setting acts tabled in both Houses of the 18<sup>th</sup> Italian Parliament, from March 2018 through to August 2021, the article suggests that China's strategy is hardly sustainable. In fact, the steady deterioration of China-related sentiment among Italian Members of Parliament as a consequence of Beijing's policies towards Hong Kong, the coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) outbreak, and Xinjiang matches the expectations of previous scholarship on international status as it confirms that social closure mechanisms discussed in the literature prevail over foreign policy consistency when the status-seeking actor is perceived as crossing critical normative thresholds.

**Key words:** China–Italy relations; Chinese foreign policy; deference; hierarchy; parliamentary policy-setting; status

On 23 March 2019, during Xi Jinping's first state visit to Italy as President of the People's Republic of China (PRC),<sup>1</sup> the Italian Minister for Economic Development and the Chairman of China's National Development and Reform Commission signed a Memorandum of Understanding for collaboration on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).<sup>2</sup> The MoU is not a legally binding agreement, as then Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte emphasised in his remarks to Parliament and the press;<sup>3</sup> however, this event had global resonance. Many of Italy's closest partners voiced their alarm at what seemed a policy course that markedly diverged from the increasingly firm attitude towards Beijing prevailing in Washington and Brussels (Dossi,

<sup>1</sup>Xi Jinping had previously been on a state visit to Italy during his second term as Vice President of the People's Republic of China, in June 2011.

<sup>2</sup>Ministry of Economic Development of the Italian Republic, 'Elenco delle intese istituzionali sottoscritte a Villa Madama', Rome, 23 March 2019, [http://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/documenti/documenti/Notizie-allegati/Italia-Cina\\_20190323/Intese\\_istituzionali\\_Italia-Cina.pdf](http://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/documenti/documenti/Notizie-allegati/Italia-Cina_20190323/Intese_istituzionali_Italia-Cina.pdf) (accessed 23 September 2021).

<sup>3</sup>Official records of the debate on the floor of the Chamber of Deputies, session 144, 19 March 2019, <https://www.camera.it/leg18/410?idSeduta=0144&tipo=stenografico#sed0144.stenografico.tit00030.sub00030.int00010> (accessed 25 September 2021).

2020). In spite of it being only the culmination of a prolonged process of deepening of the Sino-Italian strategic partnership inaugurated in 2004 (Andornino, 2015), this particular episode has stimulated much media commentariat, policy analysis, and some limited scholarly attention. The focus of this debate, however, has largely been on the reasons that may have led Italy, a NATO ally and founding member of the EU, to become the first (and, as yet, only) G7 country to endorse China's controversial initiative, and what the implications of this stance may be (Pugliese, 2020).

This article seeks to break new ground by offering a theory-informed contribution looking at China, the other player in this bilateral relationship. The Italian government was not the only actor investing substantial political capital in signing the BRI MoU: given the centrality of the BRI in China's ambitious new foreign policy posture and the growing hostility of the US vis-à-vis its aim to enlist European partners in BRI-related cooperation, Beijing too faced a delicate cost-benefit calculation. By signing this particular MoU with an unprecedented Italian populist coalition government formed less than ten months earlier, in the presence of the supreme 'nucleus' of the Party-State, Xi Jinping (You, 2020), and against strong political headwinds emanating from both Washington and key European capitals, risk-conscious Chinese decision-makers indicated the strategic value they attached to this act. The Chinese foreign ministry is notoriously loath to gamble on high-visibility deals that may leave the leadership exposed to embarrassment in case of sudden policy reversals by the other signatory. Yet, a decision was made to finalise the BRI MoU with Italy even though Chinese policy analysts and scholars were acutely aware of Rome's 'inconsistency' (*yaobai xing*) in its foreign policy towards non-traditional partners (Zhong, 2020).

China's apparently counter-intuitive course of action in this case stimulates the main research question of this article: what was the rationale behind Beijing's own commitment in the negotiations leading to the signing of the BRI MoU with Italy? The argument developed in the next sections seeks to explain the conduct of Chinese leaders employing International Relations (IR) theories of status. Beijing's choice – it will be argued – was meant to accelerate China's advancement in the international status hierarchy by negotiating deference against agency with its Italian counterpart. As articulated below, scholars from disparate traditions in political science and International Relations agree that status is an important factor in particular cases of real-world importance: critical choices have been attributed to status-seeking motives of states and leaders (Mastanduno, 1997; Renshon, 2016, 514). In Chinese academia, the debate on the issue of 'international positionality' (*guoji dingwei*) has long been recognised as uniquely vigorous (Cai, 2010). As of May 2019, the Chinese Social Science Citation Index reported over 260 journal articles dealing specifically with 'international status' (*guoji diwei*), reflecting the salience attached to the 'fluctuations in the international status of major powers' (Men and Wang, 2019), which are seen as a 'microcosm' of what the Chinese leadership views as the 'unprecedented changes in the world over the past century' (Yang, 2021).

In keeping with the predictive 'social purpose' of the IR discipline, a subordinate question is then investigated: to what extent is such a strategy of status enhancement on China's part sustainable over time? This question is tackled through an empirical analysis grounded on an original dataset of all China-related political stances expressed in ordinary non-legislative policy-setting acts tabled in both Houses of the 18<sup>th</sup> Italian Parliament, from March 2018 through to August 2021. They point to the conclusion that the steady deterioration of Italian MPs' (Members of Parliament) sentiment with regards to China, as a consequence of Beijing's policies towards Hong Kong, the coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) outbreak, and Xinjiang, confirms that social closure mechanisms discussed in the literature (Tilly, 2005) prevail over foreign policy consistency when the status-seeking actor is perceived as crossing critical 'normative thresholds' (Miller *et al.*, 2015). Such findings allow a thorough assessment of whether the Italian case matches the expectations of previous scholarship on international status. They also represent a timely contribution to the ongoing efforts to examine the traction that China's foreign policy

has been able to develop in its pursuit of deepened partnerships with key European interlocutors that may be open to loosening their alignment with Washington's preferences. Such dynamic is critical, in Beijing's strategic calculus, if Europe is to move in a direction where – in Xi Jinping's own words – it would 'independently make a correct judgment and truly realise its strategic independence' (Reuters, 2021a).

### Status in international relations

Status is a constitutive component of social life (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990) and as such it is widely debated among scholars, including in the IR community (Corbetta *et al.*, 2013; Paul *et al.*, 2014; Ward 2017; Zhang, 2017; Duque, 2018; Baxter *et al.*, 2018; Renshon, 2017; Murray, 2019; Wood and Cox, 2021). Empirical evidence suggests that human beings tend to experience a basic desire for status (Anderson *et al.*, 2015, 593), to the point that they may strive to acquire material goods not for the security and well-being they procure, but exclusively for their status-enhancing properties (Snidal, 2002). Conversely, in some instances, an aspiration for improved status can explain the conduct of individuals whose behaviour clearly goes against their own material best interests. Since political leaders are also human, it should not be surprising that similar dynamics can be observed in world politics.

As in other domains of social life, in international relations too status is mostly a positional good: it defines rankings in a hierarchical order to which states – that is to say, their leaders – are extremely sensitive. This is especially true for major powers (Wohlforth *et al.*, 2018, 544) and China is no exception (Welch Larson and Shevchenko, 2019). Especially since 2008, the leadership in Beijing has been intensifying its efforts to reshape China's international status, to this end 'adjusting its national strategic resource allocation while proactively integrating into the global governance systems' and gradually displaying leadership in the ideational, as well as institutional, realm. The launch of the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013 is but the most visible instance of this new orientation (Men, 2017a, 2017b, 2019).

