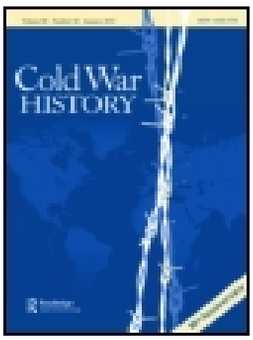

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A significant periphery of the Cold War: Italy-China bilateral relations, 1949–1989

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This paper aims to analyse the evolution of Sino-Italian relations from the foundation of the PRC to the end of the Cold War, with a special focus on the construction of the official relationship from 1970 to 1992. The article has been divided into three parts: a critical reflection on the historical context that set the ground for the evolution of Sino-Italian relations between the 1950s and the 1970s; an assessment of the historical impact of normalisation; and a reconstruction of the main dynamics in bilateral relations between 1970 and 1992.

This paper analyses the evolution of Sino-Italian relations from the foundation of the PRC to the end of the Cold War with a special focus on the construction of the official relationship from 1970 to 1992. The logic of the paper follows a prevailing trend in historiography to go beyond the 'bipolar' paradigm and to look at the Cold War as a system defined by a complex web of relationships between major and minor powers. Within this trend, special attention has recently been devoted by historians of international relations to the analysis of Sino-European relations.[1] Europe and China were in fact the most important *third actors* in the Cold War system. Being both territorial entities as well as political and economic spaces located at the crossroads of the mutual spheres of action of the two superpowers, they played an important role in the evolution and reshaping of the bipolar system.

The Cold War defined the outlines of these two spaces. On the one hand, it accelerated the decline of Europe as a central player – a process already started during World War II and intensified by the dismantling of the colonial system – and, on the other,

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[1] On Sino-European relations during the Cold War see: Enrico Fardella, Christian F. Ostermann & Charles Kraus, *Sino-European Relations During the Cold War and the Rise of a Multipolar World. A Critical Oral History* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2015).

favoured the shift of the centre of gravity of the international system towards Asia and hence to an *Asianisation* of the international system, which is still in progress today. In today's perspective, an analysis of the historical dynamics that described the evolution of Sino-European relations might help to better understand the connections between these two 'movements', the decline of Europe and the ascent of Asia.

Thanks to the progressive opening of diplomatic archives in both Europe and China, many sources on Sino-Western European relations during the Cold War have emerged in recent years. Only a few of them, however, have thus far been transformed into historiography. The prevailing trend of scholarship in China pays more attention to the relationship between Beijing and the Socialist countries in Eastern Europe with a residual group of scholars focusing on Sino-British and Sino-French relations.[2] On the European side, France and the UK – due to a wider availability of primary sources coupled with a stronger tradition in Chinese studies – have been so far the most active in investigating the evolution of their mutual relationship with China.[3]

On the contrary, the historical account of Sino-Italian relations over the last sixty years still remains mostly unexplored both in China and Europe.[4] The documentation in the Historical Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (ASMAE)[5] in Italy and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA)[6] in China has yet to be fully analysed by diplomatic

[2] An interesting overview in English on recent trends of Chinese scholarship can be found in: Zhi Liang, Yafeng Xia, Ming Chen, 'Recent Trends in the Study of Cold War History in China' (occasional paper), October 2012, ECNU-WWICS Cold War Studies Initiative. Accessed 9 December 2013. http://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/recent-trends-the-study-cold-war-history-china.

[3] K.A. Hamilton, 'A "Week that changed the world": Britain and Nixon's China visit of 21-28 February 1972", *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 15:1 (2004), 117-135; Bernard Krouck. *De Gaulle et la Chine* [De Gaulle and China). Les Indes Savantes, 2012.

[4] Three recently published books in Italian marked an important step in this direction: Laura De Giorgi and Guido Samarani, *Lontane, vicine: le relazioni fra Cina e Italia nel Novecento* [Far away, nearby: relations between China and Italy in the twentieth century] (Roma: Carocci, 2011); Carla Meneguzzi Rostagni and Guido Samarani (eds), *La Cina di Mao, l'Italia e l'Europa negli anni della Guerra fredda* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2014); Mario Filippo Pini, *Italia e Cina, 60 anni tra passato e futuro* [Italy and China, 60 years between past and future] (Roma: L'Asino d'oro edizioni, 2011). Two previously published studies, a book in English and an article in Italian, shed light on Sino-Italian relations from the beginning of the Cold War to China's entry in the UN in 1971 - Andrea Campana, *Sitting on the Fence: Italy and the Chinese Question. Diplomacy, Commerce and Political Choices, 1947-1971* (Firenze: Graficalito, 1995) – and on the negotiations that led to the normalisation of diplomatic relations between Rome and Beijing – Paola Olla Brundu, 'Pietro Nenni, Aldo Moro e il riconoscimento della Cina comunista', [Pietro Nenni, Aldo Moro and the recognition of communist China] *Le Carte e La Storia* (*Documents and History*) 2 (2004): 29–51.

[5] The documents currently available on the relations between Italy and the People's republic of China (PRC) at the Italian archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri, hereafter ASMAE) stretch from 1949 to 1964 for the documents of the Direzione Generale Affari Politici [General Directorate for Political Affairs] and to 1970 for the ordinary telegrams from the main embassies.

[6] The documents available at the Central Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on Sino-Italian relations stretch from 1949 to 1965. In 2013, however, the Archive had massively restricted the access to the sources available. The documents quoted in this paper have been analysed by the author before such a disposition occurred.

historians.[7] The same can be said for the oral accounts of diplomats, both in Italian[8] and Chinese,[9] who took part in constructing Sino-Italian relations since 1949.

