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CHINA'S BELT AND ROAD 'POLITICAL IMPACTS' IN THE INTERNATIONAL SPHERE (2013–2023): HOW TO CONCEPTUALISE, ANALYSE AND EVALUATE THEM?

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China's Belt and Road 'political impacts' in the international sphere (2013–2023): how to conceptualise, analyse and evaluate them?

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Abstract

Extensive scholarship has examined China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and its implementation in participating states. However, less attention has been paid to detecting its political impacts. This study conceptualises impact as a dual concept encompassing both influence and effects. Based on this conceptualisation, it investigates whether China has been successful in altering or strengthening participating states' positions toward two of its most vital strategic priorities—Taiwan and Xinjiang—since a given country's adhesion to BRI. Additionally, the research examines BRI's results in terms of political trust, policy coordination, political mechanisms, and Communist Party of China (CPC)-foreign party relations. Employing qualitative methodologies, adopting the canons of both discourse and content anaysis, this study examines a comprehensive corpus of official documents, political elite statements, and media coverage. By scrutinising the cases of Kyrgyzstan, Djibouti, and Italy, this research provides a more nuanced understanding of China's capacity to exert political influence on BRI participating countries and identifies BRI's main achievements in the political domain.

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List of Abbreviations

ACD	Asian Cooperation Dialogue
ADB	Asian Development Bank
AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
APSR	American Political Science Review
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
AU	African Union
BFA	Boao Forum for Asia
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CAB	Central Asian Barometer
CAI	Comprehensive Agreement on Investment
CASCF	China-Arab States Cooperation Forum
CNKI	China National Knowledge Infrastructure
CPC	Communist Party of China
CPI	Communist Party of Italy
CPK	Communist Party of Kyrgyzstan
CRP	Communist Refoundation Party
CSD	Community of Shared Destiny
CSDM	Community of Shared Destiny for Mankind
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
EEU	Eurasian Economic Union
EU	European Union
FDI	Brothers of Italy

FI	Go Italy
FOCAC	Forum of China and Africa Cooperation
FPA	Foreign Policy Analysis
GCI	Global Civilisational Initiative
GDI	Global Development Initiative
GSI	Globa Security Intiative
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development
IR	International Relations
LN	Northern League
M5S	5 Star Movement
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MSR	Maritime Silk Road
NBR	National Bureau of Asian Research
NCCU	National Chengchi University
NDRC	National Development and Reform Commission
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
NLC	National Library of China
NPC	National People's Congress
NTU	National Taiwan University
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PD	Democratic Party
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PLAN	People's Liberation Army Navy
PPBP	People's Party of Bright Path
PRC	People's Republic of China

PRP	People's Rally for Progress
RUC	Renmin University of China
SCIO	State Council Information Office
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SDP	Social Democratic Party
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SOEs	State-Owned Enterprises
SREB	Silk Road Economic Belt
SRF	Silk Road Fund
UAE	United Arab States
UN	United Nations
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNHCR	United Nations High Cimmissioner for Refugees
UNHRC	United Nations Human Rights Council
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
US	United States
XUAR	Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region

Introduction

Making sense of China's rise

The first twenty-four years of the new century have been marked by watershed challenges, with COVID-19, Russia's re-invasion of Ukraine, and the Israel-Gaza war as the latest arrivals. Beyond these shocks, there is another salient change that is testing the current liberal international order: the magisterial rise of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and its long-awaited ascendance to the great powers league. As it happens when a growing power is pawing for a greater role in the international realm, academics have focused their attention on predicting when and how this actor will enter the great powers' league and what consequences would entail for the system and the rest of the players, by bringing to bear various conceptual International Relations (IR) schools' perspectives (for a detailed review see Dian, 2021, § 2-5; Dian, 2023).

This has resulted in (neo)realist scholars, moving from the assumption that all states think alike, over-emphasising the necessity of reading this momentum through the lenses of sheer military power, competition, and security (Fravel, 2010; Mearsheimer, 2010; Goldstein, 2013; Allison, 2017), whereas liberal-inspired analyses, still contemplating the risk of tensions and potential conflicts, pointed out that the current international order is capable of socialising with China as a rising contender (Ikenberry, 2018; Parsi, 2021, § 4,7). Conclusions similar to those of the liberals have been reached by constructivists scholars who stress that integration, also in the Chinese case, will occur within the framework of multilateralism and international organisations (Johnston, 1995a, 1995b, 2008; Kang, 2017). Recently to this discussion, post-Western approaches (Acharya, 2017) and interpretations offered through the lenses of the

English school (Buzan, 2018)— whose shared starting point is that one of the main shortcomings of mainstream IR schools is their epistemological Eurocentrism— uncover the necessity to embrace pluralism to comprehend the future of international relations. However, as much as these laudable approaches could be potentially fruitful to put under scrutiny the Chinese ascendency, at this stage of their development these 'globalising IR' frameworks are still in their constituent moment as attested by ongoing and heated debates (Bilgin, 2008; Tickner & Wæver, 2009; Acharya et al., 2016; Çapan, 2017; Acharya & Buzan, 2019; Bilgin & Çapan, 2021; Dian, 2022).

In this evolutionary scenario, an alternative strand of research has studied China's rise by promoting an inside-outside approach to understand how this actor behaves in the international arena by assessing some pivotal cognitive backgrounds— how China understands the nature of international relations (Nordin, 2016a; Rolland, 2020; Shambaugh, 2020; Ho, 2021, § 1-3; Liu & Yang, 2023), which (still in the making) great power playbook it promotes (Thomas, 2020; Ho, 2021, § 4), etc.— to detect the main principles and peculiar logics underpinning its action (Caffarena, 2021; Berkofsky & Sciorati, 2022; Kamphausen, 2023; Caffarena & Dossi, 2023). Most typically, these studies have branched out in numerous directions, including a stream of literature dedicated to the attentive analysis of the strategies of the Communist Party of China (CPC), initiated to meet China's most pressing needs in its relations with great and middle powers, as well as with smaller states (Lavagnino, 2017; Brown, 2018, 2022; Kawashima, 2019; Carrai, 2021). In this respect, the 'China Dream' (*zhongguo meng* 中国梦) slogan is a very telling example. Although most of the analyses reported it as a vague expression coined by President Xi to call for greater Chinese protagonism in world affairs,[1] Callahan's assessment of the slogan, which was carried out by delving into the Chinese

[1] The 'China Dream' slogan was first formalised by President Xi during his visit to the 'Road to Rejuvenation' exhibition in Beijing on 29 November. See Xinhua (2012, 29 November). *Xi Jinping chengqian qihou jiwang kailai jixu chaozhe Zhonghua minzu weida fuxing mubiao fenyongqianjin* [Xi Jinping: Carry forward the past, open up the future, keep pushing forward towards the goal of great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation]. Retrieved from: http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2012-11/29/c_113852724.htm. This is the exact passage where it is mentioned: *Xianzai dajia dou zai taolun Zhongguo Meng wo yiwei shixian Zhonghua minzu weida fuxing jiushi*

discourse (using official documents and statements as well as academic texts and media), revealed three specificities: first, the expression originated out of discussion among multiple actors (mainly elites and citizen intellectuals); second, it contains a dynamic tension between socialism and indigenous ideas; and finally, it blends with other elements of Chinese self-perception (e.g., exceptionalism) that shape China's great power model (Callahan, 2013, § 1-3, 6, 2015).

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI): setting the scene

Based on these premises, this doctoral dissertation examines the case of the most researched and most ambitious Chinese project of the past decade, the Belt and Road Initiative (*hereafter*, BRI) (*yidai yilu* 一带一路). Hallmark of President Xi's administration (r. 2013 - onward) set in motion between September and November 2013,[2] the initiative originally consisted of multi-billion China-sponsored trade investments and loans to build transportation, energy, telecommunication infrastructure and strengthen monetary cooperation and increase people-to-people exchanges crisscrossing Eurasia (PRC National Development and Reform Commission et al., 2015). In its first 10 years, a very prolific BRI literature inside and outside China focused its attention on dissecting the multifaceted goals, drivers and logic of this initiative (Huang, 2016; Djankov & Miner, 2016; Cai, 2017; Yu, 2017; Beeson, 2018; Dossani et al., 2020; Jiang, 2022; Arase, 2022; Hall & Krolikowski, 2022; Pantucci & Petersen, 2022; Amineh, 2022; Rice, 2023),[3] as well as examining its operation and evolution at the regional

Zhonghuaminzu jindai yilai zui weida de mengxiang zhege mengxiang ningju le ji dai Zhongguoren de suyuan tixian le Zhonghua minzu he Zhongguoren min de zhengti liyi shi mei yi gezhong hua ernü de gongyong qipan [Now everyone is talking about the Chinese dream. I believe that the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation is the greatest dream of the Chinese people in modern times. This dream has united the long-cherished aspirations of several generations of Chinese people, reflects the overall interests of the Chinese nation and the Chinese people, and is the common hope of every Chinese person].

[2] The three constitutive moments of the BRI are: i) President Xi's speech at Nazarbayev University in Astana on September 7th 2013 where he unveiled the idea of a Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) connecting China to Europe by land; ii) President Xi's speech at the Indonesian Parliament in Jakarta on October 3rd 2013, where he proposed a Maritime Silk Road (MSR) connecting China to Europe by sea; iii) the official endorsement of the initiative under the name of 'One Belt, One Road' (OBOR) during the Third Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee.

[3] In 2015, Chinese scholars and academics published more than 8,400 papers on the topic, compared to just 492 in 2014 (Rolland, 2017).

and national levels (Aminjonov et al., 2019; Cornell & Swanström, 2020; Fulton, 2020; Ghiretti, 2021; Arase & Raposo de Medeiros Carvalho, 2022). Indeed, the BRI emerged at a very peculiar economic juncture: on the one hand, the Chinese government declared an excessive accumulation of foreign exchange reserves ($3.2 trillion) (Bank of China, 2013); on the other hand, a report published by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) quantified that the Asian continent needed $8 trillion worth of infrastructure (Asian Development Bank, 2013, 2017). These conditions, and the consequent need for Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs) to find alternative markets beyond its borders, are at the heart of the BRI's inception. In witness whereof, a bibliometric analysis[4] conducted in 2019 over 210 BRI-related peer-reviewed articles shows that the centrality of economic contingencies is mirrored by the majority of publications revolving around China deployed mechanisms (such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank AIIB), trends of its outward foreign direct investments, recipes for economic integration and monitoring the implementation of specific projects (Shahriar, 2019, p.89).

However, a few years after BRI's inception, researchers began to discuss its inherent multi-dimensional nature, arguing that alongside the more evident economic components, the initiative also conceals strategic, political and security components (Callahan, 2016; Ferdinand, 2016; Kaczmarski, 2017; Rolland, 2017b; Fulton, 2019; Carrai et al., 2020; Moritz, 2021; Lu et al., 2021; Freymann, 2021; Ahmed & Lambert, 2021). As Nadège Rolland, a senior researcher at the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR)[5] (2017), puts it, "Beijing is selling the promise of economic development throughout the region [*Central Asia*], its main focus is on the benefits that it hopes BRI will bring to China, not simply in the realm of economics but most importantly in the geopolitical domain" (Rolland, 2017a, p. 137). Elaborating on this intuition, studies aimed at uncovering these nuances have been conducted in two main

[4] The bibliometric analysis considered several databases, namely Science Direct, Scopus, Google Scholar, China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) and the Web of Science.
[5] The National Bureau of Asian Research is an independent, non-profit research institution based in Seattle and Washington D.C whose mission is to help decision-makers better understand Asia and develop effective policies.

directions. The first has evolved into studies that have applied various IR theoretical frameworks to the case of BRI (e.g., Bhattacharya, 2016; Yu, 2017; Jones, 2020); whereas the second corresponds to analyses that seek to detect and measure the different types of multidimensional impacts, including political impacts, that the BRI has generated in selected contexts (e.g., Garlick, 2019, § 6-7; Madeira et al., 2023, § 4).

Assessing BRI literature

The first category of studies examined the BRI through the lens of different IR theories, encompassing realist, liberal and constructivist perspectives. Realist accounts raise scepticism about China's continued emphasis on narratives such as 'peaceful development', 'shared prosperity' and 'win-win cooperation', arguing that these narratives undermine perceptions of China's true strategic ambitions (Wuthnow, 2017). As they fundamentally see the BRI as a grand strategy driven by the logic of power and self-interest, they often claim that the BRI will inevitably contribute to the acceleration of security competition or lead to great power conflict (Fallon, 2015; Wang, 2016; Bhattacharya, 2016). The realist argument thus helps to explain China's dynamism in improving its relations with neighbouring and other countries; however, it often overlooks that China has somehow acted differently from its Westphalian counterparts in a number of international circumstances (e.g., prudent/ambiguous stance on the use of force, Adelman & Shih, 1993; Huang & Shih, 2014) and fails to grasp or leads to misinterpretations of how China has framed its global ambitions and aspirations within the BRI framework in the first place.

In contrast, liberals have portrayed the BRI as a sign of China's further integration into the liberal order, which is seen as capable of accommodating China's rise (Wang, 2017; Jones, 2020). This integration process, which began with China's opening up in 1978, has long been characterised by the failure of liberal prophecies of democratisation, but also by China's growing dissatisfaction with the status quo. This became even more evident both with the

publication of the BRI White Paper published by the State Council Information Office (SCIO) in October 2023 and during the 3rd BRI Forum held in Beijing just a few days later (PRC State Council Information Office 2023a, 2023b). On the latter occasion, President Xi noted in this speech that the BRI is the instrument available to China and participating countries to build a new 'community of shared destiny for mankind' (*renlei mingyun gongtongti* 人类命运共同体) (CSDM). Moreover, in practice, BRI-related mechanisms and institutions such as the AIIB have moved away from the dominant rules-based principle (Ong, 2017). Therefore, the underlying liberal assumption that China has neither the intention nor the capacity to challenge the rule-based international order (Ikenberry, 2012, p.55) returns a more limited picture than what a detailed analysis of the BRI's official documents and speeches published in the decade of the BRI's existence, especially the more recent ones, would suggest.

Besides sheer material aspects, constructivist scholars' assessments of the BRI have emphasised the importance of analysing China's perception and behaviour *on its own terms*—avoiding the superimposition of foreign (Western) interpretative frameworks or pre-packaged logics of action. For example, according to scholar Yu, BRI was not initiated by economic contingencies, but rather by a growing sense of national pride that accompanied China's (re-)emergence as a global power (Yu, 2017, p. 356). In this sense, the BRI is a project that can bring out the converging interests of different states and promote a new model of bilateral cooperation (Liang & Zhang, 2019). However, while these works have the undoubted merit of restoring a better understanding of the BRI by adopting a China-centric perspective, existing studies tend to perceive the participating countries as fixed rather than dynamic entities, and only superficially analyse what the main tangible consequences of their involvement in BRI are (Wang, 2021, § 2).[6]

[6] Another very prolific strand of literature assessing the BRI is the one that adopts 'international cooperation' theory in international political economy. For an overview see Hsueh, C.-W. (2019). *Yidai Yilu de tiaozhan guoji hezuo lilun yu Yidai Yilu zai DongnanYa he NanYa guojia de shiji yunzuo jingyan* [The Challenges of China's Belt and Road Initiative: International Cooperation Theories and the Implementation of OBOR in South and Southeast Asia]. *Prospect & Exploration*, *17*(3), 63-87. See also Flint, C., & Zhu, C. (2019). The geopolitics of connectivity, cooperation, and hegemonic competition: The Belt and Road Initiative. *Geoforum, 99*, 95–101; Beeson, M., &

With regard to the second type of studies, a plethora of publications discussed what happened after the BRI was launched in a regional context— Central Asia, Southeast Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, Horn of Africa, United Arab States (UAE), Western and Eastern Europe, and South America (Laruelle, 2018, § 10-15; Gong, 2019; Albana & Fiori, 2021; Chiyemura et al., 2023)— or in single participating countries, with Pakistan and Kazakhstan ranking among the top selected case studies (Garlick, 2018; Louthan, 2022). These studies, which took a more triumphant tone shortly after the BRI's launch in 2013, typically consist of a general assessment of the BRI's features followed by a discussion of specific cases. Only recently have they found space to reflect on its main failures and weaknesses (e.g., the setback of European participation) (Garlick & Qin, 2023).

However, while both categories of studies presented here make important efforts to uncover and monitor BRI's developments and results, they exhibit two significant shortcomings. First and foremost, a notable problem that pervades the branch of BRI literature that focuses on its political components is the prevailing lack of conceptual clarity: what exactly is meant by 'political impacts'? How do they differ from the economic and cultural dimensions of the BRI? Is the aim to examine whether the BRI leads to participating countries demonstrating political support for China in international affairs? Or is there also an interest in examining the consequences of BRI participation on a country's domestic politics? Failing to address these questions, or implicitly assuming answers without careful scrutiny, risks compromising the analytical rigour of the entire analysis (Chambers & Kymlicka, 2002; O'Brien, 2023). Recently, a growing but still limited body of translation research in IR (Çapan et al., 2021) has argued that when analytical concepts travel to different and distant contexts, it is important to consider not only whether they can be applied, but also how they can be applied (Wigen 2014, Nordin 2016b). In other words, since most analytical concepts tend to reflect selective

Crawford. C. (2021). Putting the BRI in Perspective: History, Hegemony and Geoeconomics. *Chinese Political Science Review*, *8*, 45–62.

interpretations of certain parts of the world while neglecting others (Hoffman, 1977; Holsti, 1985; Onuf, 1989; Koenig & Chaudhuri, 2016; Levine & McCourt, 2018), it is necessary to devote sufficient time to a preliminary conceptual analysis of the concepts under consideration (Sartori, 1970; Goertz, 2006; Collier et al., 2012; Berenskoetter, 2016; Pelke & Croissant, 2021, 2022). This is particularly important in an era dominated by quantification (i.e., assessing 'how much'), data aggregation, index construction, and measurement, which have overshadowed the importance of definitional clarity (Pelke & Kinzelbach, 2023). Moreover, this conceptual focus becomes even more relevant in the case of China, which has undergone significant political and social transformations over the past century. As a result, there is a complex set of concepts to navigate: i) concepts derived from traditional Chinese thought, both in their original form and in their contemporary interpretations in Chinese political discourse (e.g., the concept of *tianxia* 天下) (Zhao, 2013; Babones, 2020); ii) ideas rooted in Leninist/Marxist ideology that have formed a syncretic blend with the aforementioned Chinese concepts (Shambaugh, 1992; Mitter, 2012); iii) concepts of non-Chinese origin, such as Western terms (Jin & Liu, 2005), which, after translation and integration, inevitably adapt to the current political and cultural context of the PRC (Suzuki, 2009; Alcaraz Vidal, 2021). As puzzling as it may seem, conducting a thorough analysis of CPC's initiatives requires the ability to both incorporate and differentiate between these three perspectives.[7]

A second critical element is the methodology employed in empirical analyses aimed at uncovering the political nuances of the BRI. In the realm of quantitative research, the majority of studies have conducted general assessments of BRI (Voon & Xu, 2019; Hsueh, 2020, 2022; Malik et al., 2021; Parks et al., 2023; An & Wang, 2023). For example, Taiwanese scholar Hsueh from the National Chengchi University (NCCU) conducted two subsequent analyses:

[7] Precisely because of this complexity, some recent studies have gone so far as to declare that the way a given semantic expression is understood in a different context should be considered as a form of proper reconceptualisation. Starting from this premise, the scholar A. Shangguan carried out a translingual conceptual analysis in order to trace the attributes of the concept of power in the Chinese context (Shangguan 2021, p. 201). As promising as this method may be in the future, it is currently still in a very exploratory phase to be adopted or further discussed.

one at the 5-year mark (Hsueh, 2020) and the other at the 9-year mark (Hsueh, 2022) after the implementation of the BRI. These analyses hypothesised that the participating countries would experience a shift in their foreign policy ideal points, moving closer to China and further away from the United States (US) (Hsueh, 2022, p. 22). The data used to test this hypothesis is an indicator commonly used in the quantitative evaluation of the BRI, namely the voting behaviour of participating and non-participating countries in the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) (Bailey et al., 2017; Alexander & Rooney, 2019; Turcsanyi et al., 2023). However, apart from the mixed results obtained, which could be open to different interpretations— with some BRI participating countries moving further away from China over time and non-BRI countries moving closer to China— it is necessary to critically examine the suitability of the indicator itself (Shichor, 2006; Strüver, 2017). Can the voting behaviour in a generalist body such as the UNGA on a wide range of international issues really serve as a reliable indicator? It is reasonable to suspect that each country makes its voting decisions based on a more complex calculus than simply positioning itself within the framework of the US-China competition. Moreover, the official documents on the BRI issued over the years have emphasised the importance of multilateral cooperation mechanisms (*duobian hezuo jizhi* 多边合作机制), but they assign even greater centrality to strengthening bilateral relations (*shuangbian guanxi* 双边关系) and promoting deeper regional cooperation (*shenhua quyu hezuo* 深化区域合作) (PRC State Council Information Office 2023b, p.12). By establishing tailored frameworks such as the 'China + Central Asia' format and actively contributing to the strengthening of regional organisations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which are centred on China's leadership, scholars have noted that China has effectively pursued a strategy of bilateralism within multilateral contexts (Qin, 2016, 2018a, 2018b; Shih, 2019; Pradhan & Mohanty, 2021). Rather than analysing voting behaviour in the context of international governmental organisations, alternative settings may be more appropriate for assessing the evolving nature of Chinese engagement with BRI participating countries.

On the qualitative side, empirical analyses have been conducted to examine the political effects of the BRI and the changing dynamics between China and individual countries. These studies employ single-country case studies (e.g., Boni, 2023 for India, Dave, 2022 for Kazakhstan) or multi-country case studies (e.g., Komakech & Ombati, 2023 for lessons from five African countries, Fulton, 2019 for UAE countries). While many of these studies simply record the highlights of a country's participation in the BRI, others provide more nuanced accounts, using elite interviews or process tracing techniques to analyse changes in a country's foreign policy attitudes (Langendonk, 2020) or domestic politics (Ergenç & Göçer, 2022). However, these works suffer from two major limitations. First, as Blanchard points out, there is a tendency for the quantity of literature on the BRI to outweigh its quality. Even qualitative studies, which are traditionally expected to provide in-depth analysis, have tended to focus on broadening thematic coverage rather than delving deeper into specific issues (Blanchard, 2021). Second, while constructivist-inspired works have been criticised for giving unbalanced attention to China's perspective rather than that of BRI participating countries, the opposite can be said for these studies, where discussion of the specific country context lacks counterbalancing analysis of the China's strategic motivations and ambitions.

Research aims

This doctoral dissertation argues that the necessity to gain a more punctual understanding of BRI's political components from its inception and throughout its first ten years of implementation (2013-2023) still stands. Building on the above discussion, conventional theoretical models of IR have so far uncovered crucial political nuances underpinning the BRI, but with some limitations. Similarly, academic research and discussions face two main interrelated problems– conceptual and empirical at the same time. To address these shortcomings, the study poses the following subsequent research questions:

(1.) What are political impacts?

(2.) What are the political ambitions set within the BRI framework from its inception, and how have they evolved and adapted over the ten-year period (2013-2023) of its implementation?

(3.) How can the political impacts of the BRI be assessed in a given empirical setting?

To answer these questions, the study adopts a three-pronged approach. First, given the lack of conceptual clarity surrounding the notion of 'political impacts', the study adopts the guidelines for conceptual analysis promoted by the political scientist Sartori and subsequent studies by Goertz (2006) and Collier et al. (2012) in order to identify an explicit and unambiguous definition of this term. These guidelines allows for an exploration on the use of the term in sociological and political science literature, narrowing it down to its use in the field of international relations. The conceptual analysis carried out shows that the concept of impact suffers from an inherent duality, since its meaning can extend to the notion of 'influence' and, at the same time, that of 'effect'. The study thus acknowledges this peculiarity and sets up an original and comprehensive framework for the study of political impacts in the international context.

Second, in order to gain a thorough understanding of the political component of the BRI, the study conducts an in-depth analysis to uncover its political ambitions since its inception and, at the same time, examines whether and how these have evolved during its ten-year implementation (2013–2023). This examination is carried out by analysising all official BRI-related documents published throughtout its lifetime, including documents and white papers issued by various PRC institutions (such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National Development and Reform Commission and the State Council Information Office), progress reports published by the Office of the Leading Group for Promoting the BRI, and official speeches—mainly given by President Xi Jinping and Foreign Minister Wang Yi— delivered in various contexts (national symposiums, bilateral meetings, international fora, etc.). The study

also reviewed analyses on the Belt and Road published in the CPC's official magazine *Qiushi*, as well as articles from the state-controlled news agencies China Daily and Xinhua.

Third, and based on the findings above, the study applies the framework for analysing political impacts to the case of the Chinese BRI. On the one hand, the influence component manifests itself in the Chinese ability to change or strengthen the positioning of another state actor in favour of its own strategic interests (e.g. Taiwan). It is in this context that the first hypothesis of the study (Hp.1) is formulated. Since the studies conducted in this area in the literature suggest that China's capacity to exert influence varies, the first hypothesis is further differentiated into three distinctive cases (A, B and C). On the other hand, the treatment of the effects component of the analytical framework allows the identification of four distinct dimensions: political trust, policy coordination, policy mechanisms and political parties. For each of these dimensions, the study identified an ad hoc hypothesis (Hp.2, Hp.3, Hp.4 and Hp.5). Finally, this dashboard of hypotheses is tested in the empirical section of the paper, which examines three case studies: Kyrgyzstan, Djibouti and Italy.