Status positions can be conceived of according to two different logics: either in absolute or relative terms. In the first instance, status is the product of a state's belonging to a group that reinforces the state's social identity (Lake, 2014), as in the case of the vexed question of Italy's status as a major power after unification. In the second, ranking within a social hierarchy reflects the greater or lesser ownership of certain attributes that are collectively regarded as significant, such as wealth, coercive capacity, social cohesion, cultural attractiveness, demography, socio-political organisation, regulatory and diplomatic influence (Welch Larson *et al.*, 2014, 7).

Status thus has an inherently comparative nature, since it depends upon the positioning of actors relative to relevant peers. Such positioning, however, does not depend entirely on the possession of material assets. It has a crucial social dimension: it derives from widely shared second-order beliefs<sup>4</sup> about the relative worth of an actor's qualities and conduct (influenced by material capabilities), in particular as esteemed by the dominant social group (Murray, 2010; Welch Larson and Shevchenko, 2010; Dafoe *et al.*, 2014; Barnhart, 2016). Status is, in fact, mostly 'local', in the sense that a state's leaders tend not to make comparisons comprehensively with all other states across all dimensions, but try to preserve or improve the country's status first and foremost across key 'circles of recognition'. Such circles are reference groups to which they wish their state to be perceived as belonging, or against which they deem it to be judged or placed in competition (Ringmar, 1996, 164). These are the critical audiences on which a state's leadership works to consolidate or alter beliefs about its status.

A government will tend to seek a status ranking for its country that is commensurate with its capabilities for a variety of reasons, but mainly because status is useful to coordinate expectations

<sup>4</sup>An actor's beliefs about another actor are first-order beliefs; an actor's beliefs about the beliefs of other actors are second-order beliefs.

of prevalence in strategic interactions within the international system (Dafoe *et al.*, 2014), and because it is valuable for domestic political legitimacy (Ward, 2017, 37). Far from being a marginal, ‘aesthetic’ concern, therefore, status is ‘one of the most sought-after qualities in world politics’ (Renshon, 2017, 3), including for its self-reinforcing nature: the more a state receives recognition, the more others deem it worthy of recognition (Correll *et al.*, 2017). This trait will appeal in a very special way to emerging countries that feel they have a gap to fill in terms of recognition, which entails overcoming some resistance from established powers.

Precisely on account of its perceived value in a system in flux, a growing body of scholarship in the last two decades has explored how the conduct of states seeking to increase their own status can generate significant international tensions and even precipitate conflicts (Horowitz *et al.*, 2005; Murray, 2019). When leaders conclude that their country, relative to specific circles of recognition, is not enjoying the status it ‘deserves’ in accordance with its capabilities – in terms of military might, economic strength, instruments of influence or symbolic-regulatory resources – dissatisfaction develops that may easily turn into outright grievance (Renshon, 2016, 516). This sort of expected pernicious development underlies the worrisome conclusions of power transition theories, increasingly evoked in recent years with reference to China’s rise as a global power.

### China’s pursuit of status in a post-unipolar world

Status has historically been a matter of the outmost concern for Chinese leaders. Paradigmatic examples include Confucius’ admonition about the overarching need to perform the ‘rectification of names’ (*zhengming*) prior to engaging with governance (Feng, 2016), and the symbolic, as well as geopolitical, implications of Imperial China’s tributary system (Zhang and Buzanz, 2012). Today, the definition of China’s international status remains ‘a central issue in China’s participation in international affairs’ (Men, 2017b, 87).

The most authoritative definition of the current international status of the PRC is that offered by Xi Jinping himself in his Report to the 19<sup>th</sup> national congress of the Chinese Communist Party: ‘China’s international status as the world’s largest developing country remains unchanged’ (Xi 2017). Underlying this ostensible continuity, however, is a growing appreciation that China is today one of the major powers in the emerging post-unipolar context. In fact, the now decade-old foreign policy discourse advocating a ‘new type of great power relations’, which has been emanating from Beijing with reference to the future course of Sino-US relations, suggests that Chinese leaders consider their country to deserve recognition on par with the United States (Qi 2015). Such is the implicit outcome of Xi’s vision to transform China from a large economic power to a fully modernised innovative country through the ‘great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation’.

The key notion underpinning such ‘new type’ of relations is that of ‘mutual respect’ (*xianghu zunzhong*), which, in Beijing’s understanding, ought to reflect the US recognition that a rejuvenating China’s international status has been significantly enhanced by the surge in its ‘comprehensive national strength’ (Zhang, 2013). Advocated since 2013 as a foundational prerequisite for sustainable relations (Central Group of the Party Committee of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013), mutual respect refers specifically to the need to ‘stop challenging China’s fundamental political system or its domestic order’, which includes both the leadership of the CCP domestically and other ‘core interests’ such as Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang and human rights (Wang, 2014).

Scholarship has shown that while nations are increasingly demanding respect from others (Fattah and Fierke, 2009), such struggle for recognition may be unpacked to reveal either of two different pursuits (or both): respect based on the principle of equality and respect that is rooted in the appreciation of a country’s prestige generated by notable achievements (Honneth, 2012). The former pursuit, which is common to all governments and especially to members of the Global South, defines a ‘horizontal’ dynamic grounded in the norm of

sovereignty. The latter reflects an aspiration to exploit the recognition of a country's success, and it leads to a hierarchical conception of status (Nel, 2010). What is peculiar to China in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is that, as the 'largest developing state', it is at once advocating 'sovereign equality [as] the fundamental expression [of] national interests' (Xi 2018), and seeking the recognition of its special status as the bearer of a unique 'Chinese wisdom' that has resulted in its historic domestic success. Through the 'practical platform [of] the Belt and Road Initiative', Beijing is now ready to 'contribute China's wisdom and strength to promoting world economic growth and improving global governance' (Institute of Party History and Literature, 2021), leading a new type of multilateralist globalisation that would not conform to the US-led 'coercive rules-based solution' which results in a 'non-neutral international system' (Zhou and Fu 2017).

For a great emerging power such as China, however, the already problematic balancing act of pursuing both sovereign equality and the higher status befitting a global norm shaper takes place in a non-conducive international system that remains in many ways marked by the vestiges of former unipolarity (Wohlforth, 2009). In fully fledged multipolar and bipolar systems, power balancing tends to have stabilising effects. In a (residually) unipolar system, on the other hand, the emergence of a country that acquires resources perceived as potentially sufficient, over time, to enable it to limit the primacy of the hegemon, or even replace it, is an intrinsically destabilising development (Schweller and Pu, 2011). Additionally, if the rising power's political regime and value profile are heterogeneous vis-à-vis those of the dominant power – that is to say, if both systemic unipolarity and systemic homogeneity are threatened (Aron, 1962) – the emerging actor will be exposed to the kind of acute insecurity that derives from it being perceived by the hegemon and its partners as 'ontologically' revisionist on account of its own getting stronger, regardless of the direction of its foreign policy. In the case of China, the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party has long been aware of the need to mitigate security dilemma risks while advocating the multipolarization of the international system. This concern explains its sophisticated discursive strategy aimed at portraying China as a 'different' emerging power, willing and able to stage a 'peaceful rise' (Zheng, 2005).<sup>5</sup> Its attitude changed over the past decade, as Chinese policymakers and scholars increasingly came to view the posture of the United States vis-à-vis China as containment-oriented, even prior to Xi Jinping's elevation to the apex of the Chinese polity in 2012, and to his sweeping 'new era' of foreign policy assertiveness (Clinton, 2011, Wang 2017).<sup>6</sup>