Furthermore, the vast majority of sources available are mostly related to the period before the establishment of the diplomatic relations between the two countries – namely from 1949 to 1970 – and do not help the historian in the analysis of the evolution of the official relations until the end of the Cold War.[10]

This article represents a partial exception in this regard. Thanks to the generous permission given by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the author consulted four official volumes – so called *marsupi* (folders) – with the preparatory notes drafted by the Office of the Secretary General on the occasion of official exchanges between China and Italy in 1973,[11] 1977,[12] 1978[13] and 1979.[14] These sources have a different nature from

[7] A first attempt has been done by the author in Enrico Fardella, 'The normalization of relations between Italy and the People's Republic of China' in Giovanni Andorino and Maurizio Marinelli (eds.) *Italy's encounters with modern China. Civilizational exchanges, imperial dreams, strategic ambitions* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 117-146. A previous study by Prof. Ennio Di Nolfo on the MAE papers related to the negotiations for the recognition of the PRC (1968-1970) have been published by the Italian Senate on the eve of the 40th anniversary of Sino-Italian normalisation: Ennio Di Nolfo, *La normalizzazione delle relazioni diplomatiche tra la Repubblica italiana e la Repubblica popolare cinese* [The normalisation of diplomatic relations between the Italian Republic and the People's Republic of China] (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2010), 1-58;

[8] Marco Francisci Di Baschi, *Le tracce sottili: l'attualità del passato negli scritti di un ambasciatore* (*Thin traces: the actuality of the past in the memories of an ambassador*) (Roma : Istituto italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente, 2007). Vittorino Colombo, *Incontri con la Cina*, (*Encountering China*) Milano 1995; Roberto Gaja, *L'Italia nel mondo bipolare: per una storia della politica estera italiana (1943-1991)* [Italy in the bipolar world: toward a history of Italian foreign policy] (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1995); Giorgio Luti, *Tra politica e impresa: vita di Dino Gentili* [Between politics and enterprise: life of Dino Gentili] (Firenze: Passigli, 1994); Domenico Zucaro, *Pietro Nenni: i nodi della politica estera italiana (Pietro Nenni: pivotal points in Italy's foreign policy)* (Milano: Sugarco, 1974); Giuliana Nenni and Domenico Zucaro, *Pietro Nenni: tempo di guerra fredda, diari 1943-1956* [Pietro Nenni: cold war times, diaries 1943-1956] (Milano: Sugarco, 1981); Pietro Nenni, *I conti con la storia: diari 1967-1971* [Coming to terms with history: diaries 1967-1971] (Milano: Sugarco, 1983); Mariano Rumor, *Memorie (1943-1970)* [Memories, 1943-1970] (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 1991); Egidio Ortona, *Anni d'America: la cooperazione, 1967-1975* [The American years: cooperation, 1967-1975] (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1989).

[9] Cai Fangbo, 'From De Gaulle to Sarkozy' (Shanghai: Shanghai Shiji Chubanshe, 2007).

[10] Only two accounts of Pini – *Italia e Cina, 60 anni tra passato e future* – and Francisci – *Le tracce sottili* – both former Italian diplomats who worked in China, provide some insights into this important stage of the relations.

[11] Visita Ufficiale del Ministro degli Affari Esteri Senatore Giuseppe Medici nella Repubblica Popolare di Cina, 6-12 gennaio 1973 [Official visit of the minister of foreign affairs Senator Giuseppe Medici in the People's republic of China, 6-12 January 1973] Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Segreteria Generale, Visite di Stato/Visite Ufficiali, Riunioni a Hong Kong e a Bangkok, Cina-Egitto-Arabia Saudita-Beirut-Austria, 1973 Vol. 1. [hereafter OVM-1973].

[12] Visita Ufficiale dell'ON Ministro (Arnaldo Forlani) a Pechino 12-16 giugno 1977 [Official visit of the Minister Forlani to Beijing 6-12 June 1977] Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Segreteria Generale, Visite di Stato/ Visite Ufficiali, Cina-Zambia-Siria, 1977 Vol. 5. [herafter OVF-1977].

[13] Visita in Italia del Ministro degli Affari Esteri della Repubblica Popolare Cinese, Huang Hua, 5-10 Ottobre 1978 [Visit to Italy of the PRC's minister of foreign affairs Huang Hua, 5-10 October 1978] Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Segreteria Generale, Visite di Stato/Visite Ufficiali, Cina-Romania-Grecia-Spagna, 1978 Vol. 5. [hereafter OVHH-1978].

[14] Visita in Italia del Primo Ministro della R.P. di Cina, Hua Guofeng, 3-6 novembre 1979 [Visit to Italy of the PRC's Prime Minister Hua Guofeng, 3-6 November 1979), Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Segreteria Generale, Visite di Stato/Visite Ufficiali, Grecia-URSS-Cina, 1979 Vol.9. [hereafter OVHG-1979].

all the other archival sources used for this study as they mainly reflect the Italian position vis-à-vis China and do not report the detailed minutes of the bilateral meetings. Nonetheless, they might prove to be a useful and original tool to enlarge the scope of historical investigation.

On these grounds the article has been divided in four parts: a critical reflection on the historical context that set the ground for the evolution of Sino-Italian relations between 1950s and 1970s; an assessment of the historical impact of normalisation; a reconstruction of the main dynamics in the bilateral relations in 1970s and an analysis of Sino-Italian 'golden age' in 1980s.

Red but not Soviet: the rationale of Mao's European policy in the 1950s and 1960s

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Italian government seemed willing to recognise the new government in Beijing.

In February 1950, Italian Foreign Minister Carlo Sforza drafted a telegram for Zhou Enlai in which he affirmed the intent of the Italian Government to recognise the PRC.[15] While in the previous months Washington seemed willing to let the European countries move first – and prepare American public opinion to a step that they felt needed to be taken sooner or later[16] – the events in the first half of the 1950s rapidly changed the climate. The Sino-Soviet alliance, McCarthy's anti-communist campaign in the US and the outbreak of the Korean War suddenly hindered the Italian initiative.

It was a symbolic beginning for Italy's China policy as it inaugurated the long-term effort of Italian diplomacy to circumvent the limits imposed by the Cold War structure on the independent realisation of its national interest. Since then, Italy looked at China as an opportunity to gain more freedom of action from Washington and upgrade its status vis-à-vis the other allies within NATO.

In Beijing's eyes on the contrary the relationship with Italy was not important per se. China's European policies have been mostly inspired by China's position vis-à-vis the hegemonic powers, Soviet Union *in primis.*

The Soviet rationale in China's European policy deserves some clarifications.

The logic of independence has always been predominant in the Maoist struggle: the movement for class emancipation in China was instrumental to the success of Mao's national liberation as much as the ideology that legitimated the *yibiandao* was instrumental to heal China's national interest after the decisions imposed by Yalta.

As Professor Chen Jian brilliantly noted, the bipolar Yalta system was interpreted in a very different way from China: since its first formulation of the 'the intermediate zone theory' in 1946, Mao identified the main contradiction not between the superpowers themselves , as the capitalism vs communism dichotomy would suggest, but between the superpowers and the countries of the intermediate zone. Mao believed that the control

[15] Mario Pini, *Italia e Cina*, 67.
[16] Ibid., 70.

over this vast intermediate area, comprising all non-Western oppressed nations including China, was necessary for the American imperialist to encircle the socialist bloc.