Study structure

This study is organized in six chapters. Chapter 1 presents the conceptual analysis carried out on the notion of 'political impact' by adopting Sartori's guidelines for conceptual analysis and subsequent publications conducted in the wake of this tradition. It begins by explaining why the Sartorian guidelines were chosen and preferred over others, with the aim of identifying a concise and original conceptual framework that will later be applied to the case of China's BRI. By reviewing the existing literature dealing with this term in both social and political literature, and then narrowing the attention to the field of IR, the discussion is based on a very comprehensive examination of the development of this term. The study argues and shows that this term has a dual nature— its meaning is associated with both the terms 'influence' and 'effects' — and in order not to lose this peculiarity, the study sets up an original framework for

analysing political impacts in the international sphere, which is able to reconcile both the components of 'political influence' and 'political effects'.

Chapter 2 takes a closer look at the case of China's BRI. Through an in-depth analysis of all publicly available BRI-related documents, the study reveals that China has projected important political ambitions into the BRI since its inception in 2013. After presenting what these ambitions are, the dissertation further argues that the goals, principles and mechanisms of these political ambitions have evolved significantly over the decade of implementation in order to address some problems and respond to some external shocks. Second, the dissertation operationalises the original framework for analysing political impacts to the case of China's BRI. In terms of political influence, the study argues that China's ability to induce the behaviour of another state entity is highly dependent on the level of alignment between its own pre-existing preferences and those of the BRI participating state. To account for this heterogeneity, three distinct hypotheses are formulated (Hp.1A, Hp.1B, Hp.1C). These hypotheses consider an increase, a partial increase or no increase in China's political influence with respect to different types of BRI participants. In terms of political effects, the study identifies the following four dimensions to be analysed: political trust, policy coordination, political mechanisms and political parties. For each of these dimensions, four hypotheses (Hp2, Hp3, Hp4, Hp5) are formulated by reviewing the main evidence in the literature. The final part of this second chapter discusses the operationalisation of the variables, explains the methodological choice of focusing on three distinctive case studies and concludes with data collection issues.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 illustrate the three empirical case studies conducted to assess the policy impact of the BRI in a particular context. The first presents the case of Kyrgyzstan, the second the case of Djibouti and the third the case of Italy. These chapters follow the same structure: in the first part, they provide a summary of the evolution of China's relations with the country in the years before and after its accession to the BRI. In the second part, they analyse the

positioning of the country in question with regard to two of China's strategic priorities — Taiwan and Xinjiang — and compare the positioning expressed in the years before BRI membership with that expressed in the years after BRI membership in order to ascertain whether changes have occurred. In this case, the hypothesis tested is different depending on the case study: Hp.1A for Kyrgyzstan, Hp1.B for Djibouti, Hp.1C for Italy. The third part presents the main results of the initiative in terms of the four dimensions identified above, namely political trust, policy coordination, political mechanisms and political parties. In this case, the hypotheses presented for examination are common and are as follows: Hp.2, Hp.3, Hp.4 and Hp.5. Finally, a concluding section summarises and discusses the main findings of the empirical case study, detailing which of the study's hypotheses are confirmed and which are not. In addition, this section reflects on the main elements of originality promoted by the study in its treatment of the Chinese case, and more specifically the Belt and Road, and sets out the main contribution of the study to the theoretical debate and policy implications. Similarly, the section identifies the main limitations of the study in light of the research framework adopted. Finally, it outlines possible avenues for future research on the topic.

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Chapter 1. Toward a conceptualisation of 'political impacts' in international politics

While studies of the BRI have extensively and increasingly discussed its political ambitions and consequences by analysing it through the lens of various IR theories or by examining what has happened in selected empirical settings, little attention has been paid to clarifying what it means and what it entails to look at this particular dimension of the BRI's multifaceted nature. In other words, previous studies on the BRI have largely assumed a definition of the phenomenon without explicitly addressing it. However, due to the complexity of the BRI initiative itself and the lack of clarity and ambiguity surrounding terms such as 'political impact' in analytical contexts, this chapter adopts the conceptual analytical guidelines proposed by political scientist Sartori and subsequent works by scholars such as Goertz (2006, 2020) and Collier et al. (2012) to explore the concept of 'political impact' in the field of international politics. Through this discussion, the aim of this chapter is twofold. First, to provide a concise and original definition of the term under analysis. Second, and based on the definition, to establish a framework that will later be applied to the case of China's BRI. This chapter does not aim to resolve the ongoing scholarly debate on the use of the concept of political impact in political science or IR academic works, nor does it propose the final empirical application of the concept. Rather, its purpose is to demonstrate that adopting a concise definition of the concept as a first step proves to be a useful guide for the subsequent stages of analysis to uncover what are the most important 'political impacts' of China's Belt and Road are.

1.1. Conceptual analyses: theoretical frameworks

To begin with: how do we define the concept? To be analytically useful, a concept should display a good balance between its 'extension' (the nature and breadth of the phenomenon) and its 'intension' (the specific qualities that characterise the phenomenon) (Ogden & Richards, 1985, pp. 1-23; Gerring, 2001, pp. 39-41). Failure to meet these criteria often results in falling into one of two categories: conceptual over-determination or over-inclusive definitions that compromise internal and external coherence. Scholars working on the BRI have rarely advanced conceptual definitions in their analyses, and when they have, the definitions have been quite poor when assessed against the above criteria. For example, Jeremy Garlick, in his book devoted entirely to the impact of China's BRI, uses two different conceptual frameworks derived from different theoretical perspectives (IR and complex theory), resulting in conceptual under-definition (Garlick, 2019, § 3).

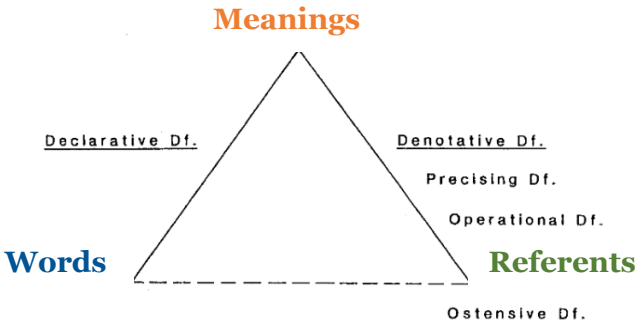
In the literature, debates over which are the best rules and practices to apply in order to perform conceptual analysis are ongoing, as witnessed by constant publications on the matter (Collier & Mahohn, 1993; Gerring, 1999, 2001; Levering, 2002; Gerring & Barresi, 2003; Bevir & Kedar, 2008; Berenskoetter, 2017; Olsthoorn, 2017; Goertz, 2020). After consulting the main literature on methods of conceptual analysis, this study has identified political scientist Giovanni Sartori's pivotal works on the theme to represent, until today, as one of the most coherent methodologies to follow in order to implement a proper conceptual analysis with a rigorous theoretical framework. More specifically, Sartori's publications will serve as the theoretical basis of this chapter: *Concept Misformation in comparative politics* (1970), *Guidelines for concept analysis* (1984) and *Tower of Babel: on the definition and analysis of concepts in the social sciences* (2011). There are at least two reasons why Sartori's guidelines have been preferred to other conceptual schemes. Firstly, Sartori's academic writings were published during a remarkable period in history, namely the late 1970s and early 1980s, when there was strong emphasis on concept analysis in the political science and international

relations literatures. Secondly, although these studies are dated, they still have considerable relevance. Many subsequent analyses have either proposed a revised version of Sartori's framework, taking into account advances in the aforementioned disciplines (Goertz, 2006; Collier, 2009; Gerring, 2012), or have constructed their systems of analysis based on Sartori's writings (Collier, 2009; Collier et al., 2012). In light of these factors, this study chooses to adopt Sartori's original analytical framework as its primary scheme. However, in recognition of the significant developments that have taken place in the subjects under study over the last four to five decades, the thesis incorporates some recent publications that draw on Sartori's tradition (Goertz, 2006, 2020).

1.2. Sartori's guidelines for conceptual analysis

According to Sartori's *Guidelines for Conceptual Analysis* (1984), a conceptual analysis follows a specific process. First, preliminary siftings are carried out to uncover the origin and etymology of a given term. Then, by applying the basic 'words-meanings-referents' scheme and clarifying the different relationships between meaning and word, and meaning and referent, it is possible to map different types of definition, each with a specific purpose. As depicted in Figure 1, the first and fundamental definition of any concept is the *declarative* definition, which connects the elements of meaning to the elements of the word. This definition is often synonymous with a lexical definition whose primary function is to 'disambiguate', that is, to reduce or eliminate the ambiguity about the meaning of a given concept. Conversely, the relationship between meaning and reference encompasses four different types of definition: denotative, precising, operational and ostensive. *Denotative* definitions aim to capture the object and establish its boundaries, while *precising* definitions attribute additional properties to the concept under study. *Operational* definitions identify properties that can be measured by specific operations. As can be seen in the figure, *ostensive* definitions are below the dotted line. This is because they are extralinguistic methods of communication that require the ability to abstract and are not always readily identifiable.

Figure 1: Sartori's basic 'words-meanings-referents' scheme and types of definition



Source: Sartori's guidelines for concept analysis (1984, p. 29)

1.3. Applying Sartori's guidelines to the concept of 'political impacts'

This study employs the Sartorian conceptual scheme to examine the notion of 'political impacts' in the field of international politics. As a first step, it is necessary to isolate the term from any attributes, which will be added at a later stage, and depart from the analysis of the term itself. Preliminary siftings has shown that the term 'impact' has recently become a buzzword, not in the sense of its original etymological meaning (i.e., collision, act of striking against, striking of one thing against another),[8] but on the contrary in relation to a much more recent figurative sense of forceful impression— first used in 1817 by the English Romantic philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge,[9] who coined the term 'impact' as a 'influence or marked effect.' To this day, this remains the dominant *declarative* definition of the term (Britannica Dictionary, 2023), from which two main implications can be drawn. First, although the term 'impact' is associated with the notion of 'influence', they are not synonymous. Using them interchangeably perpetuates a conceptual stretching fallacy, leading to further confusion of

[8] The term 'impact' originates from the Latin verb *impingere*. This is an example of the use of the verb dating back the 14th century in Dante Alighieri's Convivio: "*ciascuna cosa, da providenza di propria natura impinta, è inclinabile a la sua propria perfezione* [every thing, by the providence of its own entangled nature, is inclined to its own perfection].

[9] The term impact appears five times in Coleridge's critical autobiography, *Biographia Literaria*, published in 1817. This is one example of its use: "I*n the first place, by the impact on the percipient or ens representans (representing entity) not the object itself, but only its action or effect, will pass into the same"* (p.94).

meaning (Sartori, 1970, p. 1034).[10] Secondly, 'impact' is a broader term that encompasses different aspects, while 'influence' is one of its constituent elements, along with the idea of 'marked effects'.

Moving to the other side of Sartori's basic scheme, in order to identify a *denotative* definition of the concept, requires a comprehensive examination of the prevailing meaning assigned to the term 'impact' within the field of social and political science (Collier et al., 2012). Within this literature, however, the term 'impact' is most often used to establish a link between the independent variable and the dependent variable under analysis, as expressed in the formula 'the impact of X on Y'. For example, of all the articles published in the prestigious academic journal *American Political Science Review* (APSR) between 1990 and 2023, a total of 173 explicitly referred to 'impact' either in their titles or abstracts, predominantly with the intended meaning of the "effect of one variable on another variable". In the few cases where the concept of 'impact' was used as one of the two variables under consideration, such as in the scholarly article entitled *Political Impact of the Economic Crisis in Latin America in the 1980s*, its interpretation is primarily focused on electoral results (Remmer, 1991).[11]

There is also a field within the social sciences where the term 'impact' has acquired a precise connotation: management studies. In these studies, the term 'impact' has developed in relation to projects carried out by various third sector entities (such as philanthropic institutions and non-profit organisations) in relation to specific beneficiaries, and it is associated with changes that occur as a result of the intervention (Ricciuti & Calò, 2018, Benjamin, 2012; Ogain et al., 2012). Adopting this definition as the primary *denotative*

[10] This conceptual structure can be formalised as follows: $I = I \cup E$ (impact equals influence or effect). To say that impact and influence can be used interchangeably is to exclude *a priori* the component of the effects.
[11] Another example is Francis W. Hoole's seminal paper entitled *Evaluating the Impact of International Organisations* (published in 1977). In this paper, the author discusses the importance of examining the international activities promoted by international organisations by evaluating the impact generated by their public interventions.

definition of the analysis could have several problematic implications, for at least three reasons. First, since its meaning has been developed and evolved in a very niche branch of the social sciences, there is a risk that it will be forced to extend to other branches, such as political science and IR. Second, since the purpose of a *denotative* definition is to establish the general contours of a given term, adopting too specific a definition ends up inhibiting the very use of the term for analytical purposes. Third, although the term is often referred to as 'impact', its intended meaning is frequently associated with the more specific notion of 'social impact' and all the implications that this attribute entails.

How, then, is it possible to ascertain a *denotative* definition of the term 'impact'? As mentioned above, 'impact' refers to 'influence or marked effects'. Therefore, if it is not possible to establish a *denotative* definition of the term through its use in the relevant literature, it is plausible to explore and establish the definitions implied by its constituent elements, namely 'influence' and 'marked effects'.

1.3.1. Denotative definitions of 'influence' and 'marked effects' in social science and political science literatures

The analysis begins with an examination the concept of 'influence'.[12] There are several influential and significant works in the social sciences that provide valuable reference points for a more contextualised definition of 'influence'. Notable contributions include those

[12] From an etymological point of view, the term 'influence' stems from the medieval Latin *influentia,* which literally means 'a flow of water, a flowing in.' From the 13th century in scholastic Latin, and later in Middle English, it took on the meaning of 'imperceptible or indirect action exerted to cause changes.' The use of the term in scholastic Latin can be found in Aquinas *Summa Theologiae* (written between 1265 and 1273) *Prima pars Quaestio 9*: "*Sicut enim dicitur sol intrare domum vel exire, inquantum radius eius pertingit ad domum; sic dicitur Deus appropinquare ad nos vel recedere a nobis, inquantum percipimus influentiam bonitatis ipsius, vel ab eo deficimus"* [For as the sun is said to enter a house, or to go out, according as its rays reach the house, so God is said to approach to us, or to recede from us, when we receive the influx of His goodness, or decline from Him] (translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, re-published by Christian Classics, Westminster, Md., 1981). One of the first and most famous example in Middle English is represented by Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, which he wrote in 1386. In this work, the word 'influence' appears five times in the text, including the phrase below:
"*O lord of war, whose influence debars*
All hope! O feeble Luna, vainly knit
To him, thrust forth from where thou shouldest sit!" (The Man of Law's Tale, p. 167).

published in the mid-1950s by the American political scientist James G. March, who argued that the interest in 'influence' stems from its role as a fundamental intervening variable in the analysis of decision-making (March, 1955, p. 432). March conceptualised influence as a subset of causal relations characterised by the induction of change. He developed a formal model of the state of the organism: in his view, any influence process is characterised by a number of elementary sets, values associated with the elements in those sets (behaviour alternatives), and the probability links between the elements (March, 1955, 1957). Another seminal work by the American sociologist Talcott Parsons attempted to provide a broader understanding of influence. Parsons defined influence as "a way of having an effect on the attitudes and opinions of others by deliberate (though not necessarily rational) action – the effect may or may not be to change the opinion or to prevent a possible change" (Parsons, 1963, p. 38).

Interestingly, a significant body of literature has examined the notion of 'influence' in terms of its connections and differences with the notion of 'power.'[13] In this regard, political scientist Ruth Zimmerling, in her book *Influence and Power: Variations on a Messy Theme*, reviews all the major publications on this dichotomy (Zimmerling, 2006). Excluding works that have used the terms interchangeably (Kerbo & Mckinstry, 1995),[14] three main systematic proposals for conceptual subordination (i.e., defining one concept as more general and the other as a specific case) emerge. First, prominent scholars Lasswell and Kaplan present 'influence' as a general term and 'power' as a subcategory that includes the use of severe sanctions to exert influence. However, their definition of influence as 'value position and potential' fails to clarify

[13] See for example: Lasswell, H.D., & Kaplan, A. (1950). *Power and Society*. New Haven: Yale University Press; Simon, H. H. (1953). Notes on the observation and measurement of political power. *The Journal of Politics*, *15*(4), 500-516; Dahl, R. A. (1957). The Concept of Power. *Behavioral Science*, *2*(3), 201-215; Cartwright, D. (1965). Influence, Leadership, Control. In: J. March (Ed.). *Handbook of Organizations* (pp. 1-47); Willer, D., Lovaglia, M. J., & Markovsky, B. (1997). Power and Influence: a theoretical bridge. *Social Forces*, *76*(2), 571-603; Zaaiman, J. (2020). Power and influence: assessing the conceptual relationship. *KOERS — Bulletin for Christian Scholarship*.

[14] In an interesting paper published in 1985, Carl Böhret showed that, after surveying 254 political scientists in the Federal Republic of Germany on what they considered to be the *sine qua non* basic concepts of the discipline, influence and power emerged as two separate concepts, and thus meaning different things. Böhret, C. (1985). *Zum Stand und zur Orientierung der Politikwissenschaft in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* [On the state and orientation of political science in the Federal Republic of Germany]. In: H.-H. Hartwich (Ed.). *Policy-Forschung in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Ihr Selbstverständnis und ihr Verhältnis zu den Grundfragen der Politikwissenschaft* (pp.216-330). Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag.

this relationship (Lasswell & Kaplan, 1950, p. 60). Second, Wrong, in agreement with Lasswell and Kaplan, posits that 'influence' is the broader concept, which can be further divided into 'power' (intended and effective influence) and 'unintended influence.' However, no further elaboration of these concepts is provided (Wrong, 1995). Third, Pörn reverses the order of power and influence, taking 'power' as the general concept, which is then subdivided into 'normative power' and 'influence.' However, Pörn's work lacks a detailed exploration of the concept of 'influence' (Pörn, 1970).

According to Zimmerling, the most significant and influential contribution to the subject to date is the analysis carried out by Mokken and Stokman in the 1970s, which focused on the concepts of 'power' and 'influence' as political phenomena (Mokken & Stokman, 1976). In their approach, Mokken and Stokman provide a clear and thorough definition of 'influence', stating that it is:

> *"the capacity of actors to determine (partly) the actions or choices of others within the set of action of choice alternatives available to those actors"*
>
> (Mokken & Stokman 1976, p. 37).

There are several key elements to this definition. Firstly, it describes 'influence' as a causal concept, emphasising its role in bringing about change by enabling one or more actors to induce change in others. Secondly, the notion of change is understood from the perspective of the influenced individual, manifested in the form of actions or choices. Thirdly, it emphasises that change does not occur without limits, but rather within the realm of feasible options, allowing the influencing actor to determine outcomes without restricting or expanding the freedom of action of others. In other words, individuals are able to determine outcomes within the set of alternatives available to them. Finally, the definition recognises that 'influence' can operate at different levels, encompassing both micro-level interactions and macro-level

dynamics. By using the term 'actors' in a broad sense, the definition aims to include not only individuals, but also groups and collective entities such as institutions and governments. Thus, Mokken and Stokman's sociological definition fulfils the purpose of a *denotative* definition, which is to capture the essence of the concept and define its boundaries (Sartori, 1984, p. 30; Goertz, 2006).

The definition of the other component of impact, namely the one characterized by 'marked effects', is considerably easier to ascertain. Its origin can be traced back to the medieval Latin term *effectus*, which literally means 'the execution or fulfilment of an action.' In the field of social sciences, the term 'effect' has mainly been used to evaluate the main results of a particular action, programme or intervention. Indeed, over time, a distinct field of study has emerged within sociology and political science, known as 'evaluation studies.' The main objective of this field is to develop methodologies and standards for the evaluation of existing programmes in different fields and sectors (Wanzer, 2021). In this context, an all-encompassing definition of 'effect' is that provided by the Organisation for the Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in its *Glossary of Key Terms in Evaluation and Results-Based Management*, which defines 'effect' as "intended or unintended changes due directly or indirectly to an intervention" (OECD, 2022). This OECD definition is therefore adopted:

> *"intended or unintended changes due directly to an intervention"*
> (author's elaboration from OECD Glossary, 2022, p. 16).

Table 1 provides a summary of the definitions that have been identified as relevant thus far in the analysis so far. Before proceeding with the subsequent stages of the conceptual scheme, it is important to set out a number of observations. The adoption of a *denotative* definition of 'impact', combining the denotative meanings of its two components, highlights the inherent dual nature of the term. On the one hand, 'impact' can be associated with the ability of an actor

to influence the behaviour of another party; on the other hand, it can be understood as the tangible results of a specific programme. Against this background, it can be inferred that these two components imply different perspectives, not only in terms of their meanings, but also in terms of their implications. Specifically, 'influence' is rooted in an actor-centred perspective, while 'marked effects' are associated with an action/programme perspective. This means that when this duality is applied to the case of China's BRI, it becomes clear that the concept of 'influence' is primarily linked to China's ability to use this initiative to assume a prominent position in relation to other state actors, while 'marked effects' are more directly linked to the main outcomes and achievements of the BRI.

Table 1: Declarative definition of impact and denotative definitions of its constitutive elements derived from social science and political science literatures

Declarative definition	
IMPACT influence or marked effect Source: Britannica Dictionary, 2023	
Denotative definitions	
INFLUENCE	OR **MARKED EFFECT**
Actor-centred perspective the capacity of actors to determine (partly) the action or choices of others within the set of action or choice alternatives available to those actors Source: Mokken & Stockman (1976)	***Policy-oriented perspective*** intended or unintended changes due directly to an intervention Source: elaboration from OECD (2022)

Source: re-elaboration of the author based on Sartori's guidelines for concept analysis (1984)

Denotative definitions are necessary to establish the boundaries of a particular concept under study. However, in order for a concept to be analytically useful, two other types of definition should be identified. First, *precising* definitions are obtained by restricting the scope of the analysis to a specific disciplinary field and by adding any additional characteristics or

attributes to the concept under scrutiny (Sartori, 1984, p. 31). Secondly, *operating* definitions are used to identify the distinguishing characteristics of a given term, which can then be assessed and measured in empirical settings (Collier et al., 2012, p. 224). In order to further understand the inherent duality of the concept of impact, the following sections will again examine both the terms 'influence' and 'marked effects'.

1.3.2. Precising definitions of 'political influence' and 'political effect' in international relations literature

Following Sartori's guidelines, the first aspect to be taken into account for the continuation of the analysis is to limit the scope of the study to a specific disciplinary field, that of international relations. Up to this point, the analysis has used definitions from the social and political science literature. This is for two reasons: firstly, this step represents a crucial juncture in the analysis, where definitions are further clarified through precise characteristics; secondly, the overall aim of this chapter is to establish a conceptualisation of the concept of 'political impacts' in international politics. This section presents a comprehensive analysis of the use and development of the terms 'influence' and 'effect' in the field of international relations. Subsequently, the attribute 'political' is added to both terms. Finally, *precise* definitions are developed.

In IR scholarship, the study of 'influence' has often been compared to, and often integrated with, studies of the concept of 'power' (Bachrach & Baratz, 1962; van der Eijk & Kok, 1975). As a result, many authors have chosen to use these two terms interchangeably (Baldwin, 1971;

Dahl & Stinebrickner, 2003).[15] [16] However, there are several studies that depart from this perspective and examine how the phenomenon of influence manifests itself in two specific international contexts: bilateral relations between two state entities and multilateral interactions between states within international organisations. Robert W. Cox and Harold K. Jacobson, in one of the seminal studies on the subject, define 'influence' (presented as A→B) as "an actual modification of one actor's behaviour by another to achieve the latter's goals" (Cox & Jacobson, 1973, p. 412). In line with this definition, Robert O. Keohane, in his study focusing on political influence processes within the UNGA, highlights that "a state is influential in the UNGA to the extent that it can shape UNGA decisions in accordance with its own desires" (Keohane, 1967, p. 222).[17] There are two other noteworthy aspects emphasised in Keohane's study. Firstly, he cautions against looking only at the outcomes of influence and instead urges a broader examination of the underlying processes. This critique challenges the widespread use of indicators such as voting outcomes or measures of legislative effectiveness to determine the manifestation of influence mechanisms. Secondly, Keohane makes explicit reference to the factors on which a state can rely to exert influence (moral standing, economic

[15] For Western IR scholars, the term 'influence' can evoke a specific concept known as the 'sphere of influence.' A recent book on this topic, written by Hast (2014), critically analyses and reassesses this term. The book argues that the historical meaning of the 'sphere of influence', rooted in the Cold War, carries a negative connotation, often associated with the metaphorical idea of a country's territorial influence extending beyond its borders. The author recognises that the concept is intertwined with issues of international order and justice, and she is unable to encompass these order-and-justice related theorisations in order to obtain a more autonomous definition of the concept (Hast, 2014, p. 142). In addition, there is a continuous, and erroneous, use of the term in political language that sees it only as a foreign policy tool limited to the politics of the states (still primarily and exclusively linked to the US and Russia), so the concept does not have an entity of its own. It is important to clarify that in this study the term 'influence' will not be used interchangeably with the term 'sphere of influence.'

[16] Another relevant concept in IR that overlaps with the phenomena under study is the notion of 'soft power'. Coined by the American political scientist Joseph Nye in 2004, this term originally referred to "the ability of a state to influence other nations through persuasion and attraction rather than coercion or force" (Nye, 2004). For the purposes of this study, this concept poses at least two problems. First, it is rooted in the concept of power. Second, as the author has recently reflected, the multifaceted evolution of the concept has posed some important challenges. Nye, J. (2017). Soft power: the origins and political progress of a concept. *Palgrave Communications*, 3(17008).

