

FEATURE

All roads lead to Rome for Xi

Italian PM Giuseppe Conte says the partnership on Belt and Road projects with China is strictly business

By Pepe Escobar

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China's President Xi Jinping and his wife Peng Liyuan, seen in a file pic from December, will head to Palermo after the signing of an MoU on the Belt and Road scheme in Rome. Photo: AFP / Pedro Fiza/ NurPhoto

All (silk) roads do lead to Rome, as this Saturday Chinese President Xi Jinping and Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte will sign a memorandum to adhere to the New Silk Roads, or Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Afterward, Xi becomes a magnanimous version of [The Sicilian](#), visiting the port of Palermo, with Beijing intent on investing in local infrastructure.

Atlanticist hysteria has been raging wildly – with the simplistic narrative focused on the fact that Italy is a G7 member, at the heart of the [Mediterranean](#) “[mare nostrum](#)”, and crammed with NATO bases. Thus, it cannot “sell out” to China.

[Conte](#) and diplomats in Rome have confirmed that this is strictly about economic cooperation, and signing a memorandum is non-binding. Italy has, in fact, been informally aligned with the Belt and Road scheme since 2015 when

it became one of the founding members of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which finances scores of BRI projects.

EU members Greece, Portugal and Malta have also signed BRI agreements. Berlin and Paris have not – at least not yet. Same with London, but post-Brexit that will inevitably happen as trade with China will become even more important for the UK.

[Here, in English and Italian](#), is the draft text of the memorandum, although the final version may be slightly more diluted to appease the Eurocrats at the European Commission (EC), which last week defined China as a “systemic rival”.

Milan’s Corriere Della Sera published a comprehensive op-ed [signed by Xi Jinping himself](#), even quoting legendary writer Alberto Moravia. Xi stresses the “strategic trustworthiness” between China and Italy and vows to “build a new stage of Belt and Road in aspects of the sea, the land, aviation, space and culture”. So, yes, this is not only about geoeconomics, but crucially also about the projection of geopolitical soft power.

I have already explained how [Marco Polo is back in China](#), again, and how the EU is struggling to position itself in a common front when [dealing with its top trade partner](#). The ongoing geoeconomic game is essentially about the Maritime Silk Road – with Italy positioning itself as BRI’s privileged southern European terminal.

The port of Venice is already being upgraded for a possible role as a BRI terminal. Now, the possibility opens for Genoa and the northern Adriatic ports of Trieste and Ravenna to be developed by COSCO and China Communications Construction. Conte himself has already singled out, on the record, Genoa and Trieste as “terminals for the New Silk Roads”.

COSCO is on a roll. It has operated the port of Piraeus in Greece since 2008 and holds 35% of Rotterdam and 20% of Antwerp. And it plans to build a terminal in Hamburg. In the Battle of the Super-Ports, as I defined it, between northern and southern Europe, Cosco is betting on both sides.

Zeno D’Agostino, president of the Trieste port authority, even dreams of becoming [the new Singapore](#), profiting from Chinese investment, while not renouncing to manage its new status – as happened with Piraeus. He has perfectly understood how, for the Chinese, Trieste is “the perfect gateway to Europe.”

Palermo is an even more interesting story. It happens to be the hometown of both Italian President Sergio Mattarella and, more significantly, Michele Geraci, the undersecretary of state for economic development. Geraci was a finance professor at Zhejiang University in Hangzhou from 2009 to 2018. A Sinophile fluent in Mandarin, he has been Rome’s point man negotiating with Beijing.

China directly investing in the Sicilian economy is a huge deal, totally in tune with Italian national interest in terms of expanding the role of a strategic bridge between southern Europe and northern Africa.



Minister Giuseppe Conte, left, is seen with European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker in this photo from late last year in Brussels. Photo: AFP / Dursun Aydemir / Anadolu

On the hypersensitive telecom front, it's certain that every direct reference to data sharing, 5G and strategic infrastructure will not be part of the Italy-China BRI memorandum.

That won't alter the fact that both Huawei and ZTE have been experimenting for years now on installing 5G in Italy. Huawei already sponsors two "smart and safe cities" research centers in Italy. And the recent [opinion piece](#) by one of Huawei's rotating chairmen has made a huge splash not only in Italy but across the EU; Guo Ping argues that the reason for the current demonization campaign is that Huawei equipment blocks all back-doors available for spying by the [US National Security Agency](#).

[Moving](#) on, when Xi visits France early next week, his focus will be totally different. The Paris establishment has not made up its mind yet on how deep to relate with BRI. Inside the EU, France is the top power in terms of constraining Chinese investment. So Xi's strategy when meeting President Macron will rely on stressing cooperation on climate, global governance and peacekeeping operations.

According to media reports, Macron has also invited German Chancellor Angela Merkel and European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker to [join](#) the meeting.

Beijing is very much aware that France chairs the G7 this year and is the crucial co-actor along with Germany in shaping EU policies, especially after the crucial European elections in May that may translate into a huge success for far right, anti-Brussels parties.

Beijing is also focused on guaranteeing a smooth China-EU summit in Brussels on April 9, which will make things much easier for the 16+1 summit of China plus Eastern and Central Europe nations in Croatia on April 12. The inescapable fact is that the 16+1 – the majority of whom are part of the EU – as well as Greece, Portugal, Malta and now Italy are all on board of BRI.