By identifying the intermediate zone as the front line of the socialist block, Mao gave it a specific identity and progressively extrapolate it from the block itself, turning it into a independent pole, an intermediate and anti-hegemonic one, in which China could play a leading role. His support for the movement of national liberations in this zone could make him at the same time the vanguard of defence within the socialist camp and the leader of the anti-imperialist struggle in the intermediate zone. Mao's definition of China's position in the world order then implicitly challenged both the bipolar world order and, consequently, it sowed the seeds of the Sino-Soviet split since the beginning of the alliance.[17]

In the years between 1949 and 1956, China did not directly get involved in European affairs and mainly followed the Soviet line. The emerging frictions with the Soviet Union stimulated Chinese involvement in Europe as proven by Beijing's role in Poland and Hungary in 1956.[18] It was the beginning of China's competition with Moscow in Europe.

A 'controlled' competition in Eastern Europe: as proven by the *Interkit* system, Moscow coordinated the satellites China policy at a very high level and, with the sole exception of Romania and Albania, all the other Easter European countries were strongly limited in developing an independent China policy until the beginning of 1980s.

China's European policy then made more progress in the Western part of Europe: as the tension with the Soviets progressively rose, the relationship with the anti-Soviet partners in Western Europe became an important part of Beijing's strategy to weaken Moscow's threat in Asia. Western Europe, according to Beijing, was the focal point. As the Chinese foreign minister told Kissinger in 1975 'if the Soviet Union could not get hegemony over it, it could not control the world[19]

At the same time, the normalisation with the European allies of the United States was instrumental to weaken the US-led front of non-recognition, isolate the ROC and favour Beijing's entry at the United Nations (UN).[20]

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17. Enrico Fardella, Christian Ostermann, & Charles Kraus, *Sino-European relations in the Cold War and the Rise of a Multipolar World* (Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2015) 234-5.

Mao's idea of a growing superpower complicity for a bipolar dominance led him in fall 1963 to expand the front of China's action to a 'second intermediate zone' – including Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand – oppressed by Soviet and American hegemony

18. Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War*. Chapell Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2001, 145-162.

19. Memorandum of Conversation, Washington, 12 August 1975. Ford Library, National Security Adviser, NSC Staff for East Asia and Pacific Affairs, Convenience Files, 1969-1977, Box 39, Richard Solomon Subject Files, 1974-76. Secret; Nodis. Drafted by Gleysteen.

20. MOFA: 110-00605-01 (25 June 1955), 'Industrial Italian Delegation to China', Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) to London Embassy; MOFA: 110-01765-01 (4 December 1964) 'Sino-Italian Relations', Bern Embassy to MOFA. On China's entry into the United Nations see: Pietro Paolo Masina, La Cina e le Nazioni Unite. Dall'esclusione al potere di veto (Roma: Carocci, 2012.

A first success arrived in 1964 when Mao and De Gaulle's quest for multipolarity matched and led to mutual recognition.[21] The emergence of Soviet 'social-imperialist' threat in 1968, however, added a powerful rationale that accelerated China's willingness to normalise its relations with other Western countries.[22] The normalisation of relations with Italy must be seen within this context.

The path towards normalizisation, 1964-1970

In the 1950s, Italian governments repeatedly tried to initiate diplomatic relations with the PRC, but the US veto and the PRC's inflexibility regarding the terms of recognition limited their margins of action. Italy did not have any special interests in Asia like the UK or France and was more dependent on Washington and its containment policies against China than either of those European powers.[23]

Nevertheless, in 1964, three new factors emerged to facilitate Sino-Italian engagement: the Sino-Soviet split; De Gaulle's courageous initiative towards Beijing; and the beginning of the centre-left season in Italy, with the Italian Socialist party (PSI) playing a key role in the rapprochement with Beijing. These factors sufficed to open a commercial office that functioned as a *de facto* embassy, but were not enough to achieve proper normalisation.[24] China's role in Indochina obstructed that possibility and Washington did not let the government in Rome to formally recognise a country that was confronting American soldiers in Vietnam.[25]

The window of opportunity for normalisation came in 1968 due to the degeneration of the Sino-Soviet conflict, which led to a profound revision of Beijing's foreign policy towards Vietnam and the West, the US included. Mao tamed the ideological tension

[21] Enrico Fardella, Christian Ostermann, & Charles Kraus, *Sino-European relations in the Cold War*, 203.

[22] According to Romanian Amb. Budura, the Cultural Revolution aimed in fact at correcting the distortion of the *yibiandao so,* as Li Danhui put it, the 'social-imperialist' label served as the theoretical basis for Mao to make strategic adjustments that were functional both for Beijing's security and independence. Ibid. 28 and 74.

[23] For a detailed account of the negotiations between China and Italy in the 1950s and 1960s see E. Fardella 'The normalization of relations between Italy and the People's Republic of China' in Giovanni Andorino and Maurizio Marinelli (eds.) *Italy's encounters with modern China. Civilizational exchanges, imperial dreams, strategic ambitions* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 117-146.

[24] Ibid.; See also MOFA: 1110-2011-011 (10 June 1964), Memorandum of Conversation: Chen Yi-Vittorelli. Chen Yi said that the office would represent the government and would have diplomatic status (代表政府，具有外交身份, *daibiao zhengfu, juyou waijiao shenfen*), but not in an official way. This could push the ROC to recall its ambassador and pave the way for normalising relations between Rome and Beijing. According to Chen Yi, Italy and China had the opportunity to create a new 'Sino-Italian model for normalization' (我们创立中意方式, *women chuangli Zhong Yi fangshi*).

[25] Because of the conflict in Vietnam, the Chinese thought that the US had forced the Italians to cool down the political side of their relation with the PRC. MOFA: 110-01902-01 (15 December 1965), 'Change in Italian diplomacy', COR to MOFA. In January, the leader of Christian Democrats Amintore Fanfani, who worked for normalisation with Beijing, told the Chinese diplomats that the tension caused by the Vietnam War prevented them from normalising their relations. MOFA: 110-01899-01 (20 September 1965), "Sino-Italian relations," COR to MOFA.

of the Cultural Revolution and progressively engaged with the West to form a united front against Moscow.