[17] In addition to Keohane's study, another pertinent examination of 'political influence' has been put forth by scholars Arts & Verschuren (1999). However, given that their analysis primarily centers around intra-state political decision-making processes, this study deems it essential to shift our focus towards works that specifically address the international level. For similar analyses, refer to Banfield, E. C. (2003). *Political Influence* (1st edition). Routledge.

power, political authority), and the main instruments it can use (persuasion, promises, pressure, or threats).[18]

Subsequent studies have extensively examined the factors that contribute to a state's desire to exert influence and another state's susceptibility to it, as well as the various instruments that states can use to establish relationships of influence. Key areas of analysis regarding these factors include demography, geographical proximity, economy, military power, technology, and ideology (Mathisen, 1973; Saaty & Khouja, 1976; Baehr, 1977; Reich & Lebow, 2014). In terms of instruments, subsequent studies have endorsed Keohane's four-part spectrum of persuasion-promise-pressure-threat, and while earlier studies focused primarily on coercive instruments, more recent research has also highlighted the importance of persuasion and promises (Baldwin, 1971, 1980; Baehr, 1977; Morris, 1987; Rothgeb, 1993; Davis, 2000; Meierding & Sigman, 2021). In addition to factors and instruments, the literature also examines the conditions that facilitate the emergence of influence relationships. For example, Baehr points out that unquestioned capabilities, a strong reputation, and credibility recognised by other actors in the international system are important for the actor seeking to exert influence, while the potential recipient of influence must show needs and a certain willingness to be influenced (Baehr, 1977). In this regard, Moraes (2019) adds that the two competences that the state actor seeking to exert influence must have are the ability to identify its own national interest and to defend this interest in the context of decision-making processes that take place in the international context. In his view, 'influence' is described as "the capacity to advance the preferences of a country in a given international process as well as the ability to prevent or mitigate detrimental effect to national preferences that could derive from international discussions" (Moraes, 2019 p. 569).

[18] In a subsequent study published in 1971, Keohane examines the phenomenon of influence from the perspective of small states and delves into the primary levels and tactics that they can employ in their relations with more influential states (Keohane, 1971). For further insights, see Baldur Thorhallsson's later study titled 'Small states in the UN Security Council: means of influence?' published in *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* in 2012 or Tom Long's book 'A small state's guide to influence in world politics' published by the Oxford University Press in 2022.

Moreover, the study of influence has expanded into more specific domains. Realist-inspired accounts have turned their attention to the military and economic spheres, examining the circumstances under which states are likely to emerge victorious from wars and the consequences for losing parties (de Mesquita & Siverson, 1995). Similarly, they have analysed deterrence and the consequences of arms sales (Mearsheimer, 1983; Sislin, 1994), the intervention of third countries in interstate conflicts (Regan, 1996), and studies of crisis negotiations (Axelrod, 1984). In addition, these accounts have scrutinised the coercive instruments of economic statecraft, such as sanctions and asymmetric trade relations (Baldwin, 1985). On the other hand, liberals and constructivists have mostly focused on economic, diplomatic, and ideational tools, examining how states acquire influence by shaping international institutions, norms, and other shared belief systems (Noorudin & Lockwood, 2010; Hwang et al., 2015).[19]

In light of the analysis of the main published contributions on influence and its development in the literature relations literature, this study posits finds that the classic definition formulated by Cox and Jacobson (1973) in their book on the *Anatomy of Influence* still has the advantage of providing a concise and comprehensible conceptual framework. In their terms, 'influence' is:

> *"actual modification of one state actor B's behaviours by that of another state actor A for the purpose of achieving the latter's goals"*
>
> (Cox & Jacobson, 1973, p. 412).

[19] In addition to the IR literature, this study also examined the democratic literature to explore its contributions regarding the role of an external state in relation to another state entity in democratization processes. The authors reiterate the importance of considering both actors, state A and state B, with particular attention to the intensity of their interactions (as illustrated by Levitsky & Way's 'leverage and linkage' theory, 2006). Another example is Tolstrup's research on the influential role of national elites, so-called gatekeeper elites, in interstate interactions (Tolstrup, 2013, 2014). While these studies serve as important reference points, as they are consistent with the findings highlighted in the international relations literature, they are not incorporated further into the analysis.

As already highlighted in the broader sociological and political science literature, the use of the term 'marked effect' in the context of international relations literature is also associated with 'evaluation studies.' Its treatment has been developed within a subfield of the IR literature, that of foreign policy analysis (FPA) (Rosenau, 1980; Hudson & Vore, 1995; Beasley et al., 2012; Smith et al., 2016). In this context, the focus is on the study of the strategies and actions that a state pursues in its relations with other states and other actors in the international system. Various parameters have been studied over time, from the objectives to the resources mobilised, the instruments used and the results achieved (Morin & Paquin, 2018, p.18). As Baldwin points out, the analysis of foreign policy has for a long time focused more on the study of the process of policy-making and less in relation to the outcomes produced by these processes (Baldwin, 2000, p. 167). Baldwin therefore proposes an approach to evaluating the success of a foreign policy based on the concepts of 'success' and 'failure'. Among the dimensions of success, he identifies, for example, the effects of a given initiative on allies or adversaries and in relation to the trade-offs between the different national interests of the promoting state (Baldwin, 2000, p. 172-173). From this study, it is possible to derive a more precise definition of marked effects in the context of international relations, which is as follows:

"successes or failures of a state actor's foreign policy initiative"
(Baldwin, 2000, p. 172-173).

In order to conclude this section on the *precising* definitions provided by Sartori's conceptual analysis, a final aspect to be addressed is that of attributes. At the beginning of the chapter, the analysis has made explicit its intention to focus specifically on the 'political' dimension. With regard to the two definitions previously identified and presented, this choice has two main consequences that require relative adjustment. The first relates to 'influence', while the second relates to the 'effects' component. With regard to the notion of influence, focusing on the political sphere means identifying the government and the political elite of a given country as primarily responsible for the behaviour of a state. In this sense, the study adopts the state-

centric assumption of the discipline of international relations in its most classical sense (Gilpin, 1981; Waltz, 1999). On the other hand, as discussed above, the process underlying inter-state influence attempts is based on a state's ability and political will to determine the behaviour of other state entities. And notwithstanding the increasing importance of non-state actors, from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to international organisations and including private and transnational actors, express in the international landscape (Baumann & Stengel, 2014), the study of the influence and effects of a given policy are both direct emanations of a state entity.

More complex, however, is the decision to focus exclusively on the political dimension, with reference to the results that can manifest themselves when a state decides to implement certain policy. The links between the economic, political and even cultural spheres are increasingly close, and it is sometimes very difficult to distinguish one from the other. Nevertheless, states continue to project— sometimes more, sometimes less— explicit political ambitions into their policies. Identifying these, analysing them and understanding what has been achieved remains an important element of research (Hill, 2003).

With this in mind, Table 2 therefore shows the *precising definitions* of 'political influence' and 'political effects' adopted in the analysis.

Table 2: Precising definitions from IR literature and addition of the 'political' attribute

Precising definitions		
POLITICAL INFLUENCE	OR	**POLITICAL EFFECTS**
Actor-centred perspective		***Policy-oriented perspective***
actual modification of one state actor B's behaviours by that of another state actor A by means of its government and its political élite for the purpose of achieving the latter's political goals Source: Cox & Jacobson, 1973		political successes or failures of a state actor's foreign policy initiative Source: Baldwin (2000)

Source: re-elaboration of the author based on Sartori's guidelines for concept analysis (1984)

1.3.3. Operational definitions of 'political influence' and 'political effect': main properties and measurement

The final step in Sartori's conceptual rules is that of *operational* definitions. This step is specifically aimed at identifying the properties of the concepts under study that can be evaluated empirically. The measurement of international influence has already been the focus of many studies (Singer, 1963; Rosenau, 1969; Baldwin, 1971; Hart, 1974, 1976; Kegley & Wittkopf, 1976; Saaty & Khouja, 1976; Imai & James, 1996; Arts & Verschuren, 1999; Meernik, 1999; Kim & Urpelainen, 2015; Meierding & Sigman, 2021). As early as 1963, Singer proposed a probabilistic model, later discussed and partially modified by Baldwin in 1971, to study influence attempts and their outcomes in bilateral relations between nations. In separate studies, Brams and Hart considered the utility of set theory for studying interactions and potential influence relationships between nations (Brams, 1969; Hart, 1974). Kegley & Wittkopf were among the pioneers in using the 'number of official visits by heads of state or other government representatives' as an indicator, and they found that if the number of visits between two countries exceeded a certain threshold within a certain timeframe, an influence relationship could be inferred (Kegley & Wittkopf, 1976).

Subsequent studies have applied different theoretical lenses, such as game theory, to the case of influence (Kim & Urpelainen, 2014). For example, in an analysis of the dynamics of influence in a trilateral configuration involving two great powers and a weaker state, Imai & James (1996) used foreign policy instruments such as economic aid, arms supplies, and trade as the main research variables. More recently, large-scale N-studies have been conducted to determine the influence of specific variables (typically foreign aid and trade assistance) on desired outcomes, such as securing a favourable vote in the UNGA (Strüver 2016; Alexander & Rooney 2019). However, as Keohane noted in his seminal study of 'political influence' (1967), the concept of influence cannot be captured solely by examining outcomes at a single point in time, but rather requires the monitoring of a process over time that involves multiple factors. In line with this perspective, Meierding and Sigman (2021) have proposed a framework for analysing bilateral processes between an influencing state (referred to as state A) and a target state (referred to as state B). This framework considers four key aspects: mapping the resources (both material and ideational) available to state A to engage in influence activities within state B; identifying the types of activities involved (e.g., military, economic, diplomatic, informational); examining the mechanisms used to translate resources and activities into influence (e.g., reward, punishment, expertise, attractiveness, recognition); and monitoring changes in the target state's behaviour (Meierding & Sigman, 2021, p. 5-8).

With regard to the other component, that of 'marked effects' (Baldwin, 2000; Morin & Paquin, 2018), studies aimed at measuring them are divided into two main phases. The first deals with the punctual analysis of the initiative in terms of its main components, from objectives to targets. The second, on the other hand, considers the evaluation of effectiveness, that is, the analysis of which results were actually achieved and which were not (Morin & Paquin, 2018, p.18).

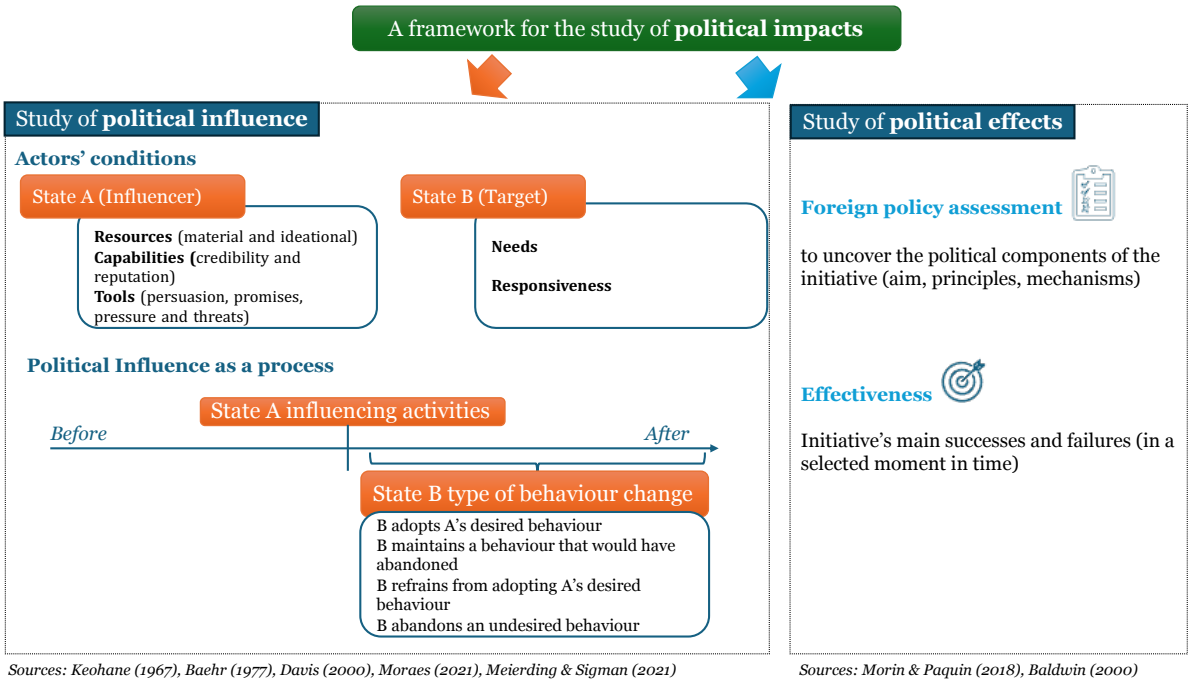
1.4. Reconcile political influence and political effects in the international sphere: a framework for assessing 'political impacts'

Using the conceptual unravelling guidelines developed by the political scientist Sartori, this first chapter has been able to present an orderly and step-by-step discussion of the components and meanings that characterise the notion of 'political impact'. Against this background, this section draws on the evidence presented earlier to establish an original framework for analysing the notion of 'political impact' in the international context. First of all, as shown in Table 2, the study opts to take into account the duality inherent in the notion of impact and recalled several times in the chapter. It therefore divides the framework into two distinct blocks: the first refers to 'political influence', while the second refers to 'political effects'. The elements that characterise the framework are described in more detail below.

With regard to 'political influence', the framework highlights the need to carry out a study of it, taking into account two aspects. The first concerns the mapping of the conditions that characterise the interaction between the two state entities. On the one hand, it is indeed necessary to identify the resources (material and conceptual), the capacities (credibility and repetition) and the instruments (persuasion, promises, pressure and threats) that characterise the condition of State A wishing to exert influence. At the same time, it is important to identify the needs and responsiveness that characterise the conditions of the state B. The second aspect concerns the analysis of the actual process of influence. It is usually characterised by a temporal scanning of the before and after typology, in which an influencing activity of state A (an initiative, a project, an action) intervenes as a rupture element. After the occurrence of this rupture element, it is essential to pay attention to how state B reacts to it. This may include changing its position in favour of state A, maintaining a position in favour of state A that one would have liked to abandon, refraining from adopting a behaviour desired by state A, and finally abandoning a position that state B does not consider favourable.

The second block of the framework focuses instead and more specifically on the study of the political effects, understood as results that a foreign policy initiative registers in a given state context. The study of these effects is characterised by a preliminary assessment of the initiative. The aim is to identify the underlying objectives, principles and mechanisms, and to monitor the evolution and changes of the initiative during its implementation. Furthermore, the analysis grid identifies the need to analyse the effectiveness of an initiative in terms of the main successes and failures recorded in a given context and selected point in time.

Figure 2: A conceptual framework for the study of 'political impacts'



Source: elaboration of the author based on the conceptual analysis presented in this Chapter

1.5. Conclusions

This chapter presents a conceptual analysis of the notion of 'political impact' in the international sphere. The starting point for this reflection is that the use of the term in this context is marred by a contradiction between the widespread use of the term, which is also used for analytical purposes, and the lack of conceptualisation of the meaning with which it is

typically used. Therefore, in order to bring order to this problematic issue, the study identifies the guidelines and definitional scheme developed by the political scientist Sartori, and subsequent studies developed in line with this approach, as a tool to introduce a conceptual analysis of the term. However, the preliminary stages of the analysis show that no meaning can be derived from the literature of international relations or political science, and that the concept of impact has an inherently dual nature. In fact, it can mean both 'influence' and 'marked effects' at the same time. Without a priori abandoning one or the other, since they also refer to two different perspectives — one state-centric and the other policy-oriented — the analysis develops these two aspects in parallel.

Accordingly, the study adopts two *denotative* definitions by reconstructing the meaning of the two terms in the sociological and political science literature and, by restricting the scope to the discipline of international relations alone, derives two *precising* definitions to which the attribute 'political' is then added. Furthermore, in order to complete Sartori's analytical approach, this study presents the *operational* definitions of the two concepts, i.e. it discusses how the characteristics of these concepts can be translated into concrete actions. Finally, on the basis of the conceptual analysis performed, the chapter systematises the main findings that have emerged and promotes the study of 'political impact' in the international context, adopting an original analytical framework capable of reconciling 'political influence' as an ongoing process between two state actors and the study of the 'political effects' of a given initiative implemented and promoted by a state.

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Chapter 2. Analysing BRI's political ambitions, China's modes of political influence and BRI's political effects

In light of the conceptual framework adopted, this chapter analyses China's Belt and Road political ambitions and provides a selective overview of the ongoing academic debate on the political impact of the Belt and Road Initiative, understood as both political influence and political effects. Firstly, in order to have a better comprehension of the initiative, the first section analyses an extensive collection of official BRI documents (e.g. white papers, progress reports, official speeches, joint communiques, statements, articles from state-controlled/affiliated news agencies) to identify China's internationally projected political ambitions at the time of the BRI's inception, and to examine whether and how these ambitions have evolved over the ten years of implementation (2013-2023). The second section presents the main findings of the niche, but emerging, literature that examines the modes of China's political influence over other state entities. Based on the main findings, and by adding the lens of BRI as a project aimed at increasing China's regional and global political influence, some hypotheses are put forward on whether China's ability to induce changes in the behaviour of another state actor has changed since the launch of the BRI. Similarly, the study goes on to discuss what have been the main results of the BRI in the political domain so far. Four dimensions are identified: political trust, policy coordination, political mechanisms and the role of political parties. By discussing preliminary evidence for each dimension, some further hypotheses are put forward.

2.1. Decoding China's Belt and Road political ambitions

This section presents the primary evidence derived from the analysis of official BRI documents published by the PRC authorities over the years. The analysis aims to identify the international political ambitions that were initially associated with the project, and whether these ambitions have undergone any modifications or evolved over the course of its ten-year implementation phase. The analysis comprises a total of 36 official documents, which were obtained through online research and archival research conducted at the National Library of China (NLC) and at the Library of the Renmin University of China (RUC) in Beijing between February and May 2024. These documents were primarily sourced from institutions such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the State Council Information Office (SCIO), the Office of the Leading Group for Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative, the official websites of the three editions of the BRI Forum (2017, 2019, 2023 respectively), the CPC's Qiushi magazine, and the China Daily and Xinhua news agencies. The documents include President Xi Jinping's official speeches, white papers, progress reports on the BRI initiative, as well as thematic and in-depth articles published by official channels. The timeframe considered for this analysis spans the ten years duration of the initiative, from 2013 to 2023. However, for the sake of clarity, the analysis is divided into three distinct periods in the following sections: the initial phase (2013-2015), the intermediate phase (2016-2019) and the most-recent phase (2020-2023).

2.1.1. China's BRI political ambitions in the early-phase (2013-2015)

Although the launch of China's Belt and Road is commonly associated with the two speeches delivered by President Xi at the end of 2013 in Astana and Jakarta, where he first outlined the two components of the initiative— the 'Silk Road Economic Belt' (SREB) and the 'Maritime Silk Road of the 21st century' (MSR) (Xi 2013a, 2013b)[20]— it was not until two years later, in

[20] Following the two speeches in 2013, President Xi made numerous public speeches reminding of the BRI initiative. For example: Xi, J. (2014a, 5 June). Opening ceremony of the sixth ministerial meeting of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASCF); Xi, J. (2014b, 4 November). Eight meeting of the Central Leading Group for Finance

2015, that the project began to take shape, political aspirations included. However, some ideas evoked in these two preliminary speeches are worth considering: in his speech at the University of Astana in September 2013, Xi emphasised the importance of mutual trust (*huxin* 互信) and mutual understanding (*hujian* 互鉴) in the interactions between the different peoples connected by the ancient Silk Road. Furthermore, in his speech to the Indonesian Parliament in Jakarta in October 2013, he reiterated the need to consolidate mutual political and strategic trust (*gonggu zhengzhi he zhanlüe huxin* 巩固政治和战略互信) in the interstate interactions between China and the countries members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). At the same time, he stressed the value of win-win cooperation (*hezuo gongying* 合作共赢) and mutual assistance (*shouwang xiangzhu* 守望相助) as paradigms for international collaboration.

Then, with the joint publication of the official document *Visions and Actions* by the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China in 2015, the Belt and Road project began to take on some specific characteristics. Essentially, the project involves the implementation and financing of a number of activities by China, including infrastructure development in various sectors ranging from transportation to digital technology. However, the document also contains, albeit in a fragmented and scattered manner, some political ambitions associated with the initiative. From the outset, the BRI is presented as a new model of international cooperation and global governance (*yiiji quanqiu zhili xin moshi* 以及全球治理新模式), in which China commits to assuming greater responsibilities and obligations (*zeren*

and Economics; Xi, J. (2014c, 11 November). 22nd informal meeting of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) leaders.

yiwu 责任义务) within its own capabilities (PRC National Development and Reform Commission et al., 2015). In addition, the initiative emphasises the need to improve policy coordination (*zhengce goutong* 政策沟通) and strengthen the role of political parties and parliaments (*chongfe fahui zhengdang*、*jiaowang de qiaoliang zuoyong* 充分发挥政党、议会交往的桥梁作用) in fostering exchanges among Belt and Road countries. The former is pursued through enhanced intergovernmental cooperation, the establishment of multi-level communication and exchange mechanisms, and the promotion of mutual political trust, [21] while further details regarding the attainment of the latter objective are not provided.[22]

Moreover, the BRI operates as a platform without its own independent organisation, except for the subsequent establishment of a small Office of the Leading Group for Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative in 2017.[23] As a matter of fact, the implementation mechanism of the BRI relies on existing bilateral and multilateral mechanisms (*xianyou shuang duobian hezuo jizhi* 现有双多边合作机制). At the bilateral level, China aims to strengthen communication and consultation through multi-level channels, sign memoranda of understanding, and adopt cooperation plans to coordinate and implement Belt and Road projects.[24] At the multilateral

[21] This is the original passage contained in the 'Visions and Actions' document: "*Jiaqiang zhengfu jian hezuo jiji goujian duoceng ci zhengfu jian honguan zhengce goutong jiaoliu jizhi shenhua liyi ronghe cujinzhengzhi huxin dacheng hezuo xin gongshi* " Strengthen intergovernmental cooperation, actively establish a multi-level intergovernmental macro policy communication and exchange mechanism, deepen the integration of interests, promote political mutual trust, and reach a new consensus on cooperation (PRC National Development and Reform Commission et al., 2015, p.3).

[22] Interestingly, this passage on the strengthening of exchanges between political actors is reported in the document under the sub-section on 'People-to-People' bond (*minxin xiangtong*).

[23] While recognising the importance of some ad-hoc multilateral mechanisms set up by China after the launch of the BRI — including the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Silk Road Fund (SRF) — reference is made here to the creation of a full-fledged organisation with a secretariat and internal consultative bodies.

[24]This is the original passage from the 'Visions and Actions' document: "*Jiaqiang Shuangbian hezuo kaizhan duoceng ci duo qudao goutong cuoshang tuidong shuangbian guanxi quanmian fazhan tuidong qianshu hezuo beiwanglu huo hezuo guihua jianshe yi pi shuangbian hezuo shifan jianli wanshan shuangbian lianhe gongzuo jizhi yanjiu tuijin Yidai Yilu jianshe de shishi fang'an Xingdong luxiantu*" [Strengthen bilateral cooperation, carry out multi-level and multi-channel communication and consultation, and promote the comprehensive development of bilateral relations. Promote the signing of memorandums of cooperation or cooperation plans, and build a

level, the policy document specifies a focus on certain multilateral cooperation mechanisms (*duobian hezuo jizhi* 多边合作机制), such as the SCO and the Asian Cooperation Dialogue (ACD). In addition, international forums (*guoji luntan* 国际论坛), such as the Boao Forum for Asia (BFA) or the China-Asia Expo, are identified as channels for engagement (PRC National Development and Reform Commission et al., 2015). Notably, the only original mechanism introduced in the 2015 policy document is the establishment of an international summit dedicated to the BRI, known as the Belt and Road International Summit (*Yidai Yilu guoji geofeng luntan* "一带一路"国际高峰论坛).

Finally, it is important to highlight three important elements in the *Visions and Actions* document that have implications for the BRI's political ambitions and future development of the BRI. First, the co-existence of bilateral and multilateral approaches. Second, the variable spatial projection of the BRI, which mainly encompasses the country and regional dimensions, but is potentially open to global expansion. Finally, as the driving force behind the initiative and the financial backer of investments, China is the only actor necessarily involved in any interstate interactions among Belt and Road countries.

2.1.2. The evolution of BRI's political ambitions up until the 2nd Belt Forum (2016-2019)

In the period from 2016 to 2017, the BRI underwent notable changes. First, the initiative gained a certain level of international recognition and consensus. While there is a lack of official statistics and the total number of members varies from source to source (Wang, 2016, 2017, 2021a; Office of the Leading Group for Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative, 2017,

number of bilateral cooperation models. Establish and improve bilateral joint working mechanisms, and study and promote the implementation plan and action roadmap for the construction of the Belt and Road] (PRC National Development and Reform Commission et al., 2015, p.5).

2019; Peking University – Tencent Big Data Innovation Project, 2019), one aspect on which different sources agree is that the number of countries and international organisations participating in the BRI increased significantly during this two-year period. A widely cited example of the BRI's increased prominence on the global stage is its citation in a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution calling on the international community to strengthen regional economic cooperation through the BRI (UNSC, 2017).

A few days before the inaugural BRI Forum in Beijing, the recently established Office of the Leading Group for Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative released a book providing further details on various aspects of the initiative, including its political ambitions. While the core objectives of enhanced policy coordination with other BRI countries and improved relations between different political actors remain central, the means by which these objectives are pursued are diversified and, in some cases, restructured. The book highlights the importance of official state visits (*gaoceng tuidong* 高层推动) and the alignment of other countries' strategies with the BRI (*zhanlüe duijie* 战略对接) as elements that deserve special attention. In addition, the document attaches importance to both bilateral and multilateral mechanisms. Specifically, bilateral interactions are seen as the primary channel for political communication (*shuangbian duihua shi tong de zhuyao qudao* 双边对话是通的主要渠道), while multilateral mechanisms are considered a valuable platform for cooperation and dialogue between parties (*hezuo duihua* 合作对话) (Office of the Leading Group for Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative, 2017, pp. 49-52).