Since in a unipolar context the conduct of an emerging power draws particular attention, it is rational for its leaders to refrain from untimely shows of strength, both to avoid conflict and to preserve the environmental conditions that allowed the country's rise in the first place. The Chinese leadership generally refers to these conditions as the nation's 'strategic window of opportunity' for development (Campbell and Ratner, 2018), singling them out as the third of the three 'core interests' of the Chinese Party-State.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, in a rising state whose political and value profiles are heterogeneous vis-à-vis those of the hegemon, the domestic legitimacy of the leadership may be threatened by too much convergence with, or acquiescence to, an international order that markedly reflects the institutional and normative preferences of the dominant state. As Pu and Schweller (2014) note, inaction can be countenanced only temporarily: the next most prudent set of options for the leadership of an emerging power in a unipolar context involves

<sup>5</sup>See section I ('The security situation') of the 2004 White Paper on National Defence (Beijing, Ministry of Defence of the PRC), which outlines the important role of developing countries – among which China includes itself – in promoting global multipolarity and 'democratisation' of international relations: <http://en.people.cn/whitepaper/defense2004/defense2004.html> (accessed 21 August 2021).

<sup>6</sup>Qualified observers believe that the PRC's new Eurasian orientation, a central tenet of China's foreign policy under Xi Jinping, should be seen as a reaction to the US policy of strategic realignment towards the Asia-Pacific region, first articulated in October 2011 by the first Obama administration.

<sup>7</sup>The others are, in order of importance, the upholding of the Party's monopoly of power domestically, and the preservation of the territorial integrity of the country.

signalling – both externally as well as to interested internal audiences – the emerging state’s dissatisfaction, while preserving plausible deniability in the face of charges of revisionism.

At one end of the signalling spectrum are reactive approaches, which include the articulation of ‘discourses of resistance’ seeking to delegitimise the order. Such approaches may or may not be accompanied by material practices aimed at increasing the costs incurred by the hegemon to maintain the order (Schweller and Pu 2011, 44). At the opposite end of the spectrum, the leadership of the emerging country can resort to proactive creative strategies, including those that seek to redefine the metrics for evaluating the status, to highlight the difference between the hegemon and the emerging state while at the same time raising the latter’s profile (Larson and Shevchenko, 2003). Leaders opting for this more ambitious course of action recognise that gaining higher status allows their country to enjoy greater traction in international politics (Volgy *et al.*, 2011). This is especially desirable when a rising power engages in ‘preventive revisionism’ to rebuff hegemon-led attempts at reforming the international order in ways that may consolidate the incumbent power structure (Andornino, 2008), and when it articulates precursive components of a new *raison du système* as the basis for a transformed order (Men and Jiang, 2020).

For a rising power faced with a well-established hierarchy of international status, promoting its own status by means of an exercise of social entrepreneurship is the preferable course of action because it avoids both emulation strategies that may be politically controversial internally (social mobility)<sup>8</sup> and risky competitive strategies at the international level (social competition) (Welch Larson and Shevchenko, 2010). Despite being positional, status does not have to be a zero-sum game: by adopting differentiated metrics, actors can improve their own status without simultaneously jeopardising the status of another actor. By acquiring a pre-eminent status outside the geopolitical arena through the promotion of new models of development, or the re-evaluation of previously marginalised norms, an emerging country like China can try to activate ‘soft-bandwagoning’ mechanisms in terms of recognition that do not obviously entail subscribing to an anti-hegemonic agenda.

This sort of duplication of metrics (Breslin, 2015) allows the rising power to test its own capacity for international leadership without entering on a collision course with the hegemon. Such capacity will be revealed by the level of consensus it is able to generate across the most significant circle(s) of recognition, consolidating parallel status evaluation metrics beside the established ones. The emerging actor’s objective will be to create a general perception that its status depends on beliefs inspired by a metric that is different, though equally salient, from those that define the hegemon’s status, so that its rise does not come across as a direct challenge to the dominant power’s status. In the case of China, this creative approach is manifested in the articulation of a what could be regarded as a model of sovereign developmental modernity that is defined by an agenda of ‘inclusive globalisation’ and ‘democratisation of international relations’ (Ren, 2011; Liu *et al.*, 2018). Its most clear policy manifestation to date is the Belt and Road Initiative, Xi Jinping’s signature proposition for promoting what is described as a more open, inclusive, balanced and widely beneficial version of economic globalisation, ‘guided by the principles of extensive consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits’ (Xi, 2019).

For the Chinese leadership today it is of strategic importance that the social purpose of the international order, traditionally underpinned by Western liberal values, shifts to include additional components, such as state-led promotion of trans-national material development, and international ‘harmony’ (that is to say, political pluralism in the international system).<sup>9</sup> By

<sup>8</sup>An example of an emulation strategy rejected by the Chinese leadership is adherence to the notion of a ‘responsible stakeholder’, advanced by the US administration under George W. Bush through the then Deputy Secretary of State Robert B. Zoellick, ‘Whither China: From Membership to Responsibility?’, Remarks to the National Committee on US-China Relations, New York City, 21 September 2005, <https://2001-2009.state.gov/s/d/former/zoellick/rem/53682.htm> (accessed 14 July 2021).

<sup>9</sup>‘Harmony in diversity’ (*he er butong*) is one of the many iterations of the concept of ‘harmony’, a core tenet in the multi-layered system of Confucian thought. Parts of this ethical-philosophical heritage are currently being selectively revived to serve the CCP’s ideological and propaganda agendas.

integrating the global normative landscape, Beijing can ensure that the new status evaluation metrics it advances are perceived as legitimate and become routinised, clearing the way for China to seek pre-eminent status according to those metrics, without directly challenging the established US primacy. In so doing, Chinese leaders can hardly be accused of opposing the present international order, unless one takes such order to be a synonym of US hegemony (Johnston, 2019).

It is within this framework that one can more effectively appraise the full extent of the Chinese leadership's ambitions for the Belt and Road Initiative, a multi-layered policy package for the promotion of 'new Silk roads' launched in 2013 and more extensively articulated in 2015.<sup>10</sup> Such ambitions far exceed the often-cited needs to reduce the chronic overcapacity of some state-owned conglomerates, or to mitigate social instability in the country's north-western provinces through accelerated economic development. These objectives could have been achieved without resorting to a high-visibility, and high-risk, grand policy design such as the BRI, which spans different domains (infrastructures, finance, cyber...) with trans-continental reach (Andornino, 2017; Leverett and Wu 2017). Nor is it plausible to envisage the BRI as a vast geopolitical manoeuvre initiated by a leadership that has lost sight of the risks associated with ambitions that stretch beyond the traditional irredentism of the Chinese Party-State (Fallon, 2015). The discourse emanating from Beijing, which describes the BRI as a catalyst for organic, win-win development activated by public investment and lending promoted by China, reveals a broader strategy: the BRI operationally embodies those values that can empower Beijing's ambitions for international status in accordance with its own metrics.