The strategic imperative also imposed more flexibility on the Taiwan issue. When China started negotiations with Italy in February 1969, the Sino-Soviet conflict had not yet reached its highest point and Beijing, stimulated by the Italian foreign minister Nenni's eagerness to achieve normalisation, kept a maximalist approach with the Italians.[26]

The final round of the negotiations was conducted from the Italian side by the new foreign minister Aldo Moro, one of the leaders of the Christian Democrats. Moro was much more concerned than the Socialist Nenni about Washington's sensitivity, making him more cautious about the form of the compromise to be reached with Beijing.[27]

The conflict with the Soviets, however, degenerated and, by autumn 1969, the Americans secretly sided with Beijing and avoided a Soviet strike.[28] As a result, the Chinese accepted the Americans' offer for high-level dialogue without preconditions over Taiwan.[29] At the same time, the Chinese dropped some of the most radical requests for normalisation that they had made to Italy, essentially de-linking progress in the talks from the issue of Italy's relations with the ROC and Italian support of the PRC at the UN.[30]

Thanks to Beijing's softened approach, on 6 November 1970 Italy recognised the People's Republic of China as the sole government of China by taking note of PRC's 'declaration' of its rights over Taiwan.

The final formula was a last minute concession made by Beijing to the Italians: few days before, in fact, Canada had recognised Beijing by taking note of Beijing's 'position' on Taiwan.

The difference was subtle but the Chinese were probably willing to concede more to the Italians in order to send Washington a message of flexibility on the formula of recognition.[31] As Chinese ambassador in France, Huang Zhen, had plainly admitted to

[26] The Chinese posed three conditions for normalising relations: 1) recognition of the PRC as the sole legal government representing the Chinese people; 2) recognition of the province of Taiwan as an integral part of the Chinese territory and the dissolution of all relations with Chiang Kai-Shek's China; 3) support to the PRC in the pursuit of its legitimate rights within the UN and suspension of any support to the "Chiang Kai-shek clique." ASMAE (no date, probably 5 May 1970), 'Sino-Italian negotiations for the mutual recognition', a. Gabinetto to Moro.

[27] Moro wrote that Nenni gave the Chinese everything they asked for without specifying who 'should state what and how it should be stated […] This is the core of the dispute. We have to figure out whether we should formally declare or carry out in practice what Nenni had already promised [i.e. discontinuing relations with Formosa and vote for the Albanian motion]', ASMAE (8 November 1969), Moro's note on a. n. 061/429, Gaja to Moro.

[28] Henry Kissinger, *On China*, 217-219.

[29] Ibid., 223.

[30] ASMAE (28 November 1970), 'Establishment of the diplomatic relations between the Italian Republic and the PRC', DGAP (no name). See also Mario Pini, *Italia e Cina*, 119.

[31] Olla Brundu, "Pietro Nenni, Aldo Moro e il riconoscimento della Cina comunista," 44. See also Ortona, *Anni d'America*, 259.

the Italian diplomats in September, the Chinese were trying to use the negotiations with Ottawa and Rome as "test cases" to create a precedent that could be used with other major powers like the US or Japan.[32] From Beijing's perspective then the normalisation with Italy was functional to move closer to the United States as the hegemonic threat of social-imperialism became predominant.

On the contrary for the Italian side it was a diplomatic success per se: as ambassador Menegatti put it, the normalisation with Beijing was a success of the universalist inspiration of the Italian diplomacy – the universal right towards emancipation of the people in the case of the socialist Nenni, and Christian universalism in the case of Moro – that translated itself into an effort towards inclusion, dialogue and the strong support for the United Nations.[33] Furthermore, the capability to achieve this target before the United States and right after the French proved a certain degree of independence of the Italian diplomacy and sent a positive message to the Chinese. At the same time, thanks to the wise direction of Minister Moro the Italians managed to respect the sensitivity of Washington in the final stage of the negotiations.[34]

The main concern for the US at that stage in fact was not the recognition per se but the repercussions on Taiwan's seat at the UN. There were in fact two different competing motions at the UN on the issue of the Chinese seat. One was a US procedural motion that treated it as an "important question" and asked two thirds of the Assembly votes to approve it. The other was an Albanian motion that called for a simple majority in order to give the PRC the seat occupied by the ROC. The support to the American motion had impeded so far the success of the Albanian motion, preserving the American prestige within the UN and its defence of Taiwan's image.

Italy had always voted in favour of the American motion and against the Albanian one. A few days before the recognition of the PRC, Italy decided to keep supporting the American motion and simply abstaining on the Albanian one showing, by so doing, a certain degree of respect for Washington's concern.

This position emerged again in October 1971, at the time of the PRC's admission to the UN: the government in Rome that had to support the Albanian motion as a consequence of the recognition of the PRC, eventually opted for abstention on the 'important question' in order to respect Washington's *desiderata*. This time, however, the Italian acrobatic diplomacy seemed a bit inconsistent if confronted with the firm opposition of other European countries, such as France and the UK, to the American motion. Similar inconsistencies continued to characterise Italian diplomacies towards Beijing in the first years of the official relations.[35]

[32] ASMAE (30 September 1969), Letter n. 429, Malfatti to Moro.

[33] Gabriele Menegatti, "Former Italian Ambassador to China Speaks Out" 22 June 2012. Accessed 9 December 2013 http://www.albertoforchielli.com/2012/06/22/former-italian-ambassador-to-china-speaks-out/.

[34] Enrico Fardella, Christian Ostermann, & Charles Kraus, *Sino-European relations in the Cold War,* 78.

[35] Mario Pini, *Italia e Cina*, 146.

Sino-Italian relations and the rise of a multipolar world in the 1970s

The Italian recognition of the PRC anticipated, as much as France's did, the American détente with China. Nonetheless, it did not possess the same ampleness and independency of the Gaullist vision and in the most important stages of the negotiations was strongly influenced by Nixon's opening itself. As a consequence, the 'window of opportunity' for the Italians, obstructed by the weakness of Italian governments and the consequent lack of long-term strategy, did not produce the expected results and started narrowing down in 1972.