However, the most important element of this paper is the link between the BRI initiative and another key concept in President Xi's diplomatic thinking, namely the 'community with a shared destiny (CSD) (*mingyun gongtongti* 命运共同体) (Office of the Leading Group for

Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative, 2017, §5). Elaborated before the BRI,[25] this concept embodies China's aspiration to improve global governance and build a new type of international relations (*xinxing guoji guanxi* 新型国际关系) based on the principles of mutually beneficial cooperation, mutual respect and common development. Although the juxtaposition of terms is not further elaborated at this stage— the document does not provide any indication of what it means for the BRI to integrate the CSD vision— it is referenced in both President Xi's opening and closing remarks at the roundtable during the opening of the first Belt and Road Forum in Beijing (Xi, 2017a, 2017b) and in the joint communiqué of the participating heads of state and leaders (Xinhua, 2017a). Finally, both the BRI and the CSD, the latter also incorporating an additional component becoming the 'community of shared destiny for mankind' (CSDM) (*renlei mingyun gongtongti* 人类命运共同体), receive even greater recognition. In October 2017, the 19th National Congress of the CPC amended the constitution to include the BRI in the 'General Programme' (Xinhua, 2017b), and in March 2018, the 13th National People's Congress amended the constitution to include the CSDM in the preamble (Xinhua, 2018).[26]

In 2018-2019, the key themes for the BRI revolved around acceleration and expansion. President Xi's speeches at the China-CELAC Forum (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States) and the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum in January and July 2018 undeniably signify the expansion of the initiative's scope, which has now reached a global

[25] The notion of the 'community of shared destiny' (CSD) was initially presented in the white paper titled 'China's Peaceful Development' published in 2011 and subsequently addressed in the report of the 18th CPC National Congress in 2012. On the global stage, the inaugural official reference to this concept was made by President Xi during a speech delivered at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations in March 2013. See Wang, Y. W. (2021a). *A Global Community of Shared Destiny: Understanding the new vision for globalization*. Beijing, China: Foreign Languages Press; Wang Y. W. (2021b). *Shidai zhiwen Zhongguo zhiida: goujian renlei mingyun gongtongti* [China's answer to the questions of the times: building a global community of shared destiny]. Changsha: Hunan Renmin Chubanshe.

[26] The exact passage of the amended preamble of the constitution is the following: "*Fazhan tong geguo de waijiao guanxi he jingji wenhua jiaoliu tuidong goujian renlei mingyun gongtongti*" [Strengthen the diplomatic relations and economic and cultural exchanges with other countries in a bid to build a community of shared destiny for mankind]. See Xinhua (2018, 11 March). China Focus: China's national legislature adopts landmark constitutional amendment. Retrieved from: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2018-03/11/c_137032165.htm.

scale.[27] Moreover, while the BRI lays its focus on China's neighbouring regions, this extension aligns with the increasingly ambitious goal of positioning the BRI as an exemplary paradigm for other nations to emulate in their efforts to reform the international system (defined and dominated by the West in general and the US in particular, as Beijing typically points out). Indeed, at the symposium organised to mark the fifth anniversary of the establishment of the BRI, President Xi made it clear that the initiative was no longer limited to economic cooperation, the focus of previous speeches, but represents a "concrete platform with which to promote the construction of the CSDM" (*yi gongjian Yidai Yilu wei shijian pingtai tuidong goujian renlei mingyun gongtongti* 以共建"一带一路"为实践平台推动构建人类命运共同体) (Xi, 2020c).

Indeed, in the book published by the Office of the Leading Group for Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative in early 2019, the merger of the BRI and the CSDM is mentioned, elevating the latter to the ultimate vision and political ambition of the initiative.[28] In addition, in order to address the BRI's continued expansion not only geographically but also sector-wise, the difficulties that have arisen in the implementation of some projects, [29] and the criticism that point to the initiative as an instrument of geopolitical influence,[30] the second section of the document revises its principles and mechanisms. In terms of principles, the emphasis is on the participation of the Belt and Road actors through inclusive consultation (*gongshang* 共商),

[27] In September of the same year (2018), the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) was convened in Beijing. During this event, the 'Beijing Declaration - Toward an Even Stronger China-Africa Community with a Shared Destiny and the 'Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Beijing Action Plan (2019-2021)' was adopted.

[28] This point was repeatedly made in President Xi's speeches during the second Belt and Road Forum in Beijing. For example in the opening remarks (retrieved from http://www.qizhiwang.org.cn/n1/2020/0818/c433568-31827134.html) and in the joint communique of leaders' roundtable (retrieved from http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-04/27/c_138016073.htm). Prior to that, this aspect was also stressed in his speech at Davos in January 2017 (retrieved from http://en.qstheory.cn/2021-03/18/c_604382.htm).

[29] To address these complexities in the above-mentioned speech on the occasion of the initiative's fifth anniversary, President Xi used the metaphor of *Gongbi* painting to express the need to focus only on high-quality projects (*gaozhulliang fazhan* 高质量发展).

[30] In the book published by the Office of Leading Group for Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative this phrase is repeated twice: "it is an initiative for peaceful development and economic cooperation, rather than geopolitical or military alliance"(p.2 and p.55).

joint contribution (*gongjian* 共建), and shared benefits (*gongxiang* 共享). Mechanism-wise, the document incorporates, at least in part, the recommendations of a newly formed BRI Advisory Council on the need for the BRI to adopt a multilateral approach to enhance other states' sense of ownership (BRI Advisory Council, 2019, p.24-31). Accordingly, the document prepared by the Office of the Leading Group includes a return to a combination of bilateral and multilateral approaches. On the one hand, it emphasises the importance of strengthening existing multilateral mechanisms (*qiangua duobian jizhi* 强化多边机制), including the G20 for the first time and, on the other, it urges the establishment of 'two-way dialogue' mechanisms (*jianli 'er gui' duihua jizhi* 建立 "二轨 "对话机制) between China and the Belt and Road countries (Office of the Leading Group for Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative, 2019, p. 33-46). To mark the culmination of this phase of the BRI, a book entitled *Extracts from Xi Jinping's Discourses on Diplomacy of a Great Power with Chinese Characteristics* was published in December 2019, which includes a section dedicated to the Belt and Road and provides a comprehensive analysis in line with the aforementioned development (Xi, 2019, pp. 81-107). [31]

2.1.3. BRI's political ambitions after-Covid: continuity or change? (2020-2023)

The emergence of the Covid-19 pandemic has had significant implications for the development of the Belt and Road. While the most noticeable impacts relate to the suspension and deceleration of funding and projects (BRI Advisory Council, 2021), there have also been some partial reconfigurations. On the surface, President Xi's message conveyed at the remote BRI

[31] These points are also reiterated by then Foreign Minister Wang Yi in three articles published in *Qiushi* magazine in 2020: i) We will not forget our original aspiration, continue to struggle, and make every effort to open up a new situation in major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics (Issue 1) (Wang, 2020a); ii) Guided by Xi Jinping's thought on diplomacy, promoting the building of a community of human destiny in global anti-epidemic cooperation (Issue 8) (Wang, 2020b); iii) In-depth study and implementation of Xi Jinping Thought on Diplomacy and continue to create a new situation in major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics (Issue 15) (Wang, 2020c).

conference in June 2020 proposes that the initiative should be expanded to encompass the safeguarding of health and the promotion of recovery and growth (*hezuo zhilu, jiankang zhilu, fusu zhilu, zengzhang zhilu* 合作之路、健康之路、复苏之路、增长之路) (Xi, 2023a). A similar sentiment is echoed in President Xi's speech at the BFA's annual conference in April 2021, which emphasised the importance of forging closer health partnerships (*weisheng hezuo huoban guanxi* 卫生合作伙伴关系) and spoke of joint vaccine production (*yimiao lianhe shengchan* 疫苗联合生产) (Xi, 2023b), which ultimately never took place. Moreover, the *Resolution of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the main achievements and historical experience of the Party in the past century*, issued on the occasion of the centenary of the founding of the CPC, strongly reaffirms the centrality of the BRI initiative and its goals. The resolution celebrates the "steady progress made by the Belt and Road, emphasises China's commitment to opening up to the world for win-win cooperation, and reaffirms the ultimate political ambition of building a CSDM" (CPC Central Committee, 2021, p.29).

However, the Belt and Road Initiative has also undergone some rethinking in recent years. First, in response to changing domestic[32] and international circumstances, [33] in addition to the infrastructure projects that have been central to the BRI since its inception, there is now a greater emphasis on what are referred to as 'high-level projects.' These include the

[32] As noted above, the BRI was conceived in 2013 partly in response to the Chinese economy's urgent need to find other markets in which to invest its excess foreign exchange reserves outside its borders. More recently, the domestic scenario has been characterised by lower economic growth, which has led to a slump in foreign investment. Already in 2017, President Xi tried to reassure other international partners about the state of the Chinese economy in his speech in Davos (Xi, 2021).

[33] In addition to the pandemic emergency, there are other international events that have hindered the development of the BRI. For example, the trade war with the US that has been ongoing since the beginning of 2018, the growing tensions between China and some countries in the region over the disputes in the South China Sea, or the growing scepticism that has fuelled the theory of the 'China Threat' and led to the withdrawal of Western countries from the initiative (the case of the European Union and the activation of the 17+1 mechanism). See for example: Lucenti, F. (2024). The 'China Threat': Stereotypical representations in the US competition with China. *International Politics*.

development of soft connectivity (*ruan liantong* 软联 通) and 'small and beautiful' projects (*xiao er mei xiangmu* 小而美项目) (Xi, 2023b). Furthermore, during the 3rd High-Level Symposium of the BRI in Beijing, President Xi explicitly states that there is a shift in focus towards sectors such as health, green, digital, and innovation (*weisheng huxiang hutong lüse fazhan* 卫生、互联互通、录色发展) (Xinhua, 2021a). However, these changes are not followed by a refocusing of the initiative's ultimate political ambition, which remains the achievement of the CSDM, nor by a re-discussion and redefinition of the mechanisms that can be activated, which remain the same as in the book published by the Office of the Leading Group in 2019.

In addition and in parallel, from 2021 to 2023, the BRI underwent an indirect reconfiguration due to the introduction of supplementary initiatives. These initiatives include the Global Development Initiative (GDI) (*quanqiu fazhan changyi* 全球发展倡议), the Global Security Initiative (GSI) (*quanqiu anquan changyi* 全球安全倡议), and the Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI) (*quanqiu wenming changyi* 全球文明倡议). As the 10th anniversary of the BRI approaches, coinciding with President Xi's evolving discourse on global governance reform, these three proposals are presented in Beijing as China's most comprehensive framework for engaging with the rest of the world to build the CSDM. The first initiative, the GDI, was initially introduced by President Xi during his speech at the UNGA in September 2021 (Xinhua, 2021b). Leveraging the significance of the UN system architecture and highlighting the importance of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework, this initiative aims to promote a more robust, environmentally sound, and equitable global development (*gengjia qiangjing lüse*

jiankang de quanqiu fazhan 更加强劲、绿色、健康的全球发展). [34] In other words, it is designed to enhance China's ability to bring its own ideas and programmes to UN institutions and agencies. The GSI follows, which was first mentioned in President Xi's speech at the BFA in April 2022 (Xi, 2022) and later elaborated in a concept paper published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in February 2023 (Xinhua, 2023a), outlining China's vision of the global security order. Finally, the GCI was introduced by President Xi during a high-level meeting of the CPC in dialogue with other foreign political parties, many of which have a communist or socialist background, but not exclusively, advocating for deepening intercultural exchanges (*wenming jiaoliu hu jian zhuru* 文明交流互鉴注入) and strengthening dialogue and cooperation between political parties (*jiaqiang zhengdang jiaoliu hezuo* 加强政党交流合作) to advance human civilisations on the basis of inclusiveness and mutual learning (PRC State Council, 2023a; Xinhua, 2023b).

Although the development of these initiatives is still in its early stages, some considerations can be made about the implications of their creation has for the policy ambitions outlined in the BRI. First and foremost, these initiatives represent a reorganisation and disaggregation of objectives that were previously included within the broader scope of the BRI. Take, for instance, the strengthening of dialogue between political parties, which was initially emphasises in the early BRI documents (PRC National Development and Reform Commission et al., 2015; Office of the Leading Group for Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative, 2017), then diminished in subsequent publications after 2017, and has now converged in the GCI. Along with the objectives, the mechanisms pursued have also diversified. Despite various reform attempts to increase the use of multilateral mechanisms, the BRI has been predominantly characterised by bilateral interactions. Consequently, the development of this

[34] Two subsequent documents published on the initiative are the following: Progress Report on the Global Development Initiative (Center for International Knowledge on Development, 2023) and the Practical Achievements and Global Contributions of the Global Development Initiative (Xinhua Institute, 2023).

mechanism has been redirected within the GDI. Another aspect to consider is the diversification of target audiences promoted by these initiatives. In particular, the GDI and the GCI emphasise South-South cooperation and the strengthening of relations between China and developing countries. The establishment of the CSDM is therefore a gradual process with different stages and levels, and at this early stage, China appears to be selective in determining which countries can participate.

In September 2023, a white paper entitled *A Global Community of Shared Destiny: China's Proposals and Actions* was published by the SCIO. This white paper incorporates and provides detailed information on the recalibration mentioned above. Interestingly, while all the initiatives are discussed in the paper, the GDI, GCI, GSI triad is presented as a whole, while the BRI is presented separately. More specifically, the paper describes the BRI as an example of China's efforts to build a CSDM that serves as a global public good and a platform for international cooperation (*goujian renlei mingyun gongtongti de shengdong shijian, shi Zhongguo wei shijie tigong de guang shonghuanying de guojija gonggong chanpin he guoji hezuo pingtai* 构建人类命运共同体的生动实践，是中国为世界提供的广受欢迎的国际公共产品和国际合作平台) (PRC State Council Information Office, 2023a, p. 12). A few weeks later, the Information Office of the State Council of the PRC released a second white paper focusing exclusively on the BRI (PRC State Council Information Office, 2023b). This publication introduces two major new elements that indicate China's willingness to take the initiative into a new phase. The first element is an apparent shift in the narrative, while the second element emphasises the achievements of the first decade of the BRI, particularly in terms of the solutions and mechanisms used to implement the CSDM. In terms of narrative, the white paper presents a revised narrative of China and its global perspective. From the outset, there is a more explicit portrayal of the CPC as a great party with a global vision and China as a great power committed to peaceful development (*Zhongguo gongchangdang shi xionghuai tianxia*

de da dang, Zhongguo shi jianchi heping fazhan de daguo 中国共产党是胸怀天下的大党，中国是坚持和平发展的大国).

Moreover, for the first time, it criticises certain countries' past conduct driven by unilateralism, protectionism, and hegemony. To be sure, the US is meant with 'certain countries'. In contrast, China is putting forward its own ideas and proposals, such as the Belt and Road, aimed at sharing development opportunities more equitably with the world (*yu shijie fenxiang Zhongguo fazhan jiyu* 与世界分享中国发展机遇) and presenting a new model of state interaction to improve global governance (*wei guojia jian jiaowang tigong le xin de fanshi, tuidong quanqiu zhili tixi chaozhe gengjia gongzheng heli de fangxiang fazhan* 为国家间交往提供了新的范式，推动全球治理体系朝着更加公正合理的方向发展) (PRC State Council Information Office, 2023b, p. 4, p. 20). In contrast to the previous years' emphasis on global openness, this white paper, like the GDI, GSI, and GCI initiatives, narrows the target audience of the BRI.[35] In terms of achievements, the white paper highlights the improvement in policy coordination between China and BRI member countries, describing it as comprehensive and profound (*zhengce goutong guangfan shenru* 政策沟通广泛深入). This improvement has been facilitated by the widespread adoption of multilateral cooperation and greater alignment of rules and standards. In addition, a new section entitled 'Injective positive energy into world peace and development' highlights the BRI's role in providing innovative solutions to improve global governance. It mentions that bilateral communities of shared destiny (CSDs) have

[35] The participants of the third BRI Forum in Beijing (18-20 October 2023) seem to bear witness to the fact that the narrowing of the participants contained in the white paper has already partly taken place. In this regard, one can mention the reduced number of heads of state present (22 compared to 29 in 2017 and 36 in 2019) and the leaders and senior representatives who spoke during the plenary ceremony after President Xi. In order: Putin (Russia), Toqaev (Kazakhstan), Widodo (Indonesia), Fernandez (Argentina), Ahmed (Ethiopia) and UN Secretary-General Guterres. In terms of overall participation, Europe was the least represented region at the event. Only the Hungarian President Orbán and Serbian President Vučić were present.

already been established with Laos and Pakistan (*Zhong Lao mingyun gongtongti, Zhong Ba mingyun gongtongti deng shuangbian mingyun gongtongti yuelaiyue duo* 中老命运共同体、中巴命运共同体等双边命运共同体越来越多) under the BRI, and significant progress has been made in building multilateral communities of shared destiny (*renleimingyun gongtongti buduan luodi shenggen* 人类命运共同体不断落地生根) (PRC State Council Information Office, 2023b, p. 21).

2.1.4. BRI's political ambitions: some remarks

In light of the above analysis, a number of observations can be made about the political ambitions of the BRI. First of all, it shows that China's projected aspirations in this regard have not been constant over time, but rather have undergone modifications, rethinking and changes over the ten years of its implementation. The most obvious case is certainly the incorporation of the CSDM into the BRI, so much so that it has become its ultimate political ambition. However, the analysis also revealed some important nuances in terms of the evolution that the same political ambitions have undergone over time: as noted above, although the CSDM has been embedded in the BRI since 2017, the meaning attributed to it in the 2019 white paper has different contours than the meaning attributed to it in the subsequent white paper published at the end of 2023. When analysing whether and how these ambitions have been translated into reality, it is necessary to pay particular attention to these aspects.

In addition, the analysis helped to shed light on three other relevant points regarding the evolution of the BRI's political ambitions. The first relates to the very tight timeframe in which the political message underlying the BRI framework has merged with the economic one. Reading the rapid and numerous accessions to the BRI not only as the desire of some countries

to join economic cooperation projects, but also attributing an important political meaning to this timing, China has decided, especially in 2018-2019, to accelerate this component of the BRI and give it a high profile. In some cases, however, joining the BRI, which is made explicit through the signing of MoUs, does not necessarily represent a turning point and/or breakthrough in relations between China and a particular target country, but rather the culmination of an interaction that soon faded away.

The second point concerns the absolute centrality that China continues to assume as the only real decision-maker in the initiative. Despite various attempts to increase the target countries' sense of ownership, including, for instance, greater involvement in the co-creation of BRI projects or the revision of the initiative's underlying principles under the banner of inclusive consultations, joint input and multi-level communication, China remained firmly in control of all aspects of the initiative.

The third and final consideration concerns what has emerged in terms of the mechanisms for dialogue and coordination between China and BRI member countries. As noted above, although the initiative has always envisaged the co-presence of bilateral and multilateral mechanisms, over the years there has been an oscillation between periods in which one was given greater prominence— this is the case of the priority given to the bilateral channel between 2017 and 2019 — and moments in which there was a greater, at least formal, balance between the two. Table 3 provides a summary of how the objectives, principles and mechanisms identified by the BRI have evolved over the period considered (2013-2023).

Table 3: Evolution of BRI's 'political ambitions' over the years (2013-2023)

Year	**2013**	**2015**	**2017**	**2019**	**2023**
Aim	Increase mutual political and strategic trust in inter-state relations	Represent a new model of international cooperation Enhance policy coordination and role of political parties	Building the Community of Shared Destiny (CSD) Enhance policy coordination and role of political parties	Building the Community of Shared Destiny for Mankind (CSDM) Enhance policy coordination	Building the Community of Shared Destiny for Mankind (CSDM) with some selected countries as some bilateral CSD are already in place Represent a new model of state interaction to enhance global governance Enhance policy coordination
Principles and paradigms	Win-win cooperation, mutual assistance	Inter-governmental cooperation, multi-level communication	Inter-governmental cooperation, multi-level communication	Inclusive consultation, joint contribution, shared benefits	Inclusive consultation, joint contribution, shared benefits
Mechanisms	*Not specified*	Both bilateral and (already existing) multilateral Setting up of the BRI Forum	Bilateral interactions are the primary channel for political communication Multilateral interactions are to be used for cooperation and dialogue BRI Forum confirmed	Both bilateral ('two-way dialogue') and (already existing) multilateral BRI Forum confirmed	Both bilateral and (already existing) multilateral BRI Forum confirmed

Source: elaboration of the author based on the analysis of BRI official documents

2.2. China’s modes of political influence: what changed with BRI?

In line with the conceptual framework set out in Chapter One, and taking into account the evolution of China's projected political ambitions for the Belt and Road over the first ten years, the study now proceeds to examine the political impact of the initiative in the dual sense of political influence and political effects respectively. In particular, this section (2.2) has two objectives. The first is to review the studies in the literature that have questioned the phenomenon of political influence with reference to the Chinese case, in order to present the main evidence that has emerged and to understand which modalities have most characterised China’s behaviour in the recent past. The second objective is to narrow down the field of investigation to discuss the studies that have related China's political influence and whether and how it has changed since China launched the Belt and Road project in 2013. Finally, based on the above, the first hypotheses of the study will be identified.

2.2.1. Literature review on China’s modes of political influence

In recent years, as a result of China's rise in the global context, studies on its influence on other state actors have proliferated. As pointed out by Kastner (2016a), three approaches are the most prevalent in the literature to date: those motivated by observations on an explanatory variable (Saunders, 2006), those motivated by general theories (Shambaugh, 2013), and those motivated by observations on the behaviour of the target countries of potential influence attempts (Story, 2011). At the same time, the literature on Chinese political influence has mostly focused on the changes taking place in the regional contexts of Southeast Asia and Central Asia (Chung, 2004; Goh, 2014, 2016; Zhang, 2021, 2022), on the use of political manipulation of economic instruments (Kastner, 2016b; Kastner & Pearson, 2021; Wang et al., 2023), and on the case of Chinese outward investment as an important tool for the international projection of a rising state (Woods, 2008; Kable, 2020; Lim & Kim, 2022; Zheng & Li, 2022; Strange, 2023). However, as the same author nicely puts it, "it makes little sense

to think of Chinese influence with respect to some country X as a measurable quantity in and of itself" (Kastner, 2016a, p. 265).

In this regard, some studies, instead of focusing exclusively on researching the outcomes and effects produced by influence, have opted for a greater focus on analysing the underlying process of political influence and what happens in the interaction between China, as the dominant power, and a range of target states. For example, scholar Evelyn Goh observes that China's actual ability to induce another state's behaviour, and thus exert political influence, depends on the degree of alignment between its own pre-existing preferences and those of the target state. She therefore identifies three possible categories of influence: 'preference multiplier' manifests itself when the preferences of the two actors are converging and already aligned, 'persuasion' operates when the alignment of the preferences of one and the other is unclear and subject to debate, and finally, 'ability to prevail' considers the case where pre-existing preferences are conflicting and therefore opposed. Her analysis of the regional context of Southeast Asia shows that China has so far not been particularly able to exert political and economic pressure on smaller states, but has made extensive use of preference multiplication and, at times, persuasion (Goh, 2014, p. 846). In a subsequent study conducted on the topic, Goh adds a second variant to the framework of the three modalities previously identified for the case of undefined preferences, namely that of institutional formation. This is the Chinese attempt to position itself within institutions to set the agenda and create or modify norms to coerce other parties. Again, the target states show a greater capacity to manage and counter Chinese influence, which is therefore limited (Goh, 2016, p. 2-23).

In their work, Goh and colleagues discuss in detail the case of four small developing countries in South and Southeast Asia: Myanmar, Vietnam, the Philippines and Sri Lanka. By unpacking the mechanisms through which China's 'preference multiplier' operates in the Philippines, scholar Baviera shows how the Chinese state and corporate activities can empower certain Filipino elites, while at the same time their indicative power can be mediated and limited by

domestic dynamics (political infighting, popular resistance) (Baviera, 2016). Similarly, by analysing the evolution of Myanmar's response to Chinese influence, Goh & Steinberg argue that, while not underestimating the strong ties that exist between the two sides and acknowledging the alignment of preferences between the two countries, Myanmar wanted to ensure mutual benefits even at the height of its dependence on China (Goh & Steinberg, 2016). Conversely, by examining the case of Sri Lanka, scholar DeVotta suggests that China has so far been paid more attention to activating discursive persuasion than to making significant demands to guide the behaviour of Colombo's elite (DeVotta, 2016). Finally, in the case of Vietnam, whose existing preferences are at odds with those of China, and although China has recently exerted increasing indirect and structural influence as their economic and development trajectories converge, scholar Ang observes that Vietnam is always looking for a countervailing force to balance an otherwise asymmetric relationship (Ang, 2016).