For any such proactive strategy of social creativity to be successful, however, it is essential that the new evaluation metrics on which beliefs about the status of an emerging country are based are validated, in particular by the dominant circle of recognition. This circle, which reflects the consolidated metrics that underpin the primacy of the hegemon's status, has the most influence in legitimating new metrics, and the idea itself of parallel metrics, in the eyes of the wider international audience. This legitimation process, which is critical to lifting the country out of its condition as 'status underachiever' (Corbetta *et al.*, 2013), resolving the mismatch between its capability 'portfolio' and status attribution, is a complex social dynamic which necessitates a significant amount of time to play out. Frequently, the time span required for new collective beliefs to become entrenched is incompatible with the 'clock speed' of the ambitions of the political leaderships seeking to elevate the status of their country. This is especially true for China, given the unprecedented pace of its growth. Fast-tracking this dynamic, however, is very difficult (Mercer, 2017). Substantial status enhancement may result from the establishment of a particular kind of 'deference hierarchy' (Wolf, 2019) where a state belonging to the dominant circle performs repeated public acts of strong symbolic value that reflect an asymmetric relationship in which the emerging country appears superordinate. This has nothing to do with occasional tributes of *kudos*: in this event patterns of deference are manifested through repeated, salient interactions between actors situated in asymmetrical positions (Holsti, 1970, 240; Gould, 2003).

Such interactions rarely take place spontaneously, especially between states that are very exposed at the international level, as is the case for an emerging power and a country belonging to the dominant circle of recognition. To the contrary, they are negotiated to ensure that the deference hierarchy generated by the states' conduct denotes a properly calibrated asymmetrical interdependence between the two. In this transactional logic, the emerging country has a strategic interest in eliciting voluntary deference from the state that belongs to the hegemonic circle in order to bolster its strategy of social creativity for the promotion of new status

<sup>10</sup>See Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, 'Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Maritime Silk Road', Beijing, 28 March. [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1249618.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1249618.shtml) (accessed 21 August 2021).

evaluation metrics. In return, it will be prepared to align itself with certain preferences expressed by the other state.<sup>11</sup>

Significantly, the China–Italy MoU signature was not an isolated event: since the mid-2010s, a succession of Italian governments had been working on strengthening relations with China, including through far-reaching decisions such as the sale of strategic national assets (Otero-Iglesias and Weissenegger, 2020). Negotiations on investments have little to do with status, however. It is in BRI-related interactions that we may observe the negotiated patterns of deference mentioned above. The MoU may have been the most apparent ‘milestone’ (Men and Jiang, 2020, 3), but it was not the only instance of senior Italian government endorsement of the Belt and Road Initiative and, consequently, of its underlying values. Between May 2017 and April 2019 at least two other salient interactions took place, under very different Italian governments, when Prime Ministers Paolo Gentiloni and Giuseppe Conte respectively took part in the two iterations of Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation held so far, the only heads of government of a G7 country to do so. A widely publicised non-binding agreement and top-level attendance to official forums shifting the established normative landscape: these are examples of precisely the patterns of deference that an emerging power requires of a member belonging to the hegemonic circle of recognition to succeed in its strategic pursuit of enhanced international status. While pursuit of status is not the sole possible explanation for Beijing’s unexpectedly risk-acceptant attitude in negotiating the BRI MoU with Italy (bureaucratic politics being just one alternative interpretative framework), the argument offered here is that the search for deference from a key Western partner is a rationale that cannot be overlooked while probing Xi Jinping’s China’s strategic calculus.

### China’s volatile status: an empirical analysis of the Italian parliament’s stance

The previous section has tackled the main research question: it has employed IR theories on international status to investigate China’s motives in pursuing the negotiations that led to the signing of the China–Italy BRI MoU in 2019. In so doing, it has validated the heuristic capacity of this body of theories against a salient case study and contributed more generally to the debate on China’s foreign policy. As both senior Chinese scholars and a former Italian ambassador to the PRC have remarked, deepening Italy–China relations have been seen as having the potential be an exemplary testing ground for ‘a new type of international relations’ between China and developed countries (Bradani, 2015; Men and Jiang, 2020). It is now time to look ahead and assess the extent to which China’s strategy may be sustainable over time. This is very relevant as it is the reiteration of deference – not sporadic gestures – that drives status enhancement.

International status rankings are social constructs, and as such they may not be directly observed. What can be observed, however, are the two sources of status: respect generated by a country’s recognised prestige, and deference determined by an asymmetric relationship vis-à-vis a superior country (Halevy *et al.*, 2012). As noted by Wolf (2019, 1191) these two sources can causally influence each other: deference, for instance, is typically reinforced by the superior partner’s prestige. Conversely, when a state engages in behaviour that adversely affects its social prestige, patterns of deference may become more difficult to perpetuate. What constitutes deviant conduct that may damage a country’s prestige is of course culturally defined (Ridgeway and Correll, 2006; Neumann, 2014), but Lake (2013, 59) has persuasively shown

<sup>11</sup>As this relational understanding of status shows, status does not only affect international conflict, as most scholarship would have it, but also international cooperation. In the case of current China–Italy relations, what Italian policymakers sought was greater agency in their dealings with Beijing. Officials in Rome have long been frustrated by what they perceive as comparative lack of traction when seeking to push forward negotiations with their Chinese counterparts, especially in the trade realm. In 2019, senior Italian officials made it plain that the government led by Giuseppe Conte was ready to lend political recognition to the BRI in exchange for Chinese goodwill in future economic negotiations (Coralluzzo 2008; Geraci 2019).



that negotiated deference does not normally depend on a shared culture with agreed standards of evaluation. Shared values certainly contribute to the stability of such deference patterns, but differences can be managed. Thus, cultural specificity is often more or less explicitly invoked to suspend judgement on the objectionable behaviour of a country with which negotiated patterns of deference have been established, as in the case of Italy and China discussed above. Here the issue is clearly one of degree: when a country engages in behaviour that crosses a normative threshold (Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998), that is to say when it violates a basic standard of appropriateness universally upheld by the dominant circle of recognition, it becomes untenable for any member of the same circle not to sanction it. Withdrawing deference would be the first move. This explains the striking decline suffered by China's prestige in its relations with Italy and its impact on deference, mere months after the zenith in the bilateral relation was reached in the immediate aftermath of the signing of the BRI Memorandum.