Rome's first official delegation to the PRC in May 1971 symbolised the contradiction in Italian diplomacy between reality and aspirations. Right after the normalisation, the Italian Socialist Party (PSI), the main supporter of the recognition of the PRC in Italy, pushed to show to the public that the relationship with Beijing could also become a great opportunity for the Italian economy. One week after the Italian ambassador Trabalza took service in Beijing, the minister of commerce Mario Zagari, a PSI member, flew to Beijing with the largest delegation ever received in China from a Western country: he met with Zhou Enlai and set the basis for a commercial agreement.[36]

The visit aimed at boosting the level of bilateral trade after a prolonged stalemate, mostly related to Chinese internal political turbulence, in the period 1969-1970. The effect on the bilateral trade, however, was minimal and the total volume of the import-export did not change (75 million dollars in 1971).[37] As the diplomat Mario Pini acutely observed, the trip represented one of typical Italian attempt to fill the absence of substance with a beautiful gesture.[38]

Some progress was made in 1972: Italian exports to China rose favoured by the signing of a commercial agreement with Beijing on 29 October 1971, the first of this kind in the European Community zone.[39] The agreement was a symbolic gesture that manifested the Italian willingness to eliminate the quantitative restrictions in the commercial exchanges with China in order to expand and stabilise the trading fluxes (at the beginning of 1972 China counted for just 0.4% of total Italian foreign trade). Chinese economic structure – a closed and mainly agricultural planned economy – in fact limited import-export mainly to some raw materials and agricultural products, which favoured a very volatile trade relationship with Italy. The structural problem in bilateral trade coupled with growing competition from other countries: in 1972, Nixon had officially inaugurated the détente with Beijing in February and by the end of the year, the UK, Japan and West Germany had normalised relations with Beijing and sent their foreign ministers or premiers to visit the PRC. The growing competition brought in by these

[36] Jacques Nobécourt, 'Une mission économique italienne va explorer le marché chinois', *Le Monde*, 19 July 1971; J. Nobécourt, 'La mission italienne n'a obtenu que des résultats commerciaux limités' *Le Monde*, 31 July 1971.

[37] OVM-1973, Rapporti Italo-Cinesi in ambito economico, allegato 1.

[38] Mario Pini, *Italia e Cina*, 144.

[39] The agreement established a mixed commission that aimed at evaluating efficient measures to expand bilateral trade and cooperation.

and other countries affected Italian exports to China and Italian presence in the Chinese market shrunk (from 2.5% in 1971 to 1.6% in 1973).[40]

At the beginning of the 1970s, a new world was emerging and China seemed to be more and more at its centre. As noted by the Office of the Secretary General in a preparatory note for the minister of foreign affairs Giuseppe Medici before his visit to China in January 1973, 27 years since the end of the Second World War the emergence of China as a great power in the ideological and political sphere, the industrial explosion of Japan and the progress towards initial forms of political and economic unification of Europe were marking the end of the bipolar era. The most relevant consequences of this phenomenon, according to the author, were the new rise of Asia – whose effects were to be seen more evidently in 1980s – and the progressive demise of the Cold War in Europe where the internal divergences seemed to be no longer susceptible to detonate a new global conflict.[41]

Italian foreign policy did not possess the same ampleness in Asia of British and French diplomacy. Hence, Italy mainly looked at the effect of Chinese emergence merely in North Africa and the Mediterranean, areas within the traditional Italian sphere of interest. The Sino-Soviet split, Chinese entry to the United Nations and its charismatic appeal to the Third World, grounded in its fierce opposition to the superpowers' nuclear blackmail, were then regarded by Italian diplomacy mainly from this perspective. The progressive reduction of Chinese support to the revolutionary movements in the region and an emerging pragmatic approach in Chinese diplomacy in North Africa and the Middle East seemed to fit with Italian interest and search for stability. In this context, the Sino-Soviet rivalry presented itself as an opportunity for Italian diplomacy to gain more margin of manoeuvre and reduce the danger of a 'progressist' exclusive zone of influence – Chinese or Soviet – in Africa.[42]

The anti-Soviet rationale of the new Chinese strategy in the 1970s, however, eventually conflicted with Italian support of détente in Europe and in the Mediterranean. As the Italian foreign minister Giuseppe Medici experienced during his visits to Beijing in January 1973, a growing attrition was emerging between Italian's ecumenist approach that favoured dialogue with all actors – an approach in line with the emerging climate of détente in Europe – and Beijing's fierce 'frontal' stance towards the Soviet threat.

This conflict deepened during the negotiations for the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe between 1973 and 1975 and the signing of the Helsinki Final Act. Beijing feared that the success of the CSCE allowed the Soviet Union to direct its main attention towards Asia – China *in primis* – and manifested its criticism towards the European logic of détente. The Chinese opposition to the CSCE dialogues – perceived by Beijing as a threatening model that the Soviets might try to apply also to Asia to

[40] F. Carbonetti, 'Interscambio italo-cinese: esperienze e prospettive', in *Mondo Cinese*, 1, 1973, p. 101-4. From the time of Italian recognition in 1970, 35 more countries recognised the People's Republic of China: 9 in Europe, 15 in Africa, 6 in Latin America, 4 in Asia and Canada in North America.

[41] OVM-1973, Telegram n. 5472/0, 'Visita On. Ministro in Cina', Segreteria Generale to Italian Embassy Saigon Seoul, Tokyo and Hong Kong Consulate, 29 December 1972, 5.30 pm. Foglio 1-2.

[42] OVM-1973, Politica Cinese in Africa.

impose their hegemony – conflicted with Italian support for détente as an opportunity to gain political and economic advantages with the Soviet Union, especially in energy supplies, a crucial need for Italian security after the embargo that followed the Kippur war in 1973.[43]

The same thirst for energy pushed in 1977 the foreign minister Arnaldo Forlani, together with the president of the Italian main oil and gas company, ENI, to rush to Beijing in June 1977 right after the completion of a second terminal for oil exports in Dalian. Between 1973 and 1976, Sino-Italian import-export grew by 96% but the total value of it was still quite modest if compared with other Western countries due to an inferior complementarity between the two economies and the negative economic conjuncture of those years that restricted the capabilities of the medium sized Italian enterprises to promote themselves in the Chinese market. Furthermore, Beijing's traditional aversion towards foreign credit limited the total volume of its imports. Nonetheless, the growth of the Chinese oil sector seemed at the time a promising opportunity as it could provide revenues for Beijing that could be invested into Italian energy technologies.[44]

At the time as Forlani's visit to Beijing, the political divergences on the détente process and the CSCE were still in place but a new positive conjuncture both in China and in Italy seemed opening more space for Italian diplomatic action.