Mixed results regarding China's ability to exert some political influence on other countries are also highlighted in the NBR's report on the African context (Rolland, 2022). While China has become a more present actor in many countries on the continent through the activities of united-front organisations[36] and efforts to strengthen ties between the CPC and political parties and elites in countries where China is investing, this increased presence, with few exceptions (Kenya and Tanzania), has not necessarily translated into real alignment of these countries with Chinese preferences and strategic interests, such as the reunification of Taiwan, opposition to separatist movements in Xinjiang and Tibet, opposition to criticism of the National Security Act that came into force in Hong Kong and human rights more generally,

[36] See Gill, B., & Schreer, B. (2018). Countering China's 'United Front'. *Washington Quarterly*, *41*(2), 155-70; Brady, A.-M. (2018). New Zealand and the CPC's 'Magic Weapons. *Journal of Democracy*, *29*(2), 68-75; Brady, A.-M. (2019). *Magic Weapons: China's political influence activities under Xi Jinping*. Conference proceedings. Retrieved from https://protorp.org/wpcontent/uploads/2018/03/magicweaponsannemariebradyseptember162017.pdf. Accessed 20 March 2024; Yang, W. (2023*). Yi qiao wei qiao tisheng xinxing zhengdang zhidu guoji yingxiang li yanjiu* [Study on Using Overseas Chinese as a "Bridge" to Enhance the International Influence of the New Political Party System]. *Journal of Fujian Institute of Socialism*, no.1, 4-16.

and explicit support for disputes in the South China Sea (Cabestan, 2022; George, 2022; Ohlberg, 2022).[37]

Interestingly, the view that sees Chinese influence is increasing over time, but with certain limitations, is also shared by several Chinese scholars (Liu & Wu, 2015; Glosny, 2016; Song, 2020; Liu, 2020; Zhang, 2021; Garlick & Qin, 2022).[38] Glosny, for example, in a chapter in which he discusses this topic with more than 40 Chinese analysts, reports that the gap between China's material capabilities and its ability to translate these capabilities into influence over other actors has remained large over time (Glosny, 2016, p. 26). The increased influence and the will to further strengthen it in the future are also expressed in a number of official documents published by the Chinese government,[39] ranging from the report of the 18th Party Congress (International Department Central Committee of the CPC, 2012), the report of Prime Minister Li Keqiang (PRC State Council, 2014), to the more recent report of the 20th Party Congress (PRC State Council, 2022). In this regard, Zhang (2021) argues that, according to several Chinese scholars, one of the main problems underlying China's difficulties in exerting influence is an approximate knowledge of the target country and its specificities, which is often accompanied by a perceived limited ability of the target country to understand China, its programmes and actions (Zhang, 2021, p.47).

Moreover, since one of the most important aspects of interstate political influence is the ability of the state seeking to exercise it to be perceived as credible by potential targets, studies on Chinese political influence have placed great emphasis on analysing the perceptions that

[37] See also Chiyemura et al. (2023). Infrastructure and the Politics of African State Agency: Shaping the Belt and Road Initiative in East Africa. *Chinese Political Science Review*. *8*, 105-131.

[38] For a more specific discussion of the CPC's international influence see Feng, Y. (2021). *Zhongguo Gongchandang guoji yingxiang li de zengqiang jiqi qishi* [The Chinese Communist Party's Enhancement of International Influence and its Implications]. *Red Flag Manuscript*, 43-46; Xu, Y. (2021). *Zhongguo Gongchandang guoji yingxiang li buduan zengqiang de neizai luoji* [The internal logic of the Chinese Communist Party's growing international influence]. *People's Forum*, 48-51.

[39] Previous reflections on the theme were already expressed in these two articles: Ma, Z. (2006), *Lixing Kandai Zhongguo de Guoji Yingxiangli* [Rationally Viewing China's International Influence]. *Qiushi*, no. 5, 58-60; Fu, M. (2011). *Guanyu Zhongguo Guoji Yingxiangli Wenti de ruogan sikao* [Some Reflections Concerning the Issue of China's International Influence]. *Xiandai Guoji Guanxi*, no. 1, 1-13.

different individuals from a given geographical area or country have of the Chinese state (Linley et al., 2012; Nelson & Carlson, 2012; Xi & Primiano, 2020; Sydoruk et al., 2020; Zhang, 2022). In this regard, some studies show that while between 2010 and 2012, Chinese perceptions of Asian states, with a few exceptions such as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Vietnam, were on average positive (Linley et al., 2012; Nelson & Carlson, 2012), more recently the same states show a more diversified perception, still positive towards the economic opportunities that China represents, but not towards its political system (Xi & Primiano, 2020). However, the case of the European context is different, where negative perceptions of Chinese influence are evident and have emerged since 2008-2010 (Sydoruk et al., 2020).

Building on the above research, Fung et al. (2022) propose an approach to the study of Chinese political influence that aims to further expand the concept of influence, which they call the 'three Is'— intentionality, intermediaries and institutions. In their interpretation, the first dimension of 'intentionality' distinguishes and encompasses both a state's intentional influence (as studied by Goh, 2014, 2016) and influence that occurs unintentionally through externalities (.i.e., changes in other states' policies or foreign public opinion towards a government, resulting from the activities of state, quasi-state or non-state actors abroad that are not directed by the state seeking influence). Broadening the framework of analysis in this direction requires opening up a diversification of the Chinese actor beyond state-level behaviour. Indeed, the second dimension of 'intermediaries' involves a systematic treatment of the various relevant actors that operate outside Chinese borders at the state level. Finally, the last dimension, 'institutions', gives centrality to the national institutions of the country under possible influence (Fung et al., 2022, p. 5-14). In line with these observations, in their analysis of the case of the International Department of the CPC (ID-CPC), Hackenesch & Bader identified party relations as a channel through which China promotes its foreign policy interests and its vision of global governance reform (Hackenesch & Bader, 2020).

2.2.2. Literature review on China's influence in relation to the Belt and Road

When attempting to quantify and qualify China's international political influence, the Belt and Road is undoubtedly relevant. While the analysis presented in section 2.1 highlighted the existence of underlying political ambitions of the BRI that have evolved and have been updated over the decade of its implementation, this section presents out the main, albeit rare, evidence that has emerged in studies that have analysed the question of Chinese political influence through the lens of the Belt and Road (Kaczmarski, 2017; Reeves, 2018; Gong, 2018; Liu & Song, 2021; Khan, 2021; An & Wang, 2023; Sun et al., 2024). In this regard, Reeves (2018), in his analysis of the case of Central Asia, argues that the BRI does not constitute a new model of international relations between China and the various countries in the region, but rather had and continues to have strategic value for China as an innovative organisational concept capable of increasing Chinese political influence through a multiplier effect (Reeves, 2018, p. 503). Indeed, he, using the theoretical framework of relationalism[40] and adopting the lens of process analysis, he observes how bilateral political relations between China and a single country, as well as interactions between China and the same countries within the multilateral mechanisms active in this regional context, have intensified and strengthened since 2013 within the framework of the BRI.

In line with these observations, Khan (2021) adds the lens of Covid-19 to reiterate that this represents an opportunity for China to further strengthen its ties and influence with Central Asian states (Khan, 2021, p.342). However, rather than asking whether and how China's ability to align other state entities with its national interests has changed since the inception of the BRI, these studies focus on discussing the more general strengthening of bilateral relations between China and a particular country. It is precisely this distinction that An &

[40] On the importance of the theory of relationalism for the Chinese case see Shih, C.-Y. (2021). *China and International Theory. The Balance of Relationships*. London: Routledge. For a more specific example that applies the relational theory to studying the case of China's Belt and Road see Wang, Z. (2021). Understanding the Belt and Road Initiative from the Relational Perspective. *Chinese Journal of International Review*, *3*(1), 1-26. doi:10.1142/S2630531321500049

Wang (2023) take into account in their analysis, which confirms the hypothesis that the BRI increases partner countries' willingness to align with Chinese foreign policy.

Apart from the fact that the authors' interpretation of what alignment with China's strategic priorities means is particularly limited— they rely on the aforementioned UNGA voting patterns— the study highlights the presence of an important heterogeneity. Indeed, China's political influence is significant for developing countries, but not for developed and highly industrialised (Western) countries (An & Wang, 2023, p. 22). Finally, in a recent study, Sun et al. (2024) analyse political influence in terms of the change in the attitudes of politicians towards China in three South-East Asian states (the Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia) whose electoral districts have only partially benefited from BRI projects. In this analysis, the authors find no evidence to support the hypothesis that the BRI contributes to some extent to improving the opinions of local politicians towards China and thus to increasing their political influence towards a particular country (Sun et al., 2024, p. 11).

From the combined exposition of the studies that have focused on Chinese modes of political influence and those that have attempted to integrate the BRI lens into this reflection, it is possible to identify several categories of actors. In order to take account of this heterogeneity, three different hypotheses (Hp.1A, Hp.1B, Hp.1C) are formulated as follows:

Hp.1A: After joining the BRI, China's political influence has continued to increase in the case of convergent preferences with a developing target state due to China's ability to activate a preference multiplier effect;

Hp.1B: After joining the BRI, China's political influence has partially increased in the case of undecided/discussed preferences with a developing target state due to China's occasional ability to activate discursive persuasion and institutional shaping;

Hp.1C: After joining the BRI, China's political influence did not increase in the case of distant preferences with a developed target state due to China's limited capacity to activate the power to prevail mode.

2.3. Literature review on BRI's main political effects

This section shifts the focus to an examination of the other component of political impact, namely that of political effects. Even more pronounced than political influence, political effects are the specific outcomes of a given initiative and should therefore be read in close relation to the analysis presented in section 2.1. Therefore, this section discusses what were the main results, and contextually what were the main challenges, of the Belt and Road in the political dimension[41], in order to adopt the main hypotheses that will be empirically analysed in the following section of the study. For the sake of clarity, this section presents the main political results of the BRI in terms of the following dimensions: political trust, policy coordination, political mechanisms and political parties.

2.3.1. Political trust

As mentioned above, enhancing political trust between China and the other member countries of the BRI has been one of the fundamental elements of the initiatives' political ambitions since its inception. However, this process has been particularly complicated throughout all the years of its implementation, especially after the expansion of the initiative to a global level that took place between 2017 and 2019. In these three years alone, many different countries joined the BRI and, as a result, China found itself entangled in complex dynamics that took place at

[41] Given that the literature on BRI outcomes is particularly limited with respect to the political components of the initiative, especially with respect to recent developments, this section of the study has benefited from more than ten discussions the author had with Taiwanese scholars during her visiting period at the National Taiwan University (NTU) (between September and October 2023) and Chinese scholars during her visiting period at the Renmin University of China (RUC) in Beijing (between February and June 2024). The author would like to thank all the lecturers for their time and availability and declares that the reflections reported here are the result of her own subsequent revision.

both the international and regional levels, and also related to the specific domestic contexts of each country, about which China often had limited knowledge. As early as 2018, scholar Song Wei noted that despite the Chinese government's efforts in this direction, China lacked a deep understanding of the delicate situations in which each country under the BRI umbrella found itself at the time. Among the main efforts made by the Chinese authorities, the author mentions the establishment of a new National Agency for International Development Cooperation, which is tasked with coordinating responsibilities and improving the consular network around the world (Song, 2018). In this context, the scholar Wang Yong has already noted that the episodes of misunderstanding that occasionally occurred between China and a particular BRI country occurred at various levels, including China's ability to effectively communicate the components and purpose of the initiative to the adhering partners (Wang, 2016).

As it turns out, the initiative is particularly complex and articulated, and for many countries the decision to join was driven more by pressing economic needs than by a rapprochement with China and its visions, such as the CSDM. In fact, according to Shi Yinhong, Director of the Centre for American Studies and Chairman of the Academic Committee of the School of International Studies at the Renmin University of China, the BRI has suffered from its inability from the outset to generate support goes beyond the economic level and to help improve China's international image not only towards Western countries, which are by nature more distant and suspicious, but also towards developing countries. Furthermore, according to Professor Shi, although China has invested heavily in communication and propaganda in BRI member countries, it has not taken due account of how heterogeneous and complex these relationships are, concluding that the initiative has not necessarily helped to improve political trust between China and these countries (Xue, 2023).

In a survey conducted by scholars Rana & Ji (2020) on a sample of 1,230 Asian opinion leaders' perceptions of the BRI, the results show that China's motives for launching the initiative

include the desire to promote Chinese soft power and cultivate a China-centric regional/global order ranked fourth and sixth place, respectively, with motives such as promoting regional integration, infrastructure connectivity and economic development coming out on top (Rana & Ji, 2020, p.75). When asked what benefits their countries expect to gain from participating in the Belt and Road, 76.4% of respondents selected 'expanding trade, investment and tourism with China and other BRI members', while a smaller but still significant percentage (56.9%) selected 'strengthening my country's political ties with China'. However, when the focus shifted to the main risks and fears of participating in the Belt and Road, the most common response was 'the BRI makes my country more vulnerable to Chinese influence' (Rana & Ji, 2020, pp. 79-81). In a follow-up study, Ji (2021) replicates the same set of questions to a group of 163 opinion leaders from 18 European countries (Ji, 2021). In this second analysis, the results are not so different from the first. In particular, the data show that while European countries are slightly more sensitive to the fact that the motives behind the initiative are China's willingness to project Chinese soft power and less inclined to believe that their country can cultivate good political relations with China by participating in the BRI (50%), they are equally concerned about the main risk of participating in the BRI, namely that their country risks becoming subject to Chinese economic and political influence and even pressure (Ji, 2021, p. 12).

Although reading these figures might suggest a fairly positive view of the BRI's chances of fostering better political relations with China, they refer to 2019, which, as discussed, was the year of the initiative's greatest expansion. In 2020-2021, in addition to the Covid-19 outbreak mentioned above, which has at least partly led to the adoption of countermeasures and the reshaping of the initiative, two other aspects need to be taken into account. On the one hand, the setback suffered by the Chinese economy and, on the other, the negative sentiment generated by the Hong Kong protests in 2019 and 2020 and the publication of the Xinjiang speeches and policy papers, at least among the public opinion and among the ruling classes of some countries. Indeed, these events have contributed to an increasingly pessimistic view of

the initiative over time — sometimes referred to as the 'containment dilemma'— and to the fact that the participation of countries and international organisations has become increasingly cold in recent years (Song & Jia, 2022). The final aspect to consider is the time it takes to improve political relations between countries, a costly process that certainly cannot bear fruit in just a few years. In this respect, the scholar Song Wei, in an analysis of China's regional integration strategy in Central Asia in 2011, warned of the need for a less early and less rapid approach (Song, 2011). More recently, the same author has extended this concept of caution by referring to the construction of the CSDM within the Belt & Road, where it is necessary to be tactically cautious and selective (Song, 2020). Based on the above discussion on political trust, the following hypothesis is identified:

Hp.2: the BRI did not contribute, even if only briefly between 2017 and 2019, to increasing participating countries' political trust in China

2.3.2. Policy coordination

Another important priority identified within the BRI is the 2015 'Visions & Actions' document, which identifies the need for policy coordination as one of the key objectives of the initiative. Initially conceived as a necessary element of coordination to support the implementation of the BRI in a given country context, it takes on additional significance with the increased political charge projected for the initiative from 2017-2018 onwards, as it can reflect China's ability to bring the language of the BRI, which is increasingly permeated by other key concepts of Chinese foreign policy, into the national and regional strategies of countries that have joined the BRI (Song, 2017a, 2019).

In this regard, for example, scholar Qi Huaigao for instance analyses the points of connection between the development strategies of five countries— Kazakhstan, Indonesia, Pakistan, Poland and Greece respectively— and the Chinese Belt and Road (Qi, 2019). What emerges

from the article is that, apart from the case of Kazakhstan, which has been particularly dynamic in adopting national plans and amending laws and regulations to facilitate the implementation of the BRI (Kassenova, 2020; Yang et al., 2022), the same cannot be said for the other countries studies. In this sense, the BRI has not necessarily led to the adoption of related policies and, more importantly, it has shown a limited ability to stimulate the use of PRC-specific terms and PRC-reinterpreted words by other countries.[42] Based on this evidence, the following hypothesis is identified with respect to the policy coordination dimension:

Hp.3: BRI-related language, as well as PRC-specific terms and PRC-reinterpreted words, can be found to a limited extent in bilateral agreements and in other countries' foreign policies and plans.

2.3.3. Political mechanisms

From the outset, the BRI envisaged the use of both bilateral and existing multilateral channels. However, as will be recalled, the importance given to one or the other mechanism already in the planning phase did not remain constant throughout the decade, oscillating between a balance between the two (as called for in the founding document 'Visions and Actions' in 2015 and taken up in subsequent revisions in 2019 and, more recently, in 2023) and a priority given to the bilateral channel (for example, the document published in 2017 by the Office of the Leading Group for the Promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative). So, what has happened in the implementation phase and what are the main achievements in the use of these two channels?

[42] For a study still being finalised on the alignment of liberal discourse with PRC discourse using PRC-specific terms and PRC-interpreted words by some countries in the UN framework see Lam, S., & Fung, C. J. (2022). Mapping China's influence at United Nations. *Working Paper*. See also Haug, S. (2024). Mutual legitimation attempts: the United Nations and China's Belt and Road Initiative. *International Affairs*, *100*(3), 1207-1230. As outlined in the first section of this chapter (2.1) the UN perspective has been recently reoriented in the Global Development Initiative (GDI). Notwithstanding, and prior to that, these ambitions where set until within BRI.

In this regard, as early as 2017, scholar Song Wei, while acknowledging the competitive advantage that China has been able to exert and exploit in bilateral interactions, stressed the need for a greater investment in multilateral channels as they are able to keep in check concerns that may arise among small and medium-sized countries (Song, 2017b). However, China has primarily invested in the bilateral diplomatic channels to initiate negotiations on Belt and Road-related cooperation documents, to manage the signing of memoranda of understanding (MoUs) in the presence of the heads of state of both parties involved, and to initiate consultation and logistical procedures for the implementation of projects under the BRI umbrella.

The use of multilateral channels, on the other hand, has undergone a more complex evolution. In this framework, the international system, led by the UN, initially became an important platform for China to communicate its intentions and seek support for the Belt and Road Initiative. As it turned out, at least until 2019, the initiative was mentioned in some UN-produced documents (UNSC, 2017) and several UN agencies signed MoUs with China (e.g. UNHCR). Over time, however, this channel has come up against a sense of growing hostility from many countries. China appears to have responded to these difficulties with a more pronounced reorientation at the bilateral level and a greater exploration of multilateral channels for investment. Indeed, while China has continued to focus on some favourable contexts, such as the case of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), it has also introduced or redirected its attention to the use of 'China + N' mechanisms (Seiwert, 2023). One example is the 14+1 mechanism between China and Central and Eastern European countries (Wen et al., 2021, p. 148-149; Vangeli, 2017). Within this framework, another format that China has continued to focus on over time as capable of ensuring strong Chinese protagonism is that of the annual Belt and Road Forum Summit.

Another aspect related to the question of mechanisms is the lack of a dedicated organisation. As scholars Rana Pradumna and Ji Xianbai note, three separate entities — the National

Reform and Development Commission, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Commerce—have been involved in the initiative from the outset. This has led to serious coordination problems, both between the various organisations involved and in external relations with the BRI countries (Rana & Ji, 2020). In particular, during the 2017-2019 expansion phase, a phenomenon described by scholars Song Wei and Jia Huihan as the 'tendency to generalise' (*chuxian fan hua qingxiang* 出现泛化倾向), the lack of an ad hoc organisation (e.g. secretariat) or the increased involvement of central actors such as the State Council weighed on the ability to control the initiative (Song & Jia, 2022). Based on this evidence, the following hypothesis is identified in terms of policy mechanisms:

Hp.4: the BRI has mainly used the bilateral channel, while it has invested in the multilateral channel in the case of Chinese-led organisations and formats.

2.3.4. Political parties

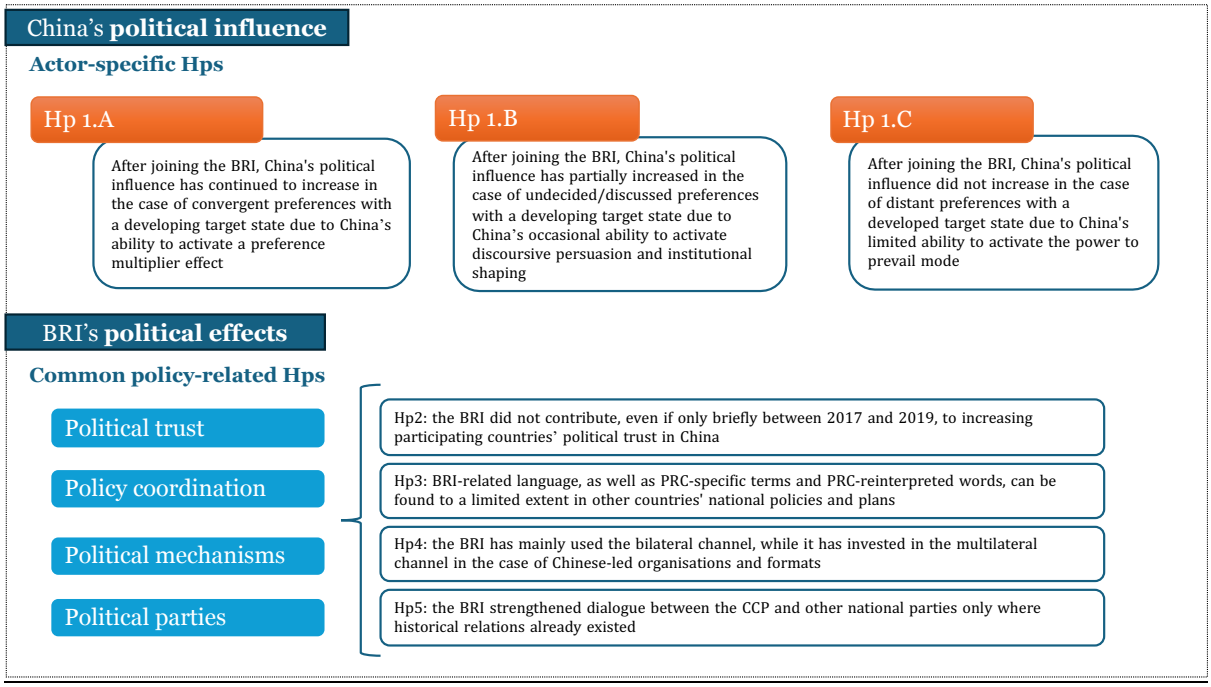
A final aspect to consider in relation to the main results achieved by the Belt and Road is the role of political parties. Although less explicit than other components of the initiative, the promotion of dialogue between political parties was an objective that was present especially in the early years of the initiative (PRC National Development and Reform Commission et al., 2015; Office of the Leading Group for the Promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative, 2017). Over time, this ambition has been scaled back, and recently it is not even mentioned in official documents (e.g. PRC State Council Information Office, 2023a). This may be due, at least in part, to the merging of these goals into the newly established Global Civilisation Initiative (GCI). However, as the GCI was only outlined by President Xi in 2023, it is useful to ask what the BRI has achieved in terms of this dimension in its first ten years. To the best of the authors' knowledge, there are no specific studies that relate the Belt and Road to the evolution of the relationship between the PCC and political parties in a particular context. However, based on

the previously cited report by Rolland et al. (2022) 'Political front lines: China's Pursuit of Influence in Africa', it is possible to derive this final hypothesis:

Hp.5: the BRI strengthened dialogue between the CPC and other national parties only where historical relations already existed.

Finally, Figure 3 summarises the assumptions of the study.

Figure 3: Overview of the hypotheses adopted in the study



Source: elaboration of the author

2.4. Evaluating BRI's political impacts: assessing China's political influence before and after BRI and analysing BRI's political effects

In this second chapter, the operationalisation of the conceptual framework for analysing political impacts is discussed in the case of China as an actor seeking to increase its influence on the international stage and the Belt and Road Initiative as an activity characterised by political ambitions that has produced results in this dimension over the ten years of its implementation (2013-2023). This section presents the research design, which links the

empirical objectives of the research to the analytical and hypothesis framework developed in the first chapter and this second chapter. This section (2.4) is structured as follows: first, it systematises the analytical framework, which consists of the various hypotheses on Chinese political influence (Hp.1A, Hp1.B, Hp1.C) and the 'political effects' of the BRI (Hp2, Hp3, Hp4, Hp5) identified earlier, which will be tested in empirical settings. Second, it examines methods, case selection and periodisation, and concludes with data collection issues.

2.4.1. Assessing China's political influence

Given the three different hypotheses Hp.1A, Hp.1B and Hp.1C, the assessment of Chinese political influence involves the identification and analysis of three different state contexts (State B1, State B2, State B3), which are characterised as follows: State B1 has traditionally convergent preferences with China, State B2 has indeterminate preferences, while State B3 has opposite preferences. The unit of analysis corresponds to the type of behaviour assumed by a country with regard to the strategic priorities of State A, which it wishes to influence. In the case of China, the following two strategic priorities have been identified as particularly relevant: a) the reunification of Taiwan, b) the (highly controversial) fight against terrorism in Xinjiang.

As the aim is to understand whether joining the Chinese BRI project has led to a change in the behaviour of these countries, the period of analysis will take into account a pre- and post-BRI scan, in order to map the positioning of a given state in the above two areas prior to its creation and accession to the BRI, and whether and how this positioning has evolved once the country has joined the Chinese-led project. Unlike many BRI studies, which tend to take 2013 as the year of the initiative's launch as the beginning of the analysis period, this study takes the year of a given country's accession as the main break point to mark the pre- and post-BRI. Figure 4 summarises the analytical approach just described.