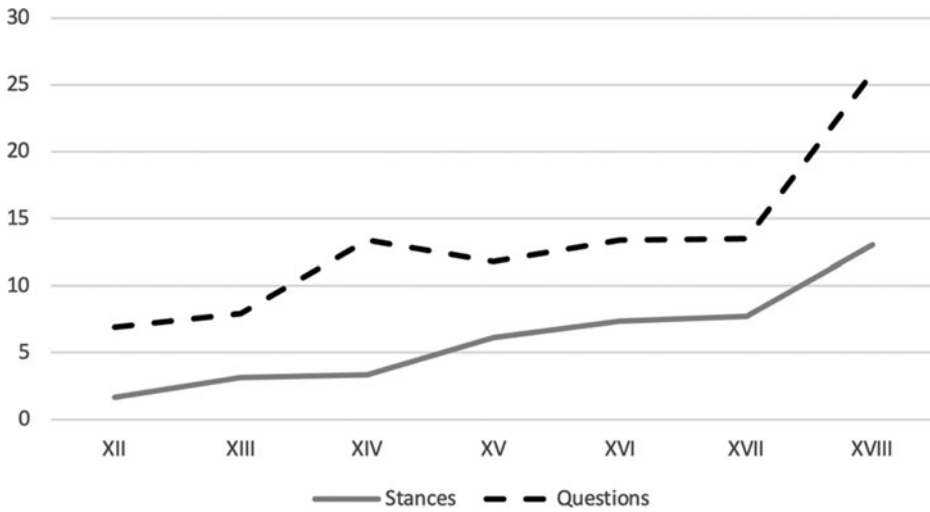
To operationalise China's prestige recognition in the context of Sino-Italian diplomatic relations, this article presents an original dataset of all salient China-related political stances formulated in ordinary non-legislative acts tabled during the 18<sup>th</sup> Italian Parliament between March 2018 and August 2021. While deference patterns are significant foreign policy acts performed by the executive branch, it is from the attitudes of MPs, who are less constrained by diplomatic protocol and less exposed to the risk of attracting retaliatory measures, that one can gauge the extent of respect for another country's prestige. A shift in parliamentary sentiment has implications for the concerned country's status on two levels: on the one hand, MPs will directly convey their position to the general public domestically and among colleagues abroad. On the other, especially in a parliamentary democracy such as Italy's, it will constrain the government's policy space for perpetuating its patterns of deference. Italy's 18<sup>th</sup> Parliament offers a particularly fertile case study: not only is it the one in office during the final negotiations of the BRI memorandum, under the right-wing populist first Conte government (June 2018 – September 2019), but it also witnessed the aftermath of the agreement, while enabling the formation of two other fundamentally different governments (Sun, 2021): a left-of-centre populist government led by the same Giuseppe Conte (September 2019 – February 2021), and a 'national responsibility government' under Mario Draghi from February 2021.

To perform the empirical analysis, a preliminary search for China-related keywords<sup>12</sup> in the Italian language was conducted on the publicly accessible online archives of the Chamber of Deputies (Sindacato Ispettivo, <http://aic.camera.it/aic/search.html>). As Figure 1 shows, during the course of the so-called 'second Republic' (Donovan, 2003), from the early 1990s onwards, a steady increase in the number of political stances and parliamentary questions mentioning China and/or China-related issues can be observed.

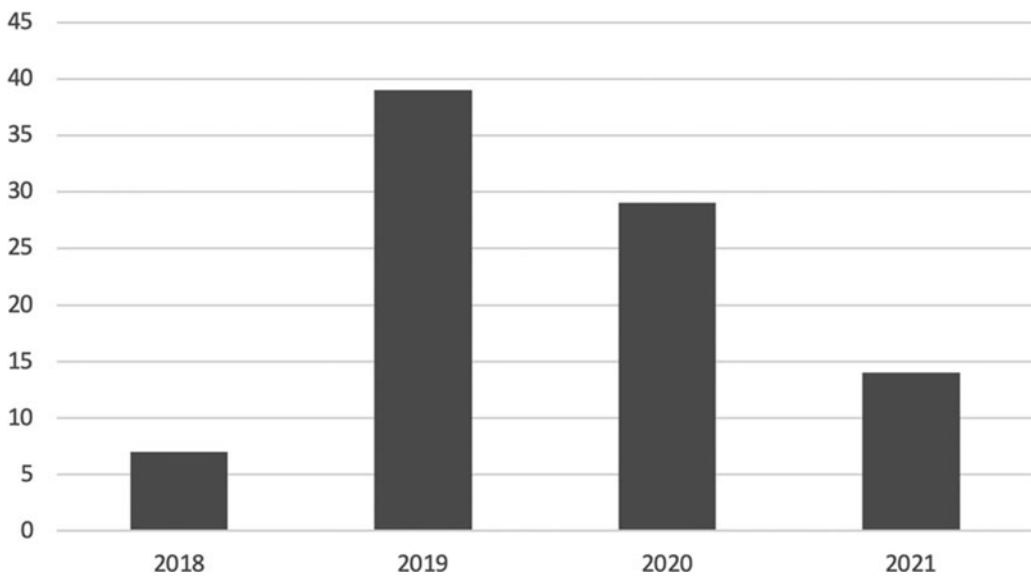
For the purpose of this study all ordinary non-legislative acts tabled during the 18<sup>th</sup> Parliament (XVIII Legislatura) from its opening in March 2018 until the end of August 2021, except MPs questions, were retrieved from the database. Ordinary non-legislative parliamentary acts fall in two categories: policy-setting acts (motions, resolutions and orders of business) and acts of parliamentary oversight (interpellations and questions). Since individual MPs questions can be inspired by highly personal concerns, while interpellations better reflect political oversight at the party level, a decision was made to include only interpellations in the corpus of documents to be examined through content analysis. Every act containing at least one of the selected keywords was treated singularly as a unit of analysis. Out of a total of 548 acts, 89 were singled out as salient, in that they focus exclusively or primarily on China-related issues (Figure 2). As shown in Figure 3, 85% of them are policy-setting acts.

A coding matrix was then developed. The matrix covered five broad dimensions of analysis: (1) formal and technical characteristics of the act; (2) relationship of the act with political parties; (3) issues specifically addressed by the act; (4) signatories' attitudes on China; (5) the government's

<sup>12</sup>Six keywords were selected: 'Cina', 'Cinese', 'Hong Kong', 'Xinjiang', 'Tibet' and 'Taiwan'.



**Figure 1.** Average monthly mentions of China-related keywords in ordinary non-legislative acts from the 12<sup>th</sup> (XII) to the 18<sup>th</sup> (XVIII) Italian Parliament (April 1994–August 2021).



**Figure 2.** Number of salient China-related political stances in non-legislative acts tabled in the 18<sup>th</sup> Italian Parliament (March 2018–August 2021).

reactions to the act. Each dimension was organised into various sub-dimensions, and for each sub-dimension relevant categories were defined. Table 1 presents the dimensions, sub-dimensions and categories, together with the coding scheme.

Dimension 1 and its sub-dimensions were included in the matrix to capture the technical and formal characteristics of the act, identifying the act type, whether the act implied a vote or not, and the current status of the act within parliamentary procedures. Dimension 2 and related sub-dimensions aim to identify the party tabling the act and its role in the political framework of the moment (e.g. whether signatories belonged to the parliamentary majority, to the opposition, etc.).