In China, Deng Xiaoping, after his rehabilitation in July 1977, began his race for the control of the Party and the launch of Reform and Opening. With his economic reform, Deng Xiaoping enhanced Mao's opening to the West into a symbiotic relationship that connected China's internal development to the cooperation with the international market. That seemed to increase the space of action for Sino-Italian relations: Italy, one of the most industrialised and developed countries in the West, could compensate for its diplomatic flaws with robust support for the Chinese economic transformation.

The Italian political situation seemed also favourable for the upgrading of the economic cooperation with China. The Third Andreotti government elected in 1976 with the external support of the Italian Communist Party – called '*governo di solidarietà nazionale*'(national solidarity)– aimed to prove to the Americans that they were not conceding too much to the Communists and their allies in Moscow and pushed for an expansion of cooperation with Beijing.[45]

In those years, the consolidation of Sino-American strategic cooperation against the Soviets, spurred by Zbigniew Brzezinski's manoeuvres, favoured military contacts

[43] OVM-1973, La Cina e l'unificazione europea; Cina: Mediterraneo e Medio Oriente. See also Mario Pini, *Italia e Cina*, 160-1.

[44] OVF-1977, Elementi di Sintesi per le conversazioni con i dirigenti della Repubblica Popolare Cinese: Rapporti Bilaterali e Questioni economiche. For the data on import-export (calculated in millions of lira): 1973 total volume 119.266; 1976 total volume 233.755. OVF-1977, Questioni Economiche: scheda statistica, 24.

[45] Mario Pini, *Italia e Cina*, 172. In those months, Beijing was looking with great interest at Italian domestic politics and in particular at 'eurocommunism'. Although China officially considered the Italian Communist Party revisionist, as observed by the Italian diplomats at the time, Beijing seemed ready for a re-evaluation of the nature of the relationship between the PCI and Moscow (in the same way as they did with the Yugoslav 'revisionists'). OVF-1977, Colloqui politic: politica interna, 6.

between China and the Europeans with Italy and West Germany providing anti-air and anti-tank missiles, France radars and Britain negotiations for jet fighters engines and technology.[46]

In 1978, a Chinese mission headed by vice-head of the Chinese army Zhang Aiping – the former 'father' of the PRC's nuclear weapon appointed by Deng Xiaoping to promote Chinese military modernisation – was received by senior Italian army officers, toured Italians security infrastructures for two weeks and attended military exercises in Sardinia.[47] These events raised deep concern in Moscow and in December 1978 the Secretary of PCUS Brezhnev wrote a letter of protest to the Italian first minister Andreotti stating that the military cooperation with China violated the logic of détente and marked a threat to global peace.[48]

The Soviet leader proved to be right. The internal stabilisation following the historical Third Plenum of the 11th CCP Central Committee in December 1978 sanctioned in China the definitive return of a pragmatic and realist component in Chinese foreign policy and inaugurated a new Chinese global dynamism at level "never seen before", as the Italian diplomats noted.[49] The strategic entente between Deng's new grand strategy and Brzezinski confrontational attitude towards Moscow eventually altered the détente logic within Europe. Chinese diplomacy were seen by many in Europe as potentially risky: according to Italian and Polish diplomats for example, Beijing's friendly relations with Romania, celebrated by Premier Hua Guofeng visit in 1978, threaten to exacerbate Moscow's control on the rest of Eastern Europe as an attempt to restrict the space for emulation of Bucharest's independent policy.[50]

As proven by Brezhnev's reactions to the Sino-European arm deals, the allure of the Chinese market for the European economic actors favoured Beijing's strategy. Italy walked on a thin line trying to harmonise a partnership with China with the détente process with Moscow: heightened tension with the Soviet Union was in fact perceived by the Italian diplomats as potentially destructive for the process of European détente and integration, the core interests of Italian diplomatic action.[51]

The Italian domestic political dynamics seemed responding to the shifts at global level. The experimental governments of 'national solidarity' – with the external support of the PCI – ended in June 1979 and the Christian Democrats' Francesco Cossiga formed a new executive rehabilitating the cooperation with the Socialists. It was a good signal for Beijing as the Socialists had proven to be favourable to Beijing's interests until

46. David Shambaugh 'China's quest for military modernization'. *Asian Affairs* May/June (1979), 301.
47. Memorandum, Situation Room to Brzezinski, May 2nd, 1978, Folder 2, Box 6, Brzezinski Material-President's Daily Report File, Jimmy Carter Library.
48. Mario Pini, *Italia e Cina*, 172.
49. OVHH-1978, Elementi di sintesi, 3.
50. OVHH-1978, Repubblica Popolare Cinese: rapporti tra la RPC e i paesi del patto di Varsavia (tranne l'Urss). Elementi di conversazione; Elementi di fatto.
51. OVHH-1978, Repubblica Popolare Cinese: rapporti RPC-Costruzione europea.

then.[52] Cossiga's executive in fact favoured a tougher line towards the Soviet Union and his approval of the installation of the Pershing missiles seemed well received in Beijing. Cossiga's decision, in fact, arrived in a critical moment for China as the Soviets' invasion of Afghanistan posed a new threat to Beijing's border security and confirmed Chinese fear of Soviet expansionism.

1980s: the 'golden age' of Sino-Italian relations

The 1980s proved to be the 'golden age' of Sino-Italian relations boosted by a rapid growth in economic cooperation and the Socialists' presence in the Italian executive. The level of Italian investments in China grew exponentially stimulated by the so-called '*cooperazione allo sviluppo*' a system of foreign aid for developing countries inaugurated by Rome and Beijing with a triennial agreement (1982-1984). According to this agreement, Italy invested 48 million US dollars for the construction of strategic infrastructures – developed in partnership with Italian companies - and donated 25 million dollars of Italian goods that were deemed crucial for the development of the country.[53] The growing flow of money that was directed into these projects by the Italian government – 576 million dollars between 1987 and 1989 – revealed to be an extremely successful instrument for penetrating the Chinese market and by the end of the decade Italy, already the single largest donor to China, became Beijing's second largest European trading partner after Germany.[54]

High level official visits increased in those years as a sign of a growing trust in the bilateral relationship. In 1984, Premier Zhao Ziyang, after the end of the session of the National People's Congress that re-launched Deng's reforms, toured Europe in search for 'money, solidarity and weapons', as an Italian reporter wrote at the time.[55] Zhao stopped in Italy, reached an agreement with FIAT for the production of trucks and industrial vehicles and, in line with one of the core decisions taken by China's Parliament on the eve of the official visit, asked Italian support for the modernisation of the PLA.[56] Zhao's request was satisfied, one year later, by the massive delegation to Beijing of Italian defence minister Giovanni Spadolini that aimed to further boost Italian military exports to China – 100 billion lire in 1984, 20% of the total value of Italian exports to China.[57] The

[52] In a meeting with Deng in October 1975, Kissinger complained that the Christian Democratic leadership in Italy was very weak and that the Chinese could be helpful with the Socialists in order to oppose the compromise with the Communists. Deng said that he personally believe that the so-called "historic compromise" could not succeed, Ford Library, National Security Adviser, Kissinger Reports on USSR, China, and Middle East Discussions, Box 2, China Memcons and Reports, 19-23 October 1975, Kissinger's Trip. Top Secret; Nodis.