Figure 4: Assessing China's 'political influence' before and after BRI

China's **political influence**

To test Hp.1A, Hp1.B, Hp1.C

Hp.1: 3 case studies	Aim, unit of analysis, timeframe
To test Hp.1A **State A: People's Republic of China** **State B1: Developing country with convergent preferences**	• Which positions before and after joining BRI? Continuity or change? • Unit of analysis = type of behaviour (change) • State B1, B2 and B3 positions in relation to State A's strategic priorities: a) Taiwan; b) Xinjiang. • Timeframe= (before BRI - joining year – after BRI)
To test Hp.1B **State A: People's Republic of China** **State B2: Developing country with undecided/discussed preferences**	
To test Hp.1C **State A: People's Republic of China** **State B3: Developed country with opposite preferences**	

Source: elaboration of the author

2.4.2. Analysing BRI's political effects

Instead, the analysis of the key political effects of the BRI is characterised by the operationalisation of the four distinct dimensions outlined above. For each of these dimensions, the study identifies an ad hoc area of investigation. For example, for the 'political trust' dimension, the analysis focuses on mapping the evolution of this dynamic between China and a given target country, both in terms of the narratives extracted from the official discourses of elites and the perceptions of public opinion towards China. For the 'policy coordination' dimension, on the other hand, the focus is on analysing whether there is a language of Chinese foreign policy buzzwords within the BRI documentation signed by a given country, or within country strategies and programmes. Finally, for the 'political mechanisms' dimension, the analysis examines key bilateral and multilateral BRI-related meetings (regional organisations and mechanisms) between China and a given country, while for the 'political parties' dimension, the survey focuses on any meetings that have taken place between the CPC and national parties. Table 5 summarises this analytical design.

Figure 5: Analysing BRI's political effects

BRI's political effects

To test Hp2, Hp3, Hp4, Hp5

Dimensions	Analysis	Sources
Political trust	Evolution of mutual political perceptions and trust: - Elite narrative in public speeches - Public opinion perceptions	• Prime ministers and top leaders' official speeches • Regional surveys on other countries' perceptions
Policy coordination	National foreign policy strategies to detect if the BRI-related o PRC-coined political language (CSDM, win-win cooperation) is present	• MoUs and BRI-related documents • Government and Ministry of Foreign Affairs databases
Political mechanisms	Screening of BRI-related meetings at the bilateral and multilateral level	• Foreign ministries and Embassies websites and statements • Regional IOs and mechanisms websites and statements • BRI Forum websites and statements
Political parties	Monitoring of party-to-party meetings	• International Department of the CPC database • National parties official websites

Source: elaboration of the author

2.4.3. Cases selection, methodology and data collection

This study identified the three national contexts of Kyrgyzstan, Djibouti and Italy as the three cases on which to base the empirical analysis (Gerring 2001, ch. 8; Seawright & Gerring 2008). These three cases were chosen for a number of reasons. First, the need to have three different case studies of BRI adherence stems from the formulation of the first hypothesis, which considers three scenarios with different preferences (the first already more China-oriented, the second with undecided preferences, and the third with opposite characteristics). In this sense, the sample, although small, is still representative and fit for purpose (Collier & Mahoney, 1996). Second, to ensure a degree of heterogeneity, the cases were selected from three different regions, namely Central Asia, the Horn of Africa and Europe. Third, the final selection was made through a comparative screening process by region, taking into account the evolution of these countries' relations with China over the past two decades and the development of the BRI in each region. In the Central Asian context, where most studies focus on the case of

Kazakhstan or treat the region as a single entity, Kyrgyzstan remains an under-researched case and was therefore identified as the first case study. In the African context, where several countries have historically close ties with China, such as Algeria, Ethiopia and Kenya, to name a few, the focus was on those cases that have recently developed closer ties with China and are involved in the BRI. Among these, Djibouti emerged as an interesting case study. Finally, in the European context, where many countries have opposite preferences to China, Italy was identified as the third case to be analysed, as it is the only G7 country to have joined the Belt and Road Initiative (and has already withdrawn from it in 2023).

The study employs a qualitative research design underpinned by deductive qualitative methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Saunders et al. 2016, pp. 165-175) and thematic and content analysis (della Porta & Keating, 2008; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). In particular, the study relies on two main sets of sources. The first are primary sources such as publicly available official documents (policy documents, strategies), official speeches by relevant members of the decision-making circles, government memoirs and articles published by state-controlled/affiliated news agencies. As relying solely on the first type of source would be too limiting, the study also included a range of secondary sources, including academic publications, reports and policy briefs published by national research centres and think tanks, national surveys and statistics. Sources include Chinese as well as sources from the three cases studied (Kyrgyzstan, Djibouti and Italy). The documentation was collected during two research periods at the National Taiwan University in Taipei (September to November 2023) and the Renmin University of China (February to June 2024). Both primary and secondary sources were retrieved from the CNKI database (*zhongguo zhiwang* 中国知网) and through archival research at the following libraries: Taipei Public Library (*taibei shili tushuguan* 臺北市立圖書館) and Koo Chen-Fu Memorial Library (*guoli Taiwan daxue shehui kexueyuan tushuguan* 國立臺灣大學社會科學院圖書館) in Taipei, and the Renmin University of China

Library (*zhongguo renmin daxue tushuguan* 中国人民大学图书馆) and the National Library of China (*zhongguo guojia tushuguan* 中国国家图书馆) in Beijing. For the Kyrgyz, Djiboutian and Italian sources, a desk review was carried out of official documents from these countries, official government websites and the websites of the main media outlets operating in these countries. In addition, the work of researchers specialising in China in each of the three contexts was consulted, as well as reports produced by leading national research institutes focusing on China.

Finally, as mentioned above and in line with the approach of this study, the timeframe is adjusted according to each case study. Kyrgyzstan, Djibouti and Italy joined the BRI at three different points in time: 2013, 2018 and 2019 respectively. As a result, the 'before and after' analytical scheme for examining China's political influence takes each case-specific year of accession as the main threshold for conducting the analysis. Similarly, the timeframe for investigating the main 'political effects' will be from the year of joining to the end of 2023.

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Chapter 3. Evaluating political impacts in Kyrgyzstan: China's political influence and BRI's political effects

Based on the content presented in the previous sections of this thesis, this chapter is divided into two main parts. The first aims to examine whether China's political influence over Kyrgyzstan has increased since the country joined the BRI. In line with the analytical framework adopted earlier, the focus is on understanding whether and how Kyrgyzstan's behaviour towards Chinese strategic priorities has evolved or changed over the past two decades. The timeframe has been identified as follows: 2003-2023. Given that Kyrgyzstan joined the BRI in the months immediately following the initiative's launch— with the Kyrgyz government's official accession in December 2013[43]— the timeframe for analysis extends to the ten years before accession (2003-2013) and the ten years after (2014-2023).

The previously identified hypothesis (hypothesis H1.A) suggests that Kyrgyzstan, a country already traditionally close to China, has increased its proximity to Beijing in the years following its accession to the BRI due to China's ability to leverage the 'preference multiplier'. Through a documentary and thematic analysis of 30 official documents (including treaties, memoranda of understanding, declarations, official speeches, interviews with the highest state

[43] Nedopil, C. (2023). Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative. Green Finance & Development Center, FISF Fudan University. Retrieved from https://greenfdc.org/countries-of-the-belt-and-road-initiative-bri/.

officials), a corpus of 202 online articles published by the Chinese[44] and Kyrgyz[45] press, and a review of secondary sources,[46] the chapter seeks to verify this hypothesis.

The second part of the chapter analyses the main political outcomes of the initiative during the ten years of its implementation (2013-2023). The study examines the four hypotheses on the political effects of the initiative (Hp2, Hp3, Hp4, Hp5) identified in the second chapter. These hypotheses encompass various dimensions that require the analysis of heterogeneous sources. These include: the foreign policies adopted by the Kyrgyz governments over the last decade, agreements and documents signed during state visits and bilateral meetings, national surveys conducted in Kyrgyzstan on the perceptions of China among the Kyrgyz elite and population, and articles published in the Chinese and Kyrgyz press on meetings and the development of relations between the two states. A complete overview of all the sources consulted and collected for the discussion in this chapter can be found in the Appendix.

This third chapter is structured as follows: section 3.1 provides an overview of the evolution of Sino-Kyrgyz relations from the beginning of the century to the present day (2003-2023). Section 3.2 presents the results of the analysis conducted in terms of Chinese political influence before and after the BRI, while section 3.3 examines the main political effects of the initiative for Bishkek. Finally, section 3.4 discusses the key findings from the analysis of this case study.

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[44] For the Chinese press, this study carried out documentary research on the following three publications: People's Daily (*Renmin Ribao* 人民日报), Guangming Daily (*Guangming Ribao* 光明日报), Xinhua Daily Telegraph (*Xinhua Meiri Dianxunbao* 新华每日电讯报). This is supplemented by analysis of news published on the Xinhua News Agency website (*Xinhua Wang* 新华网) and, where relevant, other sources such as China Daily, local newspapers (e.g., Chengdu Daily *Chengdu Ribao* 成都日报), or sector-specific publications (Economic Daily *Jingji Ribao* 经济日报).

[45] For the Kyrgyz press, the study identified, after a careful review of active news outlets and press agencies in the country, the following: 24.kg, a news agency whose content is predominantly published in English, and AKIPress, whose content is published in Russian, Kyrgyz, and occasionally in English.

[46] Secondary sources include studies and reports published by the OSCE Academy in Bishkek, the independent research institute CrossRoads Central Asia, and the think tank Caspian Policy Center.

3.1. The evolution of Sino-Kyrgyz relations (2003-2023)

In the thirty-two years since the establishment of their diplomatic relations in January 1992, China and Kyrgyzstan have gradually upgraded the status of their relationship. During the period analysed in this chapter (2003-2023), four key moments stand out in this evolution. First, in 2007, the two countries signed a declaration expressing their intention to invest in further developing and deepening their friendly relations and cooperation. This was followed by the establishment of a strategic partnership in 2013 and, in 2018, the signing of an enhanced partnership, referred to as a 'comprehensive strategic partnership'. Finally, in May 2023, the two parties added another dimension to the development of their bilateral relations by stipulating the realisation of a 'comprehensive strategic partnership in the new era' (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2007, 2013, 2018, 2023; Beisebaev, 2023).[47] What this seemingly linear and increasingly intense development belies, however, is that the evolution of China-Kyrgyzstan relations, and more broadly the evolution of Chinese relations with the countries of the Central Asian region— including, besides Kyrgyzstan, the other four post-Soviet states in the area, namely Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan— has taken place in a particularly complex context.

Since its declaration of independence in August 1991,[48] Kyrgyzstan has pursued a foreign policy strategy known as 'multi-vector diplomacy' throughout the fifteen years of Askar Akayev's presidency (1991-2005). This approach aimed to navigate between the country's historical and cultural ties with Russia while simultaneously fostering productive

[47] The website of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kyrgyzstan does not publish the full text of the various documents signed between China and Kyrgyzstan, but it does provide a list detailing in chronological order all the agreements and declarations signed by the two parties from 1992 to 2018. Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of Kyrgyzstan (2007, 2013, 2018). Retrieved from https://mfa.gov.kg/kg/dm/Embassy-of-the-Kyrgyz-Republic-in-the-Peoples-Republic-of-China/Menu---Foreign-/--uslugi/Legal-base/RC

[48] In the early 1990s, Beijing had virtually no communication with the new leaders of Central Asia until January 1992, when diplomat Tian Zengpei, accompanied by then Minister of Commerce and Economic Cooperation Li Lanqing, visited the region to establish diplomatic relations between China and several countries, including Kyrgyzstan. For more information on this, see Yau, N. (2020b). *Russia's and China's quiet rivalry*. Foreign Policy Research Institute. Retrieved from https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/09/russia-and-chinas-quiet-rivalry-in-central-asia/

relationships with a diverse array of actors, including major powers, emerging middle powers, neighbouring states, and international and regional organisations, with a particular focus on the US and China (Swanström, 2014; Omelicheva, 2014; Kelkitli, 2022). As early as 2004, Chung, while acknowledging China's growing interest in the region, highlighted Beijing's concerns about both Russia's renewed involvement (Guangming Daily, 2003) and the American presence on Kyrgyz territory (People's Daily, 2003; Chung, 2004; Xinhua Daily Telegraph, 2005a). The latter materialised in the form of the Manas airbase in the capital Bishkek, which was operational from 2001 to 2014 (Kydyralieva, 2016, p.8; Wang, 2019).[49]

During this period, under President Hu Jintao, China strengthened its economic and security ties with Central Asian states and reconceptualised its strategic approach to the region, focusing on two key pillars: 'peripheral diplomacy' (*zhoubian waijiao* 周边外交), a concept previously used by Chinese diplomacy but revived in this context to address concerns about socio-political instability, cross-border and inter-ethnic conflicts, and the spread of extremism near its borders (Sun, 2007), and the policy of 'good neighbourliness' (*mulin youhao* 睦邻友好), which aimed to promote peaceful, friendly, and prosperous relations with neighbouring countries (Niquet, 2006; Liu, 2010).[50] The strategic rationale underlying China's interest in Central Asia can be summarised as follows: first, to promote security and development in areas adjacent to the Uyghur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang (XUAR); second, to gain access to the region's vast oil and gas resources; and third, to develop new markets for infrastructure construction by Chinese companies (Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2009; Godehardt, 2014; Laruelle & Engvall, 2015; Yau, 2020a; Pantucci & Petersen, 2022). In addition to these reasons, it is

[49] On 15 February 2002, Kyrgyzstan and the United States signed a Memorandum of Understanding, officially authorising the US military presence in the country. White House (2002). Retrieved from https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/09/text/20020923-4.html.

[50] These policies gained further prominence when they were incorporated into President Hu Jintao's 'harmonious world' strategy. They were subsequently referenced in the 18th CPC Congress in 2012 and in the 12th Five-Year Plan (2011-2015). Retrieved from https://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2012-11/17/content_2268826.htm; https://www.ndrc.gov.cn/fggz/fzzlgh/gjfzgh/201109/P020191029595702423333.pdf.

important to note that Kyrgyzstan, along with Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, has an additional strategic importance as a country directly bordering China (Zeminar, 2014; Xie, 2014).

Although the great power competition seemed to have reproduced itself in this part of the world in the first decade of the new millennium (Cooley, 2012; Kim & Indeo, 2013), a decade later the gradual reduction of US engagement (and eventual withdrawal in 2021) in Afghanistan led to a decline in the priority of Central Asia, and inevitably Kyrgyzstan, on Washington's agenda (Liao & Yang, 2015; Leksyutina, 2024). The at least partial withdrawal of the US from the region has had the direct consequence that, from 2010 onwards, Russia and China have re-emerged as the main actors[51] competing for influence in the region (Yau, 2020b). Moreover, in the same years, the global economic crisis of 2008-2009 represented a crucial turning point for the projection of a greater economic presence of Russia, and especially China, in the region (Leksyutina, 2024). Indeed, between 2012 and 2015, both Russia and China developed various instruments to increase their engagement in the area. Russia, eager to restore its hegemonic role, especially towards smaller states that it considers as clients[52] (i.e., Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan), aimed to reinvigorate the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), created a new regional organisation called the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which Kyrgyzstan joined in 2015, and reestablished its military presence in Kyrgyzstan (e.g., Kant airbase, near the capital Bishkek) (Cooley, 2015, p.1-2; Dzhuraev, 2022).

China launched its BRI project in 2013, and since then it has defined and characterised Chinese relations with all countries in the region. Interestingly, the importance of China's neighbours in the initiative is not so much demonstrated by President Xi's symbolic speech in

[51] A different perspective is offered by studies that have observed Turkey's increasing activism towards Kyrgyzstan. On this point, see, for example, Murzaeva, D. (2014). Kyrgyzstan-Turkey relations: Cooperation in political and educational spheres. *Review of European Studies*, *6*(3), 39-54.

[52] For the patron-client relationship paradigm, reference is made to the following conceptualisation: Biermann, R. (2024). Conceptualising patron-client relations in secessionist conflict. A research agenda. *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 1-19.

Astana in October 2013, but by the fact that in the same weeks, the CPC Central Committee was engaged in Politburo study sessions focused on defining China's foreign policy strategy and its periphery, and shortly afterwards convened the first 'Forum on China's Neighbourhood Diplomacy' (Christoffersen, 2024). Moreover, the launch of the Belt and Road coincided with President Xi's visit to Kyrgyzstan— which took place between 10 and 12 September 2013— during which the parties discussed various bilateral issues and elevated their relationship to the status of a 'strategic partnership' (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013; International Business Daily, 2013). In terms of timing, it is not surprising that Kyrgyzstan's official accession to the Chinese project took place almost immediately, just a few months later in December 2013.[53] Less than two years later, in March 2015, the Chinese Embassy in the Kyrgyz Republic held a conference entitled 'Excellent Prospects and Practical Actions for Creating the 21st Century SREB and MSR', and in the same year, more than 80 visits took place between representatives of institutions and the business community of the two countries (Beisebaev, 2023). It is important to note that Beijing had already provided significant economic incentives and concessional loans for infrastructure projects in Bishkek throughout the 1990s and 2000s. These came in the form of trade measures, investments, and loans in exchange for Kyrgyzstan's adherence to Chinese foreign policy and security objectives (Chokobaeva & Ninnis, 2014, p.229; Reeves, 2018). Indeed, Kyrgyzstan's economic structure had long been particularly receptive to this influx of capital, as the country has been transitioning from a state-controlled economy to a market economy since its independence in 1991 (Dzhuraev, 2022). This means that even before the BRI, China had established itself as one of the country's most important partners, at least in terms of trade.

[53] According to the Green Finance & Development Center of Fudan University, the exact date of Kyrgyzstan's accession to the BRI is December 1, 2013. An article confirming this date was published on the Chinese Embassy in Kyrgyzstan's website on July 21, 2014. For more details, see: PRC Embassy in the Kyrgyz Republic (2014*). Ji'erjisi jiji zhichi zhongguo jianshe sichou zhilu jingji dai de changyi* [Kyrgyzstan Actively Supports China's Proposed Establishment of the Silk Road Economic Belt]. Retrieved from http://kg.mofcom.gov.cn/article/zxhz/sbfw/201407/20140700668818.shtml. Apart from this article, no further news regarding this matter has been published on either the Kyrgyz or Chinese government websites.

However, two significant changes have been brought about by the launch of the BRI. The first corresponds to a general increase in the amount of funding and the increased ambition of the projects (for a full list of BRI projects in Kyrgyzstan, see Mogilevskii, 2019). Among the major projects under the BRI umbrella in Kyrgyzstan are infrastructure works that the country has long sought to realise. In terms of road infrastructure, some examples include the construction of the Bishkek-Naryn-Torugart route, the alternative north-south connecting artery, and the development of the road network in the capital, Bishkek. In the energy sector, another area of concentrated investment, exemplary projects include the Datka-Kemin power transmission line and the Datka 500 kV substation (Primiano et al., 2022). However, while some projects have been implemented without any particular problems or delays, the troubled realisation of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway is an emblematic case that demonstrates that even in the Kyrgyz context, projects under the BRI umbrella have faced and continue to be confronted with obstacles and problems on the ground (for this specific project, see Khitakhunov, 2024). The second aspect of discontinuity with the past concerns China's ambition to give the BRI with an accentuated pervasiveness, to the extent that it has become the keyword describing the bilateral relationship between the two countries since 2013. More explicitly than in the past, Beijing projects through the BRI its desire to be the reference actor for Kyrgyzstan in balancing its foreign policy (Muratalieva, 2023).

Within this framework, there are a number of characteristics and developments specific to the Kyrgyz context that need to be duly taken into account. Kyrgyzstan is not monolithic, but a multi-ethnic society in which different ethnic groups coexist, not without difficulties and cyclical episodes of violence, including the Kyrgyz majority (72.2%), Uzbeks (14.3%), and Russians (6.9%) (Xie, 2014). In the years following independence, the new Kyrgyz national identity was shaped under the leadership of President Akayev, taking into account Kyrgyz demands for ethnically based nationalism on the one hand, and the desire of ethnic minorities — and many Russified Kyrgyz— to retain the civic nationalism that had been a hallmark of Soviet identity on the other (Huskey, 2003). However, it is the multi-party and liberal political

landscape that most distinguishes Kyrgyzstan from other Central Asian countries (Laruelle & Engvall, 2015; Shen, 2020). In fact, President Akayev was the only leader at the time of the transition after the collapse of the Soviet Union who was not a product of the Communist Party, which allowed him to ensure a certain degree of pluralism in the country (Nourzhanov & Peyrouse, 2021).

However, although Kyrgyzstan is often referred to as an 'island of democracy', its thirty-year political history has been particularly turbulent, as evidenced by the three revolutions that took place in 2005 (Tulip Revolution), 2010 (April Revolution) and finally in 2020, all of which ended with the deposition of the then incumbent president (Akayev, Bakiyev, and Jeenbekov, respectively) (Dzhuraev, 2022).[54] The constitution has also been amended more than ten times in a relatively short period of time (1991-2023). For example, in 2017, the Jeenbekov administration promoted constitutional amendments that increased and strengthened the powers of the government and the coalition of majority political parties (Yau, 2022). In 2021, on the initiative of the current president, Sadyr Japarov, a new constitution was adopted that significantly increased the powers of the presidency, to the extent that various voices have raised concerns about an authoritarian drift in the country and reduced the role of parliament (Government of Kyrgyzstan, 2021; Parlett, 2021). Finally, the parliamentary elections held in 2020 and subsequent developments can be cited as another example of the rapidity with which Kyrgyz politics is evolving. Following allegations of vote manipulation raised by the opposition, protests erupted in the capital Bishkek, leading to the release of some political prisoners, including the future President Japarov (Yau, 2022).

In the eyes of other neighbouring countries, and China in particular, Kyrgyzstan is often described as an allegedly politically unstable and anarchic country where ethnic problems, endemic corruption, and terrorism continue to pose a potential threat (Zhang & Lu, 2017). In

[54] Interestingly, of the six presidents who have succeeded each other since 1991, only two are currently still in Kyrgyzstan. They are Roza Otunbayeva and Sooronbay Jeenbekov.

reality, a look at the analyses of this small Central Asian country by Chinese scholars and the Chinese press allows us to make two further observations. First, Chinese state-controlled media have invested with a certain degree of consistency and increasing intensity in media coverage of international political events, but especially domestic politics in Kyrgyzstan (Xinhua Daily Telegraph, 2005b; Xinhua Daily Telegraph, 2005c; Guangming Daily, 2006, 2010; People's Daily, 2010, 2021a). In recent years, Beijing has even launched a targeted campaign to insert its content into Kyrgyz media, has signed agreements for a greater local presence of its media (including Xinhua, Weibo, and Silk Road Observer), and increased its presence and sharing of content in Russian and Kyrgyz on its social media platforms (Yau, 2022; Yau, 2023). One of the main consequences of these investments is that China, unlike other countries that continue to treat this geographical area as monolithic, is able to recognize more the individuality of each of the Central Asian states (Tafuro Ambrosetti & Sciorati, 2023). The second observation stems from the fact that, especially since the leader Sadyr Japarov came to power after the 2021 elections, China seems determined to further accelerate the development of Sino-Kyrgyz relations as long as this leader remains in power. It is not an isolated case that studies published in Chinese journals emphasise Japarov's ability to promote a number of political, economic, and social reforms in the country (Tao, 2021; Guo & Jia, 2023) and his interviews have appeared in the Chinese press (People's Daily, 2022a).

More recently, the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in February 2022 is another important juncture to consider. President Japarov was one of the first leaders to offer an understanding of Russia's recognition of Donetsk and Luhansk, albeit only on social media and with sometimes ambiguous language (Dzhuraev, 2022). However, given the great period of transformation that each Central Asian country is experiencing (Tafuro Ambrosetti & Sciorati, 2023; Zhao, 2023a; Nu & Liao, 2023), the current Russian weakening may represent an opportunity for China to open a season of greater Chinese interference, to the extent of initiating a process to undermine Russian influence, both economic and political, in the near future (Li, 2022; Zeng & Han 2023; Ozat, 2023). As scholar Liu notes, sanctions against Russia

have dramatically increased the interest of regional countries in deeper cooperation in implementing the BRI (Liu, 2022, p. 118). According to the General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China, trade turnover between China and Kyrgyzstan increased by 26.8% in the first six months of 2023 compared to the same period of the previous year (Ozat, 2023). At the same time, however, the reduced Russian presence worries Beijing for two different reasons: first, because it represents a factor of instability in a region where maintaining security and stability is vital for China (Sun, 2023; Zhao, 2023b), and second, because it leaves room for other actors (including the US, but also India, Japan and Europe) to intervene in this context and provide an alternative to China (Zeng, 2022, p.39 Zeng & Pang, 2023; Ozat & Nelson, 2023; Zhao, 2023c; Guo, 2023).

3.2. Evaluating China's political influence in Kyrgyzstan before (2003-2013) and after BRI (2014-2023)

After presenting the evolution and main features of Sino-Kyrgyz relations, this section discusses the evolution of the Kyrgyz government's positioning with respect to China's strategic priorities. In line with the theoretical framework adopted in this study, phenomena of political influence manifest themselves when, following specific initiatives such as the BRI, recipient countries change their positioning and behaviour to support the interests of the country promoting such initiatives. In the case of China, it is useful to recall that the two strategic priorities identified in the second chapter were: positioning on the Taiwan issue and Chinese policies adopted in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region. As Kyrgyzstan's accession to the BRI took place at the end of 2013, as mentioned above, the analysis covers the ten years prior to accession (2003-2013) and the subsequent ten years (2013-2023). Section 3.2.1 provides an overview of the positioning adopted by the Kyrgyz authorities in the period 2003-2013, while the following section 3.2.2 explains what, if any, developments have taken place in the following decade.