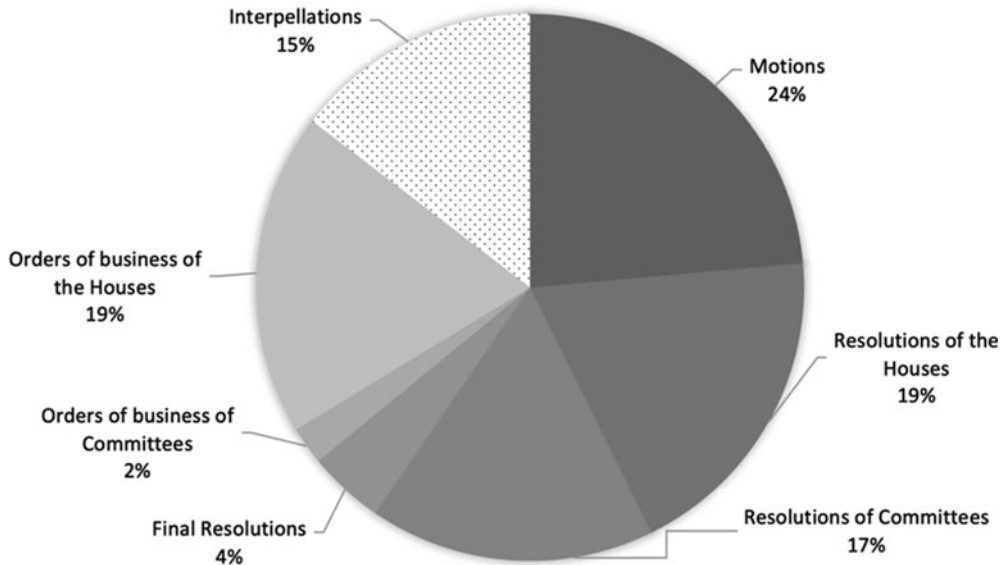


Figure 3. Nature of non-legislative acts containing salient China-related stances in the 18<sup>th</sup> Italian Parliament (March 2018–August 2021).

This dimension was deemed particularly important, since the first signatory and the co-signatories share responsibility in displaying their party's stance on China. Dimensions 3 and 4 specifically focus on the contents of the acts: in keeping with content analysis techniques described in the literature (Titscher *et al.*, 2000, 63), dimension 3 addresses theme analysis and field of meaning analysis, operating at the semantic semiotic level. Dimension 4 performs attitude analysis, focusing on the meaning and effect of the message and thus operating at a semantic-pragmatic semiotic level.

Sub-dimensions related to dimension 3 have been introduced to specify in which context China-related issues were discussed by Italian political parties (Figure 4); additionally, they aim to identify the main themes addressed through the acts (Figures 5 and 6).

The categories outlined for sub-dimension 'Degree of focus on China' allows to distinguish acts that are primarily focused on China-related issues from those in which China is mentioned within a broader discussion. Sub-dimension 'Type of focus on China' serves to clarify whether China is mentioned as a State or not, as in the case of acts focusing on the Chinese diaspora in Italy. The 'Perspective' sub-dimension was included to highlight whether a domestic or international perspective was adopted by the signatories. Categories for the 'Broad thematic area' and 'Specific themes' sub-dimensions, as well as for dimension 4 ('Signatories' attitudes towards China') were defined on the basis of the author's expertise on contemporary China and international affairs (White and Marsh, 2006). Specifically, dimension 4 category 1, i.e. *positive engaging*, corresponds to a positive and constructive attitude towards the PRC and Chinese agency more broadly. Category 2, i.e. *neutral constructive*, indicates that the attitude towards the PRC and Chinese agency more broadly is cautiously favourable. *Neutral critical* (category 3) denotes a higher degree of scepticism towards PRC and Chinese agency more broadly. *Negative stigmatising* (category 4) is associated to a squarely critical attitude towards the PRC and Chinese agency, which can be combined with the explicit stigmatising of PRC conduct or with stances that support policies running counter to Beijing's fundamental preferences (i.e. on Hong Kong, Taiwan, etc.). Finally, the sub-dimensions related to dimension 5 had the purpose of describing the government's reaction to the act, including the voting status of the act.

**Table 1.** Matrix of analysis: dimensions, sub-dimensions, categories and coding scheme

Dimension	Sub-dimension	Categories and coding scheme
Formal and technical characteristics of the act	Act type	1 = motion; 2 = interpellation; 3 = oral question; 4 = written question; 5 = Committee question; 6 = House resolution; 7 = Committee resolution; 8 = final resolution; 9 = House order of business; 0 = Committee order of business
	Procedural stage	1 = concluded; 2 = under way
Relationship of the act with political parties	Act implies voting?	0 = no; 1 = yes
	Tabling party (first signatory)	1 = Lega; 2 = PD; 3 = FDI; 4 = M5S; 5 = FI; 6 = Gruppo misto; 7 = centrist minor parties; 8 = left-wing minor parties; 9 = right-wing minor parties
	Co-signatories	1-9: column H; 0 = no co-signatories
Themes specifically addressed by the act	Coherence with the government majority	1 = majority party; 2 = opposition party; 3 = bipartisan act; 4 = non-partisan act
	Degree of focus on China	1 = act exclusively focussing on China-related issues; 2 = act focussing on other issues in relation to which China is treated as a fundamentally relevant actor
	Type of focus on China	1 = act focussing on China as a state; 2 = act focussing on China-related issues without referring to China as a state
	Perspective	1 = act with an international perspective; 2 = act focussing on issues of primarily Italian domestic relevance
	Broad thematic area	1 = trade & investment; 2 = human rights; 3 = security & safety; 4 = Indo-Pacific regional issues; 5 = global affairs; 6 = health & environment
	Specific themes	11 = trade competition; 12 = access to the Chinese market; 13 = Chinese investments in Italian companies; 14 = other investments; 15 = Italian public debt; 16 = monetary policies; 17 = other financial issues; 21 = religious freedom; 22 = human and political rights; 23 = Tibet; 24 = Xinjiang; 25 = other Chinese minority issues; 26 = other human rights; 31 = cyber security; 32 = safety of products imported from China; 33 = criminality and Chinese mafia; 34 = extra-regional military issues; 35 = other security issues; 41 = Hong Kong; 42 = Taiwan; 43 = border and maritime controversies; 44 = free trade agreements; 51 = EU-China relations; 52 = international organisations; 53 = Belt and Road Initiative; 54 = space policies; 61 = Covid-19; 62 = pollution; 63 = the Arctic region; 64 = high seas; 65 = climate change; 66 = sustainable agriculture
	Signatories' attitudes towards China	Type of attitudes towards China
Government's reactions to the act	Act voting status	1 = approved; 2 = rejected; 3 = withdrawn; 4 = yet to be voted upon; 5 = does not require a vote
	Government's opinion	1 = favourable; 2 = contrary; 3 = not yet presented; 4 = unwarranted

Each salient act was independently coded by the author and by a second researcher according to the matrix presented above. Dimensions 1, 2 and 5 captured factual information and only a few occasional coding discrepancies were found: these inaccuracies were identified and appropriately amended. For the coding of dimensions 3 and 4, respectively themes specifically addressed by the acts and signatories' attitudes towards China, which represent the core of the empirical analysis, inter-rater reliability was calculated. Varying degrees of disagreement among researchers were identified in a total of 11 instances out of 89 acts, ensuring sufficient coder agreement for the internal validity of the study (Krippendorff, 2004). Coding disagreements were then reconciled through verbal dialogue until an agreement was reached.

The outcome of the analysis, summarised in Figure 7, allows several significant inferences. First, over 80% of all non-legislative acts containing salient China-related stances in the 18<sup>th</sup> Italian Parliament between March 2018 and August 2021 denote a generally negative attitude by Italy's main five political parties, and over 2/3 fall in the 'negative stigmatising' category.