[53] Mario Pini, *Italia e Cina*, 190.

[54] Samarani, De Giorgi, *Lontane, Vicine*, 141. For data on Italian investments see *Testi e documenti della politica estera dell'Italia*, MAE, 1987, 128.

[55] Tiziano Terzani, 'Che cerca Zhao in Europa?', in *La Repubblica*, 31 May 1984.

[56] Piero Benetazzo, 'Zhao porta a Craxi le richieste cinesi', in *La Repubblica*, 14 June 1984.

[57] Alberto Jacoviello, 'Armi e istruttori italiani per le forze armate di Deng', in *La Repubblica,* 6 April 1985.

military cooperation and the support given by the '*cooperazione allo sviluppo*' pushed Italian exports whose value jumped by 75% in 1985 on a year-by-year basis.[58]

For the first time since normalisation, Beijing started appreciating Italy's foreign policy symbolised by the courageous and incisive activism of Bettino Craxi, the leader of the Socialist Party and Italy's Premier from 1983 to 1987. Craxi's independent stances vis-à-vis Washington – as proved by the Sigonella's crisis – Italian's activism in the Middle East peace process and Craxi's belief in a strong and unified Europe, were all elements that encountered Chinese appreciation.[59] The strengthening of the bilateral relationship set the ground for Craxi's visit to Beijing in 1986 – the first for an Italian prime minister since mutual recognition – and the signing of the first consular convention ever ratified with a European country. [60]

If the 1980s can be seen as the 'Golden Age' of Sino-Italian relations, the end of the 1980s seemed opening a new strategic opportunity thanks to the ability of the Premier Giulio Andreotti and the foreign minister Gianni De Michelis (PSI) to manage the crisis that aroused after the Tiananmen events of June 1989. Right after the Madrid EU council imposed sanctions on Beijing on 27 June, Andreotti and De Michelis, sincerely persuaded that isolation could alter the benefits of Chinese reforms, showed solidarity towards the Chinese government by calling for the elimination of sanctions.[61] Japan and ASEAN's resumptions of contacts with Beijing helped the Italian initiative and, a few weeks after the assumption of the rotating chair of the European Community in July 1990, the EC Council lifted some restrictions on economic and official contacts with Beijing.[62]

On May 1991, foreign minister De Michelis visited China, the second foreign minister among Western countries to pay an official visit to Beijing after the Spanish one since June 1989. De Michelis did not talk about politics but focused his visit on trade and investments and offered 600 billion lira as aid for the construction of Pudong in Shanghai, a 10 billion worth development program that promised to give Italy a strategic position in the Chinese market.[63]

At the eve of 1992, Italy seemed then to be one of the main partners for China as the visit of Premier Li Peng, in January, the first to a Western country since the Tiananmen crisis in 1989, clearly signalled.[64]

58. R. Pavolini, 'Modalità tecniche e prospettive nell'interscambio tra Cina e Italia', in *Mondo Cinese,* 58, 1987, 38.

59. Alberto Jacoviello 'Armi e istruttori italiani per le forze armate di Deng', in *La Repubblica,* 6 April 1985.

60. Mario Pini, *Italia e Cina*, 192-3.

61. Lucio Caracciolo 'La Cina: Istruzioni per l'uso'. *Limes* 1/95 (1995), 209; Walter Coralluzzo, 'Italy's Foreign Policy toward China: Missed Opportunities and New Chances', in *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 13,1, 2008, 6-13.

62. 'De Michelis: la CEE riprenda le relazioni con Pechino', *La Repubblica*, 29 September 1990. The arm embargo was not included.

63. Lucio Caracciolo 'La Cina: Istruzioni per l'uso'. 209.

64. 'L'Italia è ora seconda tra i partner europei' in *La Repubblica*, 26 January 1992; Marco Ansaldo, 'Una raffica di proteste accoglie Li Peng a Roma', in *Il Corriere della Sera*, 25 January 1992.

A few weeks later, however, the corruption scandal *Mani Pulite* wiped out the Italian political establishment hitting in particular the two parties that had historically favoured dialogue with Beijing, the Christian Democrats and the Socialists. As De Michelis said, Italy's role in China was one of the main victims of this scandal. The destruction of the Italian political system from within froze Italian diplomacy: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stopped the programs of the '*cooperazione*', Pudong included, and for three years the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not pay a visit to Beijing.[65]

The bilateral relations between Rome and Beijing never recovered since then. The images of the Italian ambulances in Tiananmen in June 1989 – a symbol of the success of the Italian aid to China – are now just a curious postcard for historians.

Conclusion: a significant peripheral relation

As mentioned in the introduction the paucity of secondary sources available on Sino-Italian relations – especially on the Chinese side – is quite impressive. This shortage, to a certain extent, indicates that Sino-Italian relations have always been perceived as a peripheral aspect of the Cold War system.

The Cold War system constantly swung between bipolarity and multi-polarity on the basis of the level of tension. In time of heightened inter-blocks hostility, the ideological dimension – in the form of communism versus capitalism – intensified with the result of solidifying the trend towards bipolarity; at the same time, however, behind the bipolar level a variegated set of different national agendas inspired a complex web of relations – such as those between Italy and China – that helped to sustain the multipolar nature of the system itself. Within this matrix – a quite hierarchical one – Sino-Italian relations occupied a very marginal position.[66]

Italy and China had different dimensions within the system and, consequently, attributed different importance to their bilateral relations: if both countries looked at their bilateral relation as an instrument to flex the constraints of the bipolar system, China, as a major power under constant threat of war with the superpowers, looked at Italy as a mere instrument in its anti-hegemonic struggle; Italy as a weak middle power constantly inhibited, both externally and internally, by its dependence on the US looked at China as an opportunity to gain more freedom of action within the alliance. China played defence vis-à-vis both superpowers, Italy looked at China as a tempting opportunity to upgrade its status.