3.2.1. Kyrgyzstan's positioning toward China's strategic priorities before BRI (2003-2013)

Kyrgyzstan has long maintained an explicit position in favour of China on the (so-called) Taiwan issue and on combating the 'three forces'— terrorism, extremism, and separatism— in Xinjiang (Zeminar, 2014). Starting with an examination of how the Kyrgyz government expressed itself in the decade 2003-2013 regarding the Taiwan issue, it is noteworthy that the 'Treaty of Good-Neighbourliness, Friendship and Cooperation' signed by the two states in August 2007 already contains a specific and detailed paragraph on this issue (Article 5): "Kyrgyzstan reaffirms its firm adherence to the one-China policy, recognised that the Government of the People's Republic of China is the only legitimate government representing all of China, and that Taiwan is an inalienable part of China's territory. Kyrgyzstan opposes any attempt to create 'two Chinas' or 'one China, one Taiwan', opposes any form of 'Taiwan independence', including 'legal Taiwan independence', opposes Taiwan's participation in all international and regional organisations in which sovereign states must participate; and does not establish or conduct any form of official exchanges with Taiwan. Kyrgyzstan supports all efforts of the Chinese government to achieve national reunification and believes that the Taiwan issue is China's internal affairs and that external forces have no right to interfere" (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2007; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2007).[55]

In the broader context of the regional organization Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)[56], the various member states opposed Taiwan's accession to the United Nations in 2008 and reaffirmed their support for China's unification with Taiwan (also referred to in the press as the 'nationalist island') (UzDaily, 2008). The same content of the 2007 treaty is also

[55] With a few modifications, the quoted passage is an evolution of what was already written in three previous documents: the Joint Declaration between the two countries signed in 1998 (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1998), the subsequent Treaty signed in 2002 (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2002), and finally the Declaration published in 2006 (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2006).

[56] The SCO is an active cooperation mechanism in Central Asia. Established in 2001 to facilitate the resolution of territorial disputes between its six member states - China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan - the organisation has gradually institutionalised and intensified cooperation between its members on security issues as well as in areas such as the economy, energy and culture.

referenced in the subsequent statement that elevated the bilateral relationship to a strategic partnership in September 2013 (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013). The main novel element in this second document is a more explicit Chinese commitment to contribute to Kyrgyzstan's economic development in exchange for Bishkek's adherence to the 'one China policy' (Reeves, 2015). At the same time, Kyrgyz support for this Chinese strategic priority is reiterated in various documents issued following official visits by President Bakiyev, who was in power from 2005 to 2009 (People's Daily, 2006; 24.kg, 2006; AKIPress, 2007, 2008), and in the early years of President Atambayev's tenure (China Daily, 2011)[57], as well as in meetings between other officials of the two states (e.g., vice presidents, foreign ministers, parliamentary speakers) (People's Daily, 2005, 2007, 2011; Economic Daily, 2007).

With regard to the second Chinese strategic priority, namely the policies pursued in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), at the beginning of the century, after years of Soviet support for the Uyghur revolt, China needed a collective and regional effort to dismantle the East Turkestan networks scattered throughout Central Asia. To this end, the Chinese government under Hu Jintao decided to support the rise of individual leaders in these countries in exchange for explicit support against the separatist movement in Xinjiang (Pannier, 2020; Yau, 2020a). Indeed, as Chung noted as early as 2004, Chinese authorities expressed concern about the inability of the Kyrgyz authorities to act against Uyghur activists present in their territory and pressured the government to close down Uyghur political parties and newspapers operating in the country (Chung, 2004). According to the World Uyghur Congress, in the decade between 2001 and 2011, the Kyrgyz government banned their public meetings and deported over fifty Uyghurs from Kyrgyzstan to China (Chokobaeva & Ninnis, 2014).

[57] During her few months as President of Kyrgyzstan (from April to December 2010), as a transitional figure until the next election, Otunbayeva had one single meeting with Wen Jiabao, then Prime Minister and member of the Standing Committee of the CPC Politburo, in November 2010. There is no explicit reference to the Taiwan issue in the available reports. Retrieved from https://www.gov.cn/ldhd/2010-11/26/content_1753778.htm.

As highlighted for the Taiwan issue, the Xinjiang issue is also consistently documented in all bilateral documents signed between China and Kyrgyzstan in the period 2003-2013 (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2007, 2013) and reaffirmed, albeit with less frequency and intensity, in official meetings at various levels (People's Daily, 2005, 2006, 2011). It is interesting to note that the formula used in these documents to refer to Xinjiang never directly mentions the XUAR. For example, in the 2013 statement, the issue is phrased as follows: "the two sides strongly condemned and opposed all forms of terrorism, extremism and separatism, and reaffirmed that the 'three forces' pose a serious threat to the security and stability of the two countries and the entire region. The two sides will comprehensively strengthen the coordination and cooperation between the relevant departments of the two countries and take effective measures to jointly combat the 'three forces', including the 'East Turkestan' terrorist forces" (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2013). Finally, in this case too, it is worth noting that in documents signed since 2013, the logic of providing economic aid in exchange for support and assistance in dealing with separatist movements present in the XUAR has become increasingly explicit (Reeves, 2015).

3.2.2. Kyrgyzstan's positioning toward China's strategic priorities after BRI (2014-2023)

During President Atambayev's tenure, which saw Kyrgyzstan join the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013 and lasted until 2017, statements of support for China's position on Taiwan remained constant. For example, this support is evident in the final declaration of the bilateral meeting between Presidents Atambayev and Xi Jinping in June 2016 (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016). It is worth mentioning an incident that took place in 2016, when the then deputy speaker of the Kyrgyz parliament, Alimbekov, visited Taiwan, sparkling a political controversy. Despite attempts to justify this stay as a private and non-institutional trip, the issue was only resolved after his resignation (AKIPress, 2016). Subsequently, the analysis of post-BRI documents and statements issued by the highest state officials during the same period

(Atambayev himself, his successor Jeenbekov, and finally Japarov) allows for two key observations.

As far as official documents are concerned, the declaration on the establishment of a 'comprehensive strategic partnership' in 2018 not only reaffirms the already solid Kyrgyz position, but also adds further details. The text links the Taiwan issue to Kyrgyzstan's adoption of certain expressions coined by its Chinese counterpart, such as 'President Xi's thought on socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era' or the notion of a 'community of shared destiny for mankind'. More specifically, the passage on Taiwan reads as follows: "the Kyrgyz side highly appreciates Xi Jinping's thought on socialism with Chinese characteristics for a new era, and believes that it points out the direction of China's future development and is of epoch-making significance for the building a community of shared destiny for mankind. The Kyrgyz side firmly adheres to the 'one-China' policy and reaffirms that the Government of the People's Republic of China is the only legitimate government representing the whole of China, and that Taiwan is an inalienable part of China's territory. We support the peaceful development of cross-Strait relations and all efforts made by the Chinese government to achieve national reunification" (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018, Section I). Moreover, in the text of the subsequent joint statement signed by China and Kyrgyzstan in May 2023, the tone becomes even more decisive and emphatic. For the first time, the text prefaces the passage on Taiwan with a statement on the parties' broader mutual support for their respective fundamental interests. There is also a subtle but significant change in the wording on this issue: from "Kyrgyzstan supports the peaceful development of cross-Strait relations and all efforts of the Chinese government to achieve national reunification" to "Kyrgyzstan firmly supports the Chinese government in all its efforts to achieve national reunification" (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023, Article 4). This change is also reflected in a more systematic inclusion of Taiwan in various statements issued after bilateral meetings between presidents, prime ministers, and foreign ministers (People's Daily, 2021b, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d, 2023a, 2023b; AKIPress, 2019b).

In terms of official statements, two statements by the Kyrgyz authorities are particularly noteworthy. The first was issued on August 4, 2022, following the official visit of the US House Speaker, Nancy Pelosi, during which the Foreign Minister expressed concern about the resulting tensions and reiterated the invariability of Kyrgyzstan's position on the Taiwan issue (24.kg, 2022b; AKIPress, 2022a). The second is a statement by the Kyrgyz Embassy in China published on the MFA website, opposing the presidential and parliamentary elections held on the island, which it sees as an attempt to use the issue to interfere in China's internal affairs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2024). Finally, an interview with an adviser to the Kyrgyz National Strategic Institute can be cited, who told the Chinese press that "from a legal point of view, Taiwan was, is, and will certainly remain an inseparable part of Chinese territory" (People's Daily, 2022e).

In the years since Kyrgyzstan joined the Belt and Road Initiative, the country's support for China's position on Xinjiang has remained unchanged. In fact, as evidenced by numerous statements issued especially since Japarov came to power in January 2021, China seems to place greater emphasis on ensuring that this strategic priority is always mentioned alongside support for its positions on Taiwan and Hong Kong (People's Daily, 2021b, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d, 2023a). During these years, official documents such as the joint statements of 2018 and 2023 continue to refer to the 'three forces', including the terrorist forces of 'East Turkestan' (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018, 2023). In this context, it is worth mentioning a single episode that contradicts the above description. Following the publication of the so-called Xinjiang Papers by the US newspaper The New York Times in November 2019[58], and despite the fact that the Kyrgyz government did not dispute the official Chinese

[58] Ramzey, A. & Buckley, C. (2019, 16 November). The Xinjiang Papers: 'Absolutely No Mercy': Leaked Files Expose How China Organized Mass Detentions of Muslims". *The New York Times*. Retrieved from: https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/11/16/world/asia/china-xinjiang-documents.html. See also "China Cables" documents (2019, 24 November). *International Consortium of Investigative Journalists*. Retrieved from: https://www.icij.org/investigations/china-cables/read-the-china-cables-documents/.

position that the camps were set up for educational and vocational training purposes, Bishkek decided not to sign the letter addressed to the UN Human Rights Council expressing support for China's policies in Xinjiang (Kelkitli, 2022).

Based on the analysis of the evolution of Kyrgyzstan's positioning on two major Chinese strategic priorities in the two periods— one preceding the country's accession to the BRI (2003-2013) and the decade following its adhesion (2013-2023)— it is possible to confirm hypothesis Hp1.A. With respect to both priorities, the Kyrgyz government had already demonstrated preferences converging with Beijing in the years preceding its entry into the Chinese initiative. Thanks to China's already demonstrated ability to leverage the preference multiplier effect, Kyrgyzstan has increased the intensity of statements expressing its support for Chinese strategic priorities during the ten years of BRI membership. More specifically, with regard to the Taiwan dossier, Bishkek has increased not only the intensity but also the unconditional nature and firmness of its support. Similarly, and notwithstanding the single episode cited that occurred in 2019, Kyrgyzstan has continued to defend Chinese policies in Xinjiang.

3.3. BRI's main political effects in Kyrgyzstan

3.3.1. Political trust

As highlighted in the second chapter, one of the main political ambitions underlying the BRI was to enhance mutual political trust between China and each participating country. This section, therefore, aims to discuss whether and how Kyrgyzstan's political trust in China, as expressed by the country's elite, has evolved since the country joined China's BRI. Several studies have been conducted on this topic, using data from both the Asian Barometer Survey project and the Central Asian Barometer (CAB).[59]

[59] The Asian Barometer Survey is a comparative survey of 18 Asian countries and territories sponsored by the Academia Sinica Research Institute and the National Taiwan University based in Taipei on 18 Asian states and

For example, in the various waves collected between 2017 and 2021, the CAB notes that over these five years there has been a steady decline in public sentiment towards China among respondents in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan (Muratalieva, 2023). More specifically, as Kyzy contextualises in a study, there seems to be a split in Kyrgyzstan at present: while the country's political leaders tend to be increasingly Sinophile, traders and citizens are animated by Sinophobic sentiments. Former Prime Minister Zhantoro Satybaldiev (in office from 2012 to 2014) and Foreign Minister Adakhan Madumarov have both spoken out against manifestations of anti-Chinese sentiment and small-scale riots that erupted in Bishkek bazaars against Chinese traders, claiming that forcing Chinese workers, investors, and businesses to leave would result in severe losses for Kyrgyzstan (Kyzy, 2021). While the Kyrgyz political elite may see cooperation with China as an opportunity to diversify the state's foreign relations, Kyrgyz society views the state's relationship with Beijing with growing suspicion and anxiety. Some Kyrgyz activists and intellectuals have begun to equate China's presence in the country with state corruption and political inefficiency, while Kyrgyz media regularly publish articles by prominent academics accusing Bishkek of favouring Chinese interests over those of the state (Reeves, 2015).

In fact, some scholars have presented a more complex reality than this stark division suggests (Huskey, 2003; Laruelle & Engvall, 2015). As Laruelle and Engvall highlight, Kyrgyzstan's elites are at least partially pro-Western, and their motivations for greater proximity to China are merely the result of a forced choice due to the fact that Kyrgyzstan, as the smallest and poorest economy in the region along with Tajikistan, turns to China as the only country with significant investment capacity (Laruelle & Engvall, 2015). Similarly, China's growing influence in the security sphere is due to the Kyrgyz Republic’s need to deepen its political-

territories. This is the link to the official page: https://www.asianbarometer.org/index. The Central Asian Barometer, based in Bishkek, is instead a large-scale biennial research project that measures the social, economic, and political atmosphere of Central Asian countries through interviews with a sample of 1,000 to 2,000 respondents in each country. This is the direct link to the website: https://ca-barometer.org/en

military cooperation with China to compensate for Russia's declining military position and reduced capacity to fund the country's armed forces (Muratalieva et al., 2022). Moreover, Chinese scholars themselves note a degree of suspicion on the part of the Kyrgyz establishment about the rise of Chinese influence (Deng, 2022). Scholar Xu, for example, cites years of Soviet anti-Chinese propaganda and the legacy of the Sino-Soviet confrontation as causes of this phenomenon (Xu, 2022, p.54).

In recent years, numerous studies have focused on university students in Kyrgyzstan and, more broadly, on students throughout Central Asia. As Muratalieva observes, it is interesting to summarise the main evidence that has emerged from these analyses as an expression of the country's future political elites (Muratalieva, 2023). Already in 2017, for example, Chen & Jiménez-Tovar, in their study conducted on over 340 university students from Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, observed a significant difference between the two countries: while on the one hand, the analysis showed that respondents of Kazakh nationality considered China to be the country with the greatest influence in Central Asia, on the other hand, Kyrgyz students believed that Russia still held a more influential position in the region compared to Beijing, although they indicated that they expected China to overtake them within the next decade. Interestingly, when asked directly about the BRI, the survey found that the vast majority of respondents from both countries were not even aware of the Chinese initiative (only 31.5% of Kazakh students and an even lower percentage, 13.8%, of Kyrgyz students said they had heard of the project) (Chen & Jiménez-Tovar, 2017). In an analysis conducted the following year on the same database, Chen & Günther not only confirmed the above evidence, but also observed that Kyrgyzstan is the country in Central Asia with the lowest percentage of people who believe in a positive contribution from China to their own country (Chen & Günther, 2018).

Confirming this evidence, Can et al. in 2021 found in a study conducted on a sample of 292 students from different Central Asian countries that while China does not appear to be a cause for concern for students from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, a 'Chinese issue' is raised by students

from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The latter perceive trade with China and Chinese investment positively, while China's growing military ties with Central Asian countries are perceived negatively (Zhang et al., 2021). Furthermore, in a study conducted among a sample of 120 students from the American University of Central Asia in Bishkek, these students expressed positive views of China's handling of the coronavirus in the country, but more mixed views of China's ability to help and support other countries in dealing with the pandemic. Similarly, participants say they are positive about Chinese support at the economic level, but fear that Kyrgyzstan may lose its autonomy because of its growing debt to China (Primiano et al., 2022; on the debt issue, see also the surveys conducted by Sharifli, 2022).

Finally, a comparative discourse analysis of perceptions of Russia and China in Russian-language online media present in Kyrgyzstan (the analysis considers these four sources: Vecherniy Bishkek, Kloop.kg, Radio Azzatyk, 24.kg) shows that while Russia's role in the region is still described mainly in political terms, China's role is expressed mainly in economic terms. However, the study is able to capture some changes that have occurred in recent years: although there are many more articles on Russia overall than on China, the percentage of articles dealing with economics in the case of Russia and politics in the case of China is increasing, and the percentage of positive articles on relations between China and Kyrgyzstan compared to those between Russia and Kyrgyzstan is increasing (Owen, 2018).

In light of what has been presented in this part of my research, and recalling the second hypothesis of the study, according to which the BRI, except for a short period between 2017 and 2019, did not contribute to increasing the political trust of the participating countries towards China, nor did it improve mutual understanding with China, this is confirmed for the case of Kyrgyzstan. As observed, Kyrgyzstan’s political leadership has moved closer to Beijing, but continues to express a degree of distrust and caution towards its Chinese counterpart.

3.3.2. Policy coordination

The second aspect previously identified in relation to the political ambitions inherent in the BRI project is policy coordination. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, it is important to emphasise that since its declaration of independence in 1991, the Kyrgyz Republic has largely adopted governance principles, legislation, and national and foreign policy formulation of Russian origin, using political documents published by Moscow as models (Sharshenova, 2021).[60] However, as already briefly discussed when examining the development of relations between Kyrgyzstan and China in recent years, a first element of Chinese influence can be identified in the development of the language used in treaties and declarations aimed at regulating the bilateral relations between the two countries. Comparing the texts of the 2007 and 2013 Joint Declarations with those published in 2018 and subsequently in 2023, a change becomes evident: the presence of Chinese-derived terms, concepts, and ideas was almost absent in the first two documents, while it is very significant in the two more recent documents (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2007, 2013, 2018, 2023). It is worth noting that the latest of these documents, signed in 2023, already contains a Chinese expression in its title: 'Joint Declaration of the People's Republic of China and the Kyrgyz Republic on the Establishment of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in the New Era'. The text repeatedly mentions terms such as 'Belt and Road', 'Xi Jinping Thought', and 'community of shared destiny for mankind' (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). Similar considerations can be made after analysing the Kyrgyz-PRC cooperation programme signed in 2015 for the period 2015-2025.[61]

A more complex discourse is that which seeks to understand whether this kind of influence has also manifested itself in documents adopted by the Kyrgyz government in matters of foreign policy and in relation to national development plans. Currently, the most important

[60] For further insights see Marat, E. (2007). Soviet military legacy and regional security cooperation in Central Asia. *China and Eurasian Forum Quarterly*, *5*, no.1, 83-114. Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program.

[61] The program is mentioned within the Joint Declaration signed by the two countries in 2015 but is not available online.

document adopted by the Kyrgyz government is the 'National Development Strategy of Kyrgyzstan for 2018-2040'.[62] Although during the preparatory stages of its drafting, the then incumbent President Atambayev had declared that the Kyrgyz strategy and the Belt and Road had good prospects for alignment, the analysis of the document shows that the link between the Chinese initiative and Bishkek's strategy has not materialised (Samakova, 2021).

Returning to the third hypothesis of the study, according to which BRI-related language, as well as specific PRC terms and words interpreted by the PRC, are found to a limited extent in bilateral agreements and in the foreign policies and plans of other countries, it can be observed that in the case of Kyrgyzstan this hypothesis can only be partially verified. While the presence of Chinese-derived language is evident in bilateral documents, the same cannot be said for national documents.

3.3.3. Political mechanisms

The third dimension is that of mechanisms. As discussed above, the BRI involves a mix of bilateral and multilateral interactions. In line with this framework, China has used both channels in its relations with the Kyrgyz Republic. Regarding the development of bilateral relations between the two countries following Kyrgyzstan's accession to the BRI in 2013, two main trends are noteworthy. First, there has been an increase in official visits and meetings between the highest officials of both states. For example, in the 2021-2023 triennium alone, President Xi and President Japarov met three times (People's Daily, 2022b, 2022d, 2023b; 24.kg, 2022a, 2023, AKIPress, 2022b). This increase is significant when compared with another triennium before 2013, 2006-2008, when President Hu Jintao and President Bakiyev met only once (People's Daily, 2006; 24.kg, 2006). Compared to the frequency of these visits

[62] National Development Strategy of the Kyrgyz Republic (2018-2040). Retrieved from https://policy.thinkbluedata.com/sites/default/files/National Development Strategy of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2018-2040 (EN).pdf

before 2013, such as those occurring between 2006 and 2009 between then President Hu Jintao and President Bakiyev, which was only one (People's Daily, 2006; 24.kg, 2006), this increase is significant. The data itself is not surprising. As emphasised throughout this chapter, China and Kyrgyzstan have invested in closer bilateral relations, and a direct consequence of this is an increase in opportunities for official meetings.

But the second aspect is even more interesting. Since the BRI was launched a decade ago, there has been a significant increase in the number of meetings held at various levels. In particular, the role played by the Chinese ambassador to Kyrgyzstan, Du Dewen,[63] and his Kyrgyz counterpart in Beijing, Aktilek Musaeva,[64] has been characterised by a certain dynamism, according to both Chinese and Kyrgyz sources (People's Daily, 2023c, CCTV, 2023; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2023). To underline this dynamism, on October 9, 2023, President Japarov awarded Ambassador Du Dewen the 'State Order of Friendship' in the presence of Minister Li Baojie (People's Daily, 2023d).

Another figure whose meetings with Chinese counterparts have increased is the speaker of the Kyrgyz parliament. While meetings with this Kyrgyz state official have taken place before— in 2006, the then Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Assembly, Wu Bangguo, met with Parliament Speaker Sultanov, a meeting that was repeated the following year with then President Hu Jintao (People's Daily, 2006; Economic Daily, 2007), and between the vice-speakers of both parliaments in September 2009 (People's Daily, 2009). In March 2022, Talant Mametov met with Ambassador Du Dewen and, within a few days, held talks with Li Zhanshu, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, explicitly expressing the desire to strengthen exchanges and cooperation between the two

[63] Since 2013, these have been the Chinese ambassadors to Kyrgyzstan: Qi Dayu (from 2013 to 2016), Xiao Qinghua (from 2019 to 2019), and Du Dewen (from 2019 to present).
[64] Since 2013, these have been the Kyrgyz ambassadors to China: from 2013 to 2017 and again from 2019 to 2022, Kanayim Baktygulova, Azamat Usenov between 2017 and 2018, and Aktilek Musaeva from September 2022 to present. Retrieved from https://mfa.gov.kg/kg/dm/Embassy-of-the-Kyrgyz-Republic-in-the-Peoples-Republic-of-China/news/27559

countries' legislative bodies (Xinhua, 2022a, 2022b).[65] Similarly, there has been an increase in ties established between various administrative levels of the two countries. There have been numerous instances in recent years of delegations composed of local political leaders from different regions of Kyrgyzstan (Osh, Talas, Issyk-Kul, Chuy Oblast) visiting China to sign friendship agreements. For example, the twinning between Shanxi Province and Jalal-Abad Oblast, or between the cities of Chengdu and Bishkek (People's Daily, 2021c; Chengdu Daily, 2023).

In contrast to the increased intensity of bilateral relations between the two countries just described is the development of the Kyrgyz government's participation in the main event promoted under the BRI aegis, namely the Beijing Forum. In the first two editions of the forum in 2017 and 2019, Kyrgyzstan was represented by its highest office (President Atambayev in 2017 and President Jeenbekov in 2019) (AKIPress, 2017, 2019a). Significantly, however, President Japarov chose not to attend the third Forum held in October 2023 (AKIPress, 2023; Mardell, 2023; Ozat & Nelson, 2023).

From the perspective of multilateral relations, China has focused heavily on promoting the BRI by using an organisation that has been active in the region since 2001, namely the SCO. Prior to the SCO, in the 1990s, existing multilateral organisations were merely a means of maintaining strong ties with the Russian Federation (Yau, 2020b). In the late 1990s, the forerunner of the SCO, a mechanism known as the 'Shanghai Five', which initially focused exclusively on the issue of territorial disputes still existing between various countries, gradually shifted its attention to the fight against terrorism (see the establishment of an anti-terrorism centre in Bishkek) and represented an early form of multilateral cooperation between some Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan), China and Russia. On the basis of these experiences, and with the inclusion of Uzbekistan, the SCO emerged as a

[65] In this context, it is possible to cite as examples the meetings that took place in December 2022 between Vice Premier Hu Chunhua and President Japarov, and between the CPC Secretary in Xinjiang Ma Xingrui and Japarov himself in March 2023. Retrieved from https://www.gov.cn/guowuyuan/2022-12/09/content_5730991.htm; http://osh.china-consulate.gov.cn/zjsbwl/202309/t20230918_11144714.htm.

more ambitious organisation, immediately equipped with a more institutionalised structure, a statute, and a secretariat (Chung, 2004).

As indicated above, given that the BRI from the outset focused on using existing multilateral mechanisms, it is not surprising that in the early years— from 2013 to 2019— China looked to the SCO as a natural channel through which to promote its initiative (Nurgozhayeva, 2020). However, this Chinese ambition was soon complicated by several factors. First and foremost, the organisation became the main platform linking the BRI to another rival initiative promoted by Russia from 2015 onwards, namely the aforementioned EEU. Although the EEU has been scaled down in terms of both ambition and investment, its existence has helped to constrain China's autonomous moves in Central Asia by forcing a degree of coordination between Russian and Chinese approaches in the region. Moreover, the SCO is a multilateral forum that has undergone significant changes in recent years, also in terms of membership: in 2017, India and Pakistan joined the organisation, in 2023, Iran, and more recently, Belarus (in 2024).

In order to respond to these difficulties, China felt the need to create a new mechanism that would appear to be multilateral, but would in fact be identifiable as the sum of the bilateral relations between Beijing and the Central Asian countries (Muratalieva, 2023). Under these premises, the '5+1' mechanism (literally, the five Central Asian countries plus China) was born in 2020 and met for the first time online. The first meeting ended with the approval of 54 cooperation agreements and initiatives, the establishment of 19 mechanisms and platforms to plan regular meetings of ministers of economy and trade, agriculture, transport and education. Three years later, on 18-19 May 2023, the 'China-Central Asia Summit' (*Zhongguo – Zhong Ya fenghu* 中国—中亚峰会) was held in Xi'an, demonstrating the importance that China will henceforth attach to this mechanism to promote its interests in the region. The fact that the next meeting is already scheduled to take place in Kazakhstan in 2025 and that Beijing has

proposed to establish a secretariat for the assembly are examples in this direction (Leksyutina, 2024).