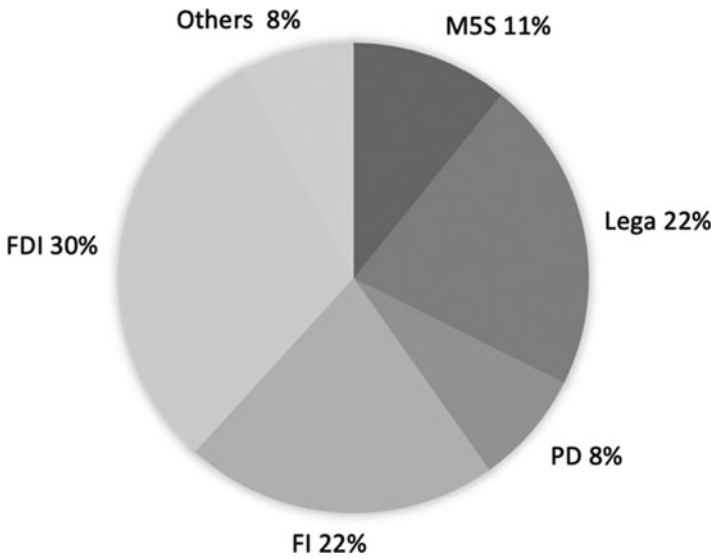


Figure 4. Share of non-legislative acts containing salient China-related stances in the 18<sup>th</sup> Italian Parliament (March 2018–August 2021) by promoting or seconding party<sup>13</sup>.

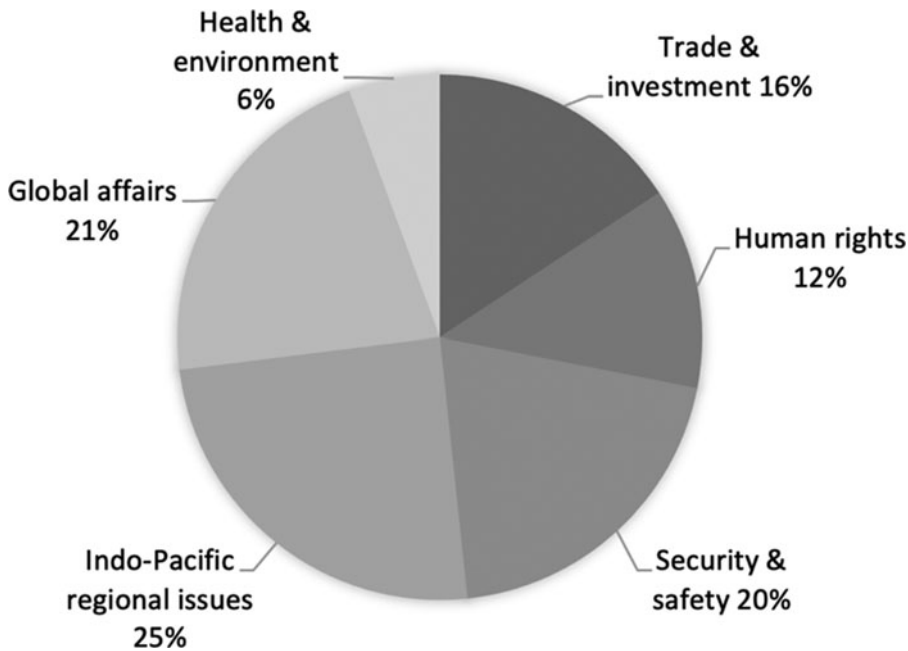


Figure 5. Share of non-legislative acts containing salient China-related stances in the 18<sup>th</sup> Italian Parliament (March 2018–August 2021) by domains.

Second, only one party, M5S, displays, on average, a prevalingly positive sentiment: all other parties have tabled or seconded acts qualifying China, or Chinese agency more broadly, in negative terms in over 70% of cases. Third, right-wing and right-of-centre parties consistently show a strong negative sentiment, a trait exacerbated by the need on the part of the Lega’s leadership

<sup>13</sup>91% of all stances were expressed in acts tabled or seconded by the five largest political parties represented in the 18<sup>th</sup> Italian Parliament, comprehensively accounting for 79,5% of Chamber of Deputies members and 76,9% of Senate members as of 31 August 2021: Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S), Lega, Partito Democratico (PD), Forza Italia (FI) and Fratelli d’Italia (FDI).

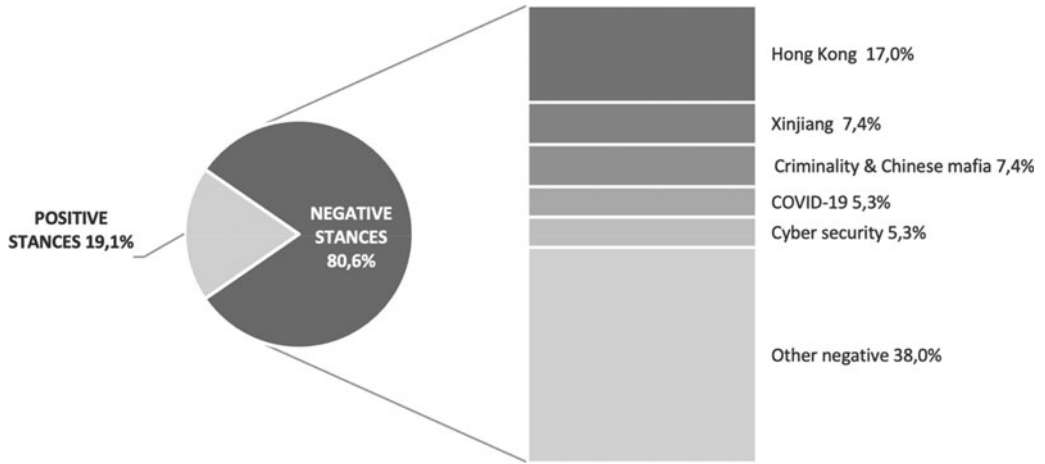


Figure 6. Share of non-legislative acts containing negative salient China-related stances in the 18<sup>th</sup> Italian Parliament (March 2018–August 2021) and themes eliciting the most numerous negative stances.