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65. Lucio Caracciolo Ibid.

66. In the conversations between Chinese and American leaders, for example, during the Nixon, Ford and also Carter administrations, Italy was either bypassed or briefly touched upon and always in connection with the Soviet threat. Furthermore, Beijing had a very realistic image of the role of Italy in the international system: 'Italy is a second level country in the imperialist camp as it does not have that much power. That makes Italian foreign policy too weak and its guiding principle is to follow the big powers' MOFA, Rome to Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 12 December 1965, 110-02033-02, MOFA. (translated by the author).

Italy had two opportunities to upgrade its relationship with Beijing and transform itself into a 'special partner' for Beijing in Europe: in 1969-70 and again in 1989-1992.

At the end of 1968, Italy, first among the European countries, perceived the telluric transformation that was going to revolutionise Beijing's policies and bet on the normalisation with China. The Italian activism was inspired by the Socialist presence in the government and in particular by Foreign Minister Nenni's aspiration to capitalise internally on this foreign policy success. The constant instability of Italian politics at the time however – with the change of three governments at the most important time for the negotiations – disrupted the window of opportunity that Italy had opened in the first place. The normalisation eventually occurred thanks to the reopening of the Warsaw channel and the willingness of the Chinese to compromise on the terms of negotiations after the escalation of the conflict with Moscow.

When France recognised Beijing in 1964, it was the only country, among the main powers, who could talk to Washington, Moscow and Beijing at the same time. In 1969, Italy tried to follow the French steps but it did not succeed: in less than two years the détente process with Beijing already involved most of the other NATO allies, US included, and deprived the Italian initiative of its appeal.

The second opportunity arose after the Tiananmen crisis in June 1989 events and the European attempt to isolate the Chinese government. The Italian Socialists played once again an active role in dragging China out of the 'quarantine' and foreign minister De Michelis used the Italian presidency at the EC to lift the ban on trade and ministerial meetings with Beijing. The Italian solidarity in such a delicate moment was very well received by the leadership in Beijing that reciprocated by offering, during De Michelis visit in 1991, the Italian participation in the development of Pudong, a unique opportunity for Italian companies to extend their long term presence in the Chinese market. Nonetheless, few months later, the corruption scandal *Mani Pulite* destroyed the two main parties who had promoted the relationship with Beijing, the Socialists and the Christian Democrats: the political stalemate that followed literally annihilated all the Italian stakes built in the previous years in China.

From 1970 to 1992, the structural weakness of Italian domestic politics, and the consequent lack of a long-term strategy, did not let Italian diplomacy to capitalise on the opportunities that arose to upgrade its political cooperation with Beijing and contributed to create an image of unreliability among the Chinese political elite.[67] The 1980s were an exception: Craxi's government – the longest Italian government of the Cold War – managed to grasp the opportunities offered by the opening of the Chinese market.

[67] Francesco Sisci, *Chi ha paura della Cina*, (Firenze: Ponte alle Grazie, 2006), 54 In the crucial moment of the negotiations for normalisation between February and July 1970 Italy changed two governments and that persuaded the Chinese that it was more convenient to give priority to the negotiations with the Canadians. ASMAE (12 February 1970), Letter n. 26, Malfatti to Moro; ASMAE (13 March 1970) Letter n. 46, Malfatti to Moro. Deng himself complained with Kissinger that the Italians constantly changed their prime minister. Memorandum of Conversation Beijing, 21 October 1975, Ford Library, National Security Adviser, Kissinger Reports on USSR, China, and Middle East Discussions, Box 2, China Memcons and Reports, 19-23 October 1975, Kissinger's Trip. Top Secret; Nodis.

The 'golden age' of Sino-Italian relations however did not possess anything unique in political terms if compared with other European countries' position, such as Germany for example. The entente between Rome and Beijing was mostly driven by economic factors: it was animated by the logic of Deng's reform and opening and doped by the Italian aid channelled via the so-called 'cooperazione allo sviluppo'. To put it bluntly: as the Chinese themselves said, Italy was a weak middle power and it had nothing special to offer to Beijing beside its technology.

The Chinese, on the contrary, have been the ones who had benefited the most from their relationship with Italy, most probably thanks to their capability to design global strategies, tailor them at a local level and implement them on the long term.

Mao's intermediate theory zones signalled since the very first day the multipolar aspiration of the Chinese movement for national independence and the precarious nature of the *yibiandao*. It was the anti-imperialist nature of the Soviet Union to have inspired Mao's choice to join the Socialist bloc after the founding of the PRC. The frictions between the two countries on the policy of peaceful coexistence, the alleged collusion between the USSR and the United States against China and Mao's belief in the intolerance of European countries of the hegemonic role of the superpowers, led him to correct China's stance in the international system. Therefore, the bipolar hegemony of the superpowers eventually loosened the already fragile bond between Maoist anti-imperialism and the Soviet front and, by weakening the cohesion of the two blocks, opened a space for Beijing in the heart of the superpower quest for hegemony: Europe. The normalisation with France and the commercial office in Rome in 1964 were the first steps in this strategy.

The normalisation with Italy in 1970 however happened in a different context: the competition with Moscow turned into confrontation and China needed to solidify its defence by strengthening its international support. At the beginning of the negotiations in the first months of 1969 the Chinese put on the table a maximalist position but, right after the escalation of the conflict with the Soviets and the first contacts with the Americans, they abruptly softened their conditions for normalisation. Normalisation with Italy was not important per se – as it was for the Italians the recognition of the PRC – but because it represented a useful test-case for the negotiations with first ranking powers, such as the US and Japan; because it could accelerate China's entry at the UN by influencing the position of other European countries and because, by so doing, it ultimately helped to dilute the superpower hegemony.

To conclude, Sino-Italian relations was a peripheral aspect of the Cold War, but a significant one nonetheless. Starting in 1970 the normalisation between Rome and Beijing stimulated other European countries to follow suit, first in the West and then in the East, and activated the intra-European competition to attract Beijing's favour that enormously increased Beijing's influence in the region to this day. Furthermore, the cooperation with the European developed economies favoured the success of Beijing's modernisation, diluted Soviet hegemony and progressively ameliorated Beijing's position vis-à-vis Moscow.