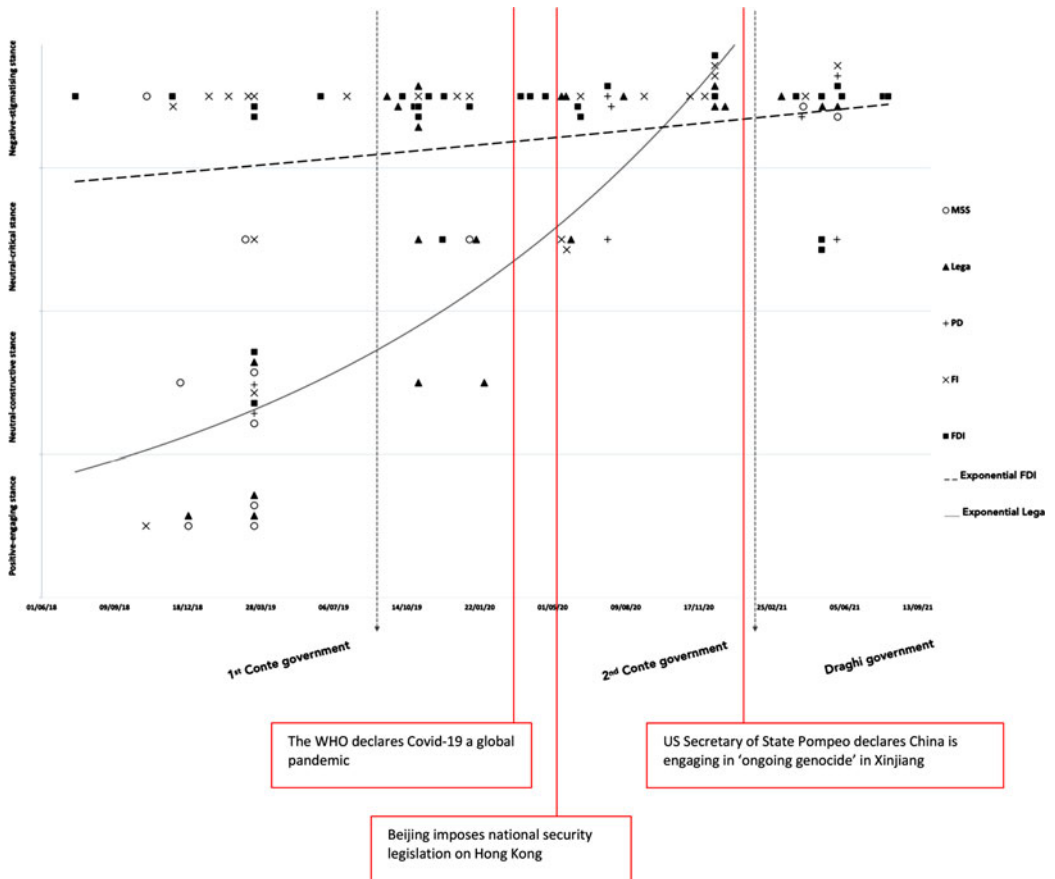


Figure 7. Salient China-related political stances tabled or seconded by the largest five parties in the 18<sup>th</sup> Italian Parliament (March 2018–August 2021).

to rectify its briefly-held pro-BRI position during the first Conte government (as demonstrated by the exponential curve in [Figure 7](#), which shows the Lega as the party with the most pronounced swing from positive to negative territory over time).

The most illuminating result, however, speaks directly to the branch of literature on an international status that is concerned with the adverse impact of behaviour that crosses a normative threshold of appropriateness upheld by the dominant circle of recognition. In addressing a common complaint about the difficulty in drawing a clear map of where parties stand ([Ghiretti, 2021](#)), a diachronic examination of the sentiment of the five main Italian parties, as manifested by their China-related stances in salient non-legislative acts of parliamentary policy-setting and oversight, suggests a steady deterioration of China's prestige in a very short period of time (just over three years). After an initial phase of relatively more positive attitudes during the first Conte government, strongly influenced by the high number of generally constructive stances expressed during the Floor debates in the two Houses of Parliament on 19 March 2019 on the prospects of deepening cooperation with China through the Belt and Road Initiative, a sharp reduction in positive stances can be noticed during Giuseppe Conte's 17-month long second government, and none at all feature since the beginning of the Draghi government through to the end of August 2021.

In the latter two political phases, three issues dominated China-relevant parliamentary proceedings, generating the largest number of salient stances: the debate on the Floor of the Chamber of Deputies regarding the situation in Hong Kong after Beijing's decision to impose draconian new national security legislation on Hong Kong (October 2019–January 2020), the debate on the Floor of the Chamber of Deputies regarding China's responsibilities vis-a-vis the Covid-19 pandemic (May–August 2020), and the debate in the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Chamber of Deputies on the repression of the Uighur minority in Xinjiang (March–May 2021). In all three cases, the five main Italian parties unanimously reported 'negative-stigmatising' positions.

Each of the three issues relates to basic standards of appropriateness universally upheld by the West. The 2020 Hong Kong crisis, quite apart from the political demands voiced by part of the local citizenry, entails China's breaching of an international treaty: the 1984 Sino-British Joint Declaration, which stipulated that the economic, social, governing, and legal systems of the would-be Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (under PRC sovereignty since 1997) should remain basically unchanged at least until 2047. The Covid-19 emergency called into question basic principles of transparency on China's part in the face of extraordinary risks for global health. Finally, the situation of Xinjiang spiralled into the realm of alleged crimes against humanity when US Secretary of State Pompeo declared the PRC to be responsible for 'ongoing genocide' ([Pompeo, 2021](#)). In line with the expectations derived from the literature, as discussed above, China's conduct in these three cases was seen by Italian MPs as crossing critical normative thresholds. In a striking reminder of the volatile nature of international status, China's prestige in the Italian Parliament collapsed within months of the signing of the BRI Memorandum, extinguishing the political space for deference on part of the Italian government. Ultimately, China's pursuit of accelerated status enhancement through the leveraging of the BRI in its relations with Italy does not currently appear to be a sustainable strategy.

## Conclusions

In the toast he offered at the State luncheon in Rome following the signing of the 2019 Memorandum of Understanding for collaboration on the Belt and Road Initiative, Chinese President Xi Jinping pronounced a few rare impromptu opening words: 'I came to Italy to strengthen *political* relations between our two countries; I have succeeded.'<sup>14</sup> This article complements existing literature on Chinese foreign policy, China–Italy relations, and the BRI by

<sup>14</sup>Working notes of the author, present at the State luncheon as a signatory to one of the institutional agreements exchanged during the Chinese president's state visit; italics added.

investigating the political rationale behind Beijing's commitment to this particularly high-profile MoU in spite of Italy's unsteady engagement with non-traditional partners such as China, as well as strident criticism from the US and key European capitals.

The article employs International Relations theories of status to explain the conduct of Chinese leaders as an attempt to accelerate China's advancement in the international status hierarchy by negotiating deference against agency with its Italian counterpart. In this reading, 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. As a close US ally, founding member of NATO and the EU, and the sole G7 country to have repeatedly engaged with BRI initiatives at the highest institutional levels, the salience of Italy as a member of such dominant circle of recognition would justify the gamble taken by Beijing in exposing the 'core leader' personally as the sponsor of the Sino-Italian BRI MoU.

Empirical analysis, however, reveals China's strategy to be hardly sustainable at this time. Based on a new dataset of all China-related political stances expressed in ordinary non-legislative policy-setting acts tabled in both Houses of the 18<sup>th</sup> Italian Parliament, from March 2018 through to August 2021, a steady deterioration of Italian MPs' sentiment regarding China can be traced. This is in keeping with the literature expectation that social closure mechanisms prevail over foreign policy consistency when critical normative thresholds are crossed. In this article, three such thresholds are identified: China's policies towards Hong Kong, the Covid-19 outbreak, and Xinjiang.

In a Parliamentary democracy such as Italy, a consistent and bipartisan rise of negative sentiment vis-à-vis China in Parliament is likely to extinguish the political space for deference on part of the Italian executive. This appears to suggest a twin policy failure resulting from the BRI MoU: on the one hand, China's strategy of accelerated status enhancement has been thwarted by its own disregard for a critical relational process affecting status: social closure against an actor that is perceived as crossing normative thresholds. On the other, Rome's inconsistency in its negotiated patterns of deference towards China invites recrimination on Beijing's part: as seen from the increasingly assertive viewpoint of the Chinese leadership, such shift in posture cannot be excused on account of domestic dynamics they firmly defend as matters of exclusive sovereign interest. Italy is thus unlikely to be the sole actor 'carefully assessing' the value and implications of the BRI MoU going forward, as Prime Minister Mario Draghi has suggested (Reuters, 2021b). Miscalculated expectations for an agreement that was showcased as a game-changer are likely to paradoxically leave China-Italy relations in a worse state than prior to its signature.

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