Recalling the fourth hypothesis of the study, according to which China has primarily used the bilateral channel through the BRI, while investing in the multilateral channel only in the case of Chinese-led organisations/formats, this hypothesis finds confirmation in the Kyrgyz case. Indeed, with increasing intensity after 2013, China has paid more and more attention to developing bilateral relations between the two countries (not only at the central level, but also by investing in strengthening ties between different administrative levels). At the same time, Beijing has for some years been trying to use a multilateral channel already active in the region. Over the years, however, China has shown a certain degree of difficulty in promoting its initiative within the SCO, a multilateral organisation that is not led exclusively by China. In response to these difficulties, in 2020 China has even created a format that is better able to convey its interests (the 5+1 format).

3.3.4. Political parties

The final dimension to consider is the evolution of political relations, specifically the ties that the CPC has established with political parties in Kyrgyzstan. As noted above, unlike other Central Asian countries characterised by autocratic systems, Kyrgyzstan is a multi-party republic (Zhu et al., 2013). Therefore, it is not surprising that the CPC has maintained relationships with various political parties over the years, some of which have been created and dissolved within the span of a single leader's political career. In 2008, for example, the then director of the CPC's International Department, Wang Jiarui, led a party delegation to Kyrgyzstan at the invitation of the People's Party of the Bright Path (PPBP) (a party founded by President Bakiyev that was active only from 2007 to 2010). During this visit, the Chinese delegate also engaged with parties with which China had already established more

consolidated contacts, namely the Communist Party of Kyrgyzstan (CPK) and the Social Democratic Party (SDP) (People's Daily, 2008, 2009).

In the post-BRI period, as the CPK is currently in a period of severe decline with limited influence in the politica arena (Lee, 2018), Beijing has shifted its focus to increasing opportunities for meetings and dialogue with all political parties in the country without focusing on specific political entities. For example, in July 2023, Chen Gang, a member of the CPC Central Committee and Secretary of the Qinghai Provincial Committee, led a CPC delegation to Kyrgyzstan from July 26 to 29, where he met with the leaders of the six political parties represented in the country's parliament.

The study's final hypothesis, that the BRI has only strengthened dialogue between the CPC and other national parties only where historical relations already existed, seems to have been confirmed in the case of Kyrgyzstan. Given the lack of particularly strong pre-existing relations in this context, and characterised by the creation and dissolution of parties within a few years, Beijing is currently still looking for a valid interlocutor in which to invest in the near future.

3.4. Discussion

On July 9, 2024, the Chinese state-controlled newspaper People's Daily published a twenty-minute documentary[66] on its official website, highlighting the importance and development of the BRI in Kyrgyzstan. In the video, Chinese Ambassador Du Dewen emphatically presents the supposedly significant achievements in the development of bilateral relations between the two countries and the positive contribution that Kyrgyzstan's accession to the BRI has made in this context. However, the analysis conducted in this chapter has revealed a more nuanced picture of these dynamics. First, the chapter illustrates how the key moments in the evolution

[66] Chinese ambassador to Kyrgyzstan: 'BRI is a road of cooperation, friendship, and prosperity'. Retrieved from http://en.people.cn/n3/2024/0709/c90000-20191409.html

of Sino-Kyrgyz relations have occurred within a broader and more complex political context. Although Kyrgyzstan has invested in closer ties with Beijing over the past two decades, with increasing intensity in the last decade, it has nevertheless retained a degree of autonomy and continued to maintain ties with Moscow.

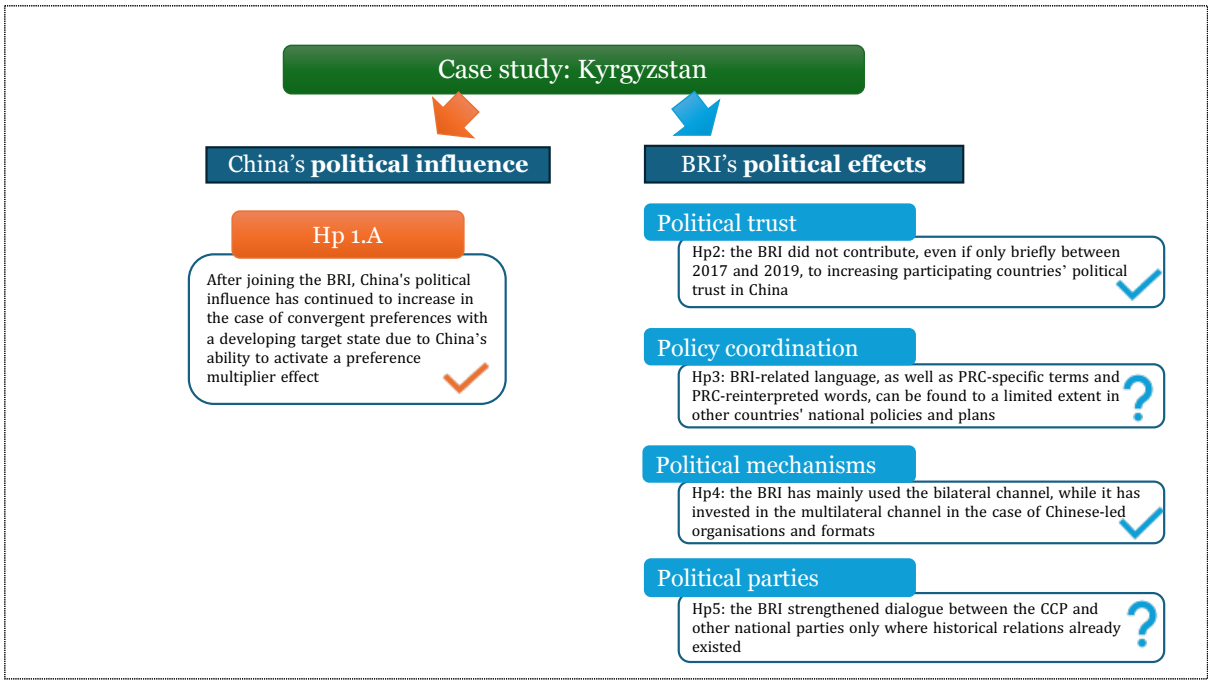
In terms of China's political influence exerted by China on Kyrgyzstan and its evolution over time, the analysis presented in this chapter confirms China's ability to activate the 'preference multiplier' in relation to countries with which it already has close relations. With regard to the Taiwan issue, Kyrgyzstan, has consistently adhered to the 'one China policy', a prerequisite for maintaining diplomatic relations with mainland China, despite various domestic crises. In the post-BRI period, more precisely from 2018 and with increasing intensity from 2023, some changes can be observed. For example, the documents show that adherence to the 'one China policy' is more often coupled with support for other visions typical of President Xi's political and foreign policy thinking (e.g., the community of shared destiny for mankind). In addition, Kyrgyz support for China's call for national reunification has become more explicit. Moreover, during Pelosi's visit to Taipei and on the occasion of the Taiwanese elections, the government publicly reaffirmed its closeness to Beijing on both occasions. Regarding the PRC's policy in Xinjiang, Kyrgyzstan's support has been consistently documented in all bilateral agreements signed between 2003 and 2013. In the years following Kyrgyzstan's entry into the BRI, Kyrgyzstan's support for the Xinjiang issue has remained unchanged, with the sole exception of the decision not to sign the letter addressed to the Human Rights Council.

Regarding the political effects of the BRI, the following can be concluded. Analysis of the cited studies suggests that Kyrgyzstan's political trust in China has steadily declining in the post-BRI period. Although some studies highlight a contrast between Sinophile political leaders and Sinophobic businessmen and citizens, the reality is that even pro-Western elites harbour a certain degree of distrust, but have chosen to align themselves with Beijing for economic and security reasons. Moreover, studies of university students' perceptions show that there is still

a tendency to perceive Russia, rather than China, as the most influential nation, while negative sentiments are associated with Beijing's growing political and military presence.

In terms of policies, it is evident that Chinese political language and propaganda has increasingly permeated the documents signed and statements made by political representatives of both countries. However, the same cannot be said about the presence and integration of Chinese language and BRI-related terminology in the foreign policy programmes adopted by the Bishkek government. In terms of mechanisms, it can be observed that in the post-BRI period, China has primarily invested in bilateral relations, especially in strengthening ties between various administrative levels of the two countries. On the multilateral front, while China has long relied on and used an existing organisation, the SCO, it has more recently felt the need to establish a multilateral format in which Beijing's leading role is more evident (the 5+1 format). Finally, it is worth noting that the CPC's relations with the numerous Kyrgyz parties were active long before the BRI. Since then, partly due to a significant decline in support for the Kyrgyz Communist Party, China seems to be still in an exploratory phase, assessing the possibility of further cooperation with various parties. Finally, Figure 6 summarises the main results of the analysis.

Figure 6: Summary of the application of the analytical framework to the case of Kyrgyzstan



Source: elaboration of the author

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Chapter 4. Evaluating political impacts in Djibouti: China's political influence and BRI's political effects

Based on the findings presented in the previous sections, this second empirical chapter analyses the case study of Djibouti and is divided into two main parts. The first aims to investigate whether China's political influence on Djibouti has increased since the country joined China's Belt and Road Initiative. In line with the analytical framework adopted earlier, the focus will be on understanding if and how Djiboutian behaviour towards China's strategic priorities has evolved or changed over the past decade. More specifically, the timeframe has been identified as follows: 2012-2023. Since Djibouti officially joined the Chinese initiative on September 2, 2018,[67] the chapter discusses the Djiboutian government's official positions on two of Beijing's strategic priorities— namely the Taiwan issue and Chinese policies in Xinjiang — in the six years prior to Djibouti's entry into the Belt and Road (2012-2017) and compares them with the positions expressed in the following six years (2018-2023).

The previously identified hypothesis (hypothesis H1.B) suggests that after joining the BRI, China's political influence has partially increased in the case of undecided preferences such as Djibouti's, thanks to China's ability to activate instruments of discursive persuasion and institutional modelling. Through a documentary and thematic analysis of 58 official documents (including treaties, memoranda of understanding, declarations, official speeches,

[67] Nedopil, C. (2023). Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative. Green Finance & Development Center, FISF Fudan University. Retrieved from: https://greenfdc.org/countries-of-the-belt-and-road-initiative-bri/.

interviews with the highest state officials) and a corpus of 188 online articles published by the Chinese[68] and Djiboutian press,[69] the chapter will confirm or refute this hypothesis.

The second part of the chapter examines the main political effects of the initiative during its six years of implementation (2018-2023) in Djibouti. Through the analysis of a heterogeneous corpus of sources, the study evaluates the four hypotheses related to the 'political effects' of the initiative in this specific context (Hp2, Hp3, Hp4, and Hp5). The sources include foreign policies adopted by Djiboutian governments over the last decade, agreements and documents signed following state visits and bilateral meetings, national surveys on perceptions of China among the Djiboutian elite and population, and articles in the Chinese and Djiboutian press on meetings and the development of relations between the two countries. A complete overview of all the sources consulted and collected for the discussion in this chapter can be found in the Appendix.

The chapter is structured as follows: the first section provides an overview of the evolution of Sino-Djiboutian relations from 2012 to 2023. The second section presents the results of the analysis of Chinese political influence before and after the BRI. The third section outlines the main 'political effects' of the initiative in Djibouti. Finally, the fourth section discusses the key findings that emerged from the analysis of this case study.

[68] For the Chinese press, this study carried out documentary research on the following three publications: People's Daily (*Renmin Ribao* 人民日报), Guangming Daily (*Guangming Ribao* 光明日报), Xinhua Daily Telegraph (*Xinhua Meiri Dianxunbao* 新华每日电讯报). This is supplemented by analysis of news published on the Xinhua News Agency website (*Xinhua Wang* 新华网) and, where relevant, other sources such as China Daily, local newspapers (e.g., Chengdu Daily *Chengdu Ribao* 成都日报), or sector-specific publications (Economic Daily *Jingji Ribao* 经济日报).

[69] For the Djiboutian press, the study, after a careful examination of active news outlets and press agencies in the country, the study identified the following: le Nation, one of the most widely read French-language newspapers in the country, جريدة القرن الجيبوتية Djibouti Al-Qarn Newspaper, an Arabic-language newspaper.

4.1. The evolution of Sino-Djiboutian relations (2012-2023)

Djibouti is a small country in the Horn of Africa with a population of approximately one million, which gained independence from France in 1977. However, France remained the dominant power in the country for the next two decades (Styan, 2013).[70] Djibouti's strategic position is evident: located at the entrance of the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Red Sea, a strait that controls any entry into the Red Sea and the Suez Canal from the Indian Ocean, and at the confluence of Africa, the Middle East, and the Indian Ocean, Djibouti has maintained a high value for all maritime nations (Cabestan, 2019).[71] Consequently, seaports are Djibouti's only valuable economic resource. Recent studies have also highlighted how Djibouti straddles the lanes of fibre optic cables that form the backbone of global telecommunications (Styan, 2020). Furthermore, in a region characterised by strong political instability (e.g., Somalia, Yemen, and Eritrea), with the exception of the civil war that affected the country between 1991 and 1994, Djibouti has experienced relative political stability under the multi-decade leadership of President Gouled first (in office from 1977 to 1999) and his successor Guelleh (in office from 1999 to the present) (Olika, 2018).

Over the past two decades, the evolution of Djibouti's foreign policy and its strategic choices have been strongly influenced by four key factors: i) the Ethiopian-Eritrean war of 1998-2000, ii) Ethiopia's rapid economic transformation, iii) the post 9/11 shift in US strategy in Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, and iv) the resurgence of piracy in the Gulf of Aden and along the Somali coasts (Styan, 2013; Zhao, 2018). In addition to these external factors, Djibouti faces a historical domestic vulnerability stemming from the marginalisation of the Afar ethnic group. Despite the coexistence of Somali Issas and Afar ethnic groups in Djibouti, access to state

[70] Two referendums were held in 1958 and 1967, both of which resulted in the desire to keep the territory remaining under French control. See Thompson, V., & Richard A. (1968). *Djibouti and the Horn of Africa*. Stanford: Stanford University Press; Dolley, M. (1987). *Djibouti. in Africa South of the Sahara*. London: Europa Publications.
[71] See Gresh, F. G. (2017). A vital maritime pinch point: China, the Bab al-Mandeb, and the Middle East. *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, 11*(1), 37-46.

power is not equally distributed between these ethnic groups (Olika, 2018).[72] Indeed, in the late 1990s, an Afar rebellion marked the last years of President Gouled's administration (Kebede, 2005). In terms of its relations with other countries in the Horn of Africa, Djibouti has strategic, albeit complex, relations with its neighbours. It has longstanding and close ties with Ethiopia, while relations with Eritrea have often been strained due to territorial disputes (Endo, 2022; Bereketeab, 2023).[73]

In its relations beyond the Horn of Africa, Djibouti continues to maintain cordial relations with France (Ambassade de France à Djibouti, 2021; 2024; Ministère des Affaires Étrangères du Djibouti, 2021). At the same time, Djibouti has for some time been developing extensive diplomatic relations well beyond the Francophone networks for some time. In the transition of leadership from President Gouled, who advocated for a cautious policy of 'multiple identities' based on pragmatism in international affairs, President Guelleh has shaped his foreign policy around activism and 'patronage-based' and 'personal diplomacy' (Olika, 2018, p.135-136). His relationships with various leaders, including those of Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Sudan, and Somalia, serve as examples of this approach (Kapteijns & Spears, 2022). As a result, Djibouti's power and influence are disproportionate to its small size and seemingly 'subordinate' role as a state (Zhao, 2018; Le Gouriellec, 2018a; Cobbett & Mason, 2021; Lawale & Ahmad, 2023). Its profile is further enhanced by the fact that Djibouti hosts the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), the regional body that links all the states in the Horn of Africa (Styan, 2013).

It is in the military sphere that this dynamic has produced the most significant results. Currently, Djibouti hosts military bases from France, the US, Japan, Germany, Italy, Spain,

[72] By custom, the presidency is held by a member of the Issas group, while the prime minister is chosen from among the leading political figures of Afar origin. This division is currently in place: President Guelleh is an Issas exponent, while Prime Minister Kamil Mohamed belongs to the Afar ethnic group.

[73] For a positioning of Djibouti during the Ethiopian-Eritrean war see Bereketeab, R. (2019). *The Ethiopia-Eritrea Rapprochement: Peace and Stability in the Horn of Africa*. Nordic Africa Institute Policy Note, 1, 1-4. Retrieved from https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1313153/FULLTEXT02.pdf

and China (Sun, 2017). Historically, there is nothing unusual about Djibouti's strategy of leasing land for foreign military bases (Cobbett & Mason, 2021). Although the French presence has decreased in recent years (1,450 personnel in 2019 compared to 4,300 in 1978), the defence cooperation treaty signed in 2011 guarantees France's commitment to the defence of its former overseas territory (Ferras, 2015). Moreover, Djibouti remains France's largest military base in Africa. Since 2002, the Americans have established their military base at Camp Lemonnier, and over the years, their deployment has evolved from a soft military presence to an asset of considerable strategic importance (with 4,000 personnel) (Lee, 2015; Sun & Zoubir, 2016; Shen, 2022). It is worth noting that to avoid risking support from the Arab world, Djibouti opposed the unilateral US military action against Iraq in 2003 so as not to risk support from the Arab world, while allowing the US and its allies to build military bases on its territory (Styan, 2013; Melese, 2022). In 2011, Japan also opened its only overseas military base since 1954 in Djibouti (Melvin, 2019). Furthermore, following the launch of the European Union's anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden (Operation Atalanta) in 2009, Italy established a small base (80 troops) in Djibouti, while Spanish and German soldiers from the EU anti-piracy force make frequent stopovers hosted by American facilities (Sun & Zoubir, 2020). Finally, in 2017, Saudi Arabia also signed an agreement to open its own military base on Djiboutian territory (Melvin, 2019).[74]

In this context, although China and Djibouti established diplomatic relations in 1979,[75] the Chinese economic presence developed slowly throughout the 1990s and early 2000s (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2002; Brautingam, 2009). The rapprochement was marked by President Guelleh's state visit to China in March 2001 and his participation in the Forum on FOCAC summit in Beijing in November 2006 (Xinhua Daily Telegraph, 2001; People's Daily, 2001, 2006; PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2001; 2006). Subsequently, and under the

[74] Arabian Gulf Business Insight (2024, 6 June). Saudi Arabia to set up logistics centre in Djibouti. Retrieved from https://www.agbi.com/trade/2024/06/saudi-arabia-to-set-up-logistics-centre-in-djibouti/

[75] The first president of the republic, Hassan Gouled Aptidon, made the first of three state visits to Beijing in 1979 (see Styan, 2020).

impetus of increasing involvement in the Ethiopian economy,[76] Chinese companies began to secure a greater number of infrastructure projects in Djibouti (Cabestan, 2012). However, China's economic presence in the country really took off after the Chinese navy (People's Liberation Army Navy – PLAN) began to participate in anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and thus became a regular presence in Djibouti. As Downs et al. note, the Chinese navy made more than 23 visits to Djibouti's ports between 2009 and 2013, becoming more familiar with the area (Downs et al., 2017).

As early as 2013, the Chinese National Defence University submitted a report to the Central Military Commission proposing the establishment of a military base in Djibouti, which was approved by Xi Jinping (Zhang, 2016). The timing of the report's approval coincides with the launch of the BRI, which has since projected a central role for the People's Liberation Army (PLA) in implementing the initiative in Djibouti (Wang, 2018). Shortly thereafter, in early 2014, Chinese Defence Minister Chang Wanquan and his Djiboutian counterpart signed a security and defence agreement (Xinhua, 2014). The decision was first made public by President Guelleh in May 2015, when he announced ongoing discussions to establish a Chinese base in the territory. The Chinese government confirmed this decision, albeit more discreetly, only in November 2015, shortly after the visit to Djibouti of PLA Chief of Staff General Fang Fenghui (Collins & Erickson, 2015). As noted above, the Chinese logistics base in Djibouti does not represent a sudden shift in China's African foreign policy; rather, the change has been gradual and tangible since the mid-2000s (Downs et al., 2017; Elmahly & Sun, 2018). Moreover, China's decision to establish a military base was motivated not only by its participation in anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden since December 2008 and an increasing number of UN peacekeeping operations, but also by Beijing's need to better protect its security interests in Africa, the Middle East, and the Indian Ocean (Yu, 2015; Le Gouriellec,

[76] One of the earliest examples is the infrastructure project launched in 2011 to rebuild the railway linking Djibouti with the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa (built by the French a century earlier). Completed in 2017, the project involved USD 3.4 billion of Chinese loans for the Ethiopian part and USD 514 million for the Djiboutian part.

2018b; Cabestan 2019; Sun & Zoubir, 2020). The growing body of analysis published by Chinese scholars on the importance and centrality of Djibouti serves as evidence of this strategic shift (Wang, 2015, 2017; Shen, 2015; Yang & Gao, 2018; Zhang, 2020).

An interesting point is that initially, immediately after the inauguration in August 2017, Chinese officials took great care to describe the Chinese military base as a 'logistics support facility' (*houqin baozhang sheshi* 后勤保障设施), 'support facility' (*baozhang sheshi* 保障设施), or even a 'dual-use facility' (*junmin liangyong sheshi* 军民两用设施) for both civilian and military purposes, to differentiate their project from those of other Western powers (Sun & Zhou, 2017). However, in a short period of time, this structure was quickly transformed into a full-fledged naval and military base capable of carrying out all kinds of missions (Cabestan 2019, p.16). As Styan notes in his study, China's naval presence reflects a double paradox. First, although Djibouti is a small state without material resources, its government was able to negotiate the construction of the naval facility by China (aided by previous experience acquired in negotiating other foreign military bases). Equally paradoxically, it was easier and less controversial at the international level for China to establish its first overseas military facility in close proximity to other major powers, rather than in a state that had never hosted foreign forces (Styan, 2020, p.3). In this regard, Wang has emphasised that the simultaneous presence of the US and China, although marked by competition, while characterized by competition, is also marked by some forms of cooperation (Wang, 2016, 2017).

Relations between the two countries were further strengthened following President Guelleh's second state visit, which coincided with the fifth FOCAC conference in July 2012 (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2012). On this occasion, a bilateral 'Joint Ministerial Commission' was established to deepen civil, maritime, and military ties. Under the aegis of this newly established commission, China has continued to invest in Djibouti with increasing intensity under the umbrella of the BRI (Melese, 2022). Moreover, in 2016, the two parties signed

important commercial agreements (Présidence de la République du Djibouti, 2016). Indeed, Chinese companies are indeed involved in the financing and construction of infrastructure projects such as the multi-purpose port of Doraleh (loan of 340 million),[77] the Ethiopia-Djibouti water pipeline (loan of 320 million), the port of Ghoubet (loan of 64 million) and the financing of the establishment of an international free trade zone in Djibouti (loan of 30 million), as well as airports, shopping centers, roads, and new ports (Elmahly & Sun, 2018; Ma, 2020; Fouad Ali, 2021; Carmody & Murphy, 2022; Yan & Mao, 2023; Doukari, 2023). On September 2, 2018, following a meeting between President Guelleh and President Xi Jinping, Djibouti officially announced its accession to the BRI (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018, Présidence de la République du Djibouti, 2018).[78] However, two other important aspects to highlight are that, in addition to investment, Chinese direct ownership of Djiboutian assets has increased over the years. As early as 2013, the state-owned China Merchants Group (CMG) acquired almost a quarter of the shares in the Djibouti port authority. In addition to infrastructure projects, the number of Chinese aid programmes in various sectors has also increased considerably. These include new educational facilities and scholarships, a state-of-the-art Diplomatic Institute for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a new military hospital, telecommunications, and military assistance (Styan, 2020; Rodenbiker, 2022).

4.2. China's political influence in Djibouti before (2012-2017) and after BRI (2018-2023)

After presenting the evolution and main features of Sino-Djiboutian relations, this section discusses the evolution of the Djiboutian government's positioning towards China's strategic priorities. According to the theoretical framework adopted in this study, phenomena of political influence manifest themselves when, following specific initiatives such as the BRI,

[77] For an in-depth study of the legal dispute between Dubai Ports and China Merchants Group over the Doraleh terminal see Barton, B. (2021). Agency and Autonomy in the Maritime Silk Road Initiative: An Examination of Djibouti's Doraleh Container Terminal Disputes. *The Chinese Journal of International Politics*, *14*(3), 353-380.
[78] A further evolution of relations took place in September 2024 when the two sides elevated their relationship to a 'comprehensive strategic partnership' (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024).

recipient countries change their positioning and behaviour to support of the interests of the country promoting such initiatives. In the case of China, it is useful to recall that the two strategic priorities identified in the second chapter were: positioning on the Taiwan issue and on Chinese policies adopted in the autonomous region of Xinjiang. As Djibouti's accession to the BRI took place on September 2, 2018, as mentioned above, the analysis considers the six years prior the adhesion (2012-2017) and the six years after (2018-2023). Section 4.2.1 provides an overview of the positioning adopted by the Djiboutian authorities in the 2012-2017 period, while the following section 4.2.2 explains what, if any, developments have taken place in the subsequent six-year period (2018-2024).

4.2.1. Djibouti's positioning toward China's strategic priorities before BRI

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations with the PRC in 1979, Djibouti has consistently adhered to the 'one China policy', refusing to recognise Taiwan as an independent state. This stance was reaffirmed through various diplomatic exchanges and joint statements during the period 2012-2017 (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2003, 2009, 2017; People's Daily, 2008, 2017). Long before joining the BRI, Djibouti had already adopted a favourable position towards this strategic priority of Beijing. In 2008, for example, President Guelleh publicly reaffirmed his government's firm commitment to the 'one China policy' (People's Daily, 2008). More recently, during his state visit to Beijing in November 2017, President Guelleh reaffirmed the mutual support between the two countries regarding their respective fundamental interests, including the Taiwan issue (People's Daily, 2017; Agence Djiboutienne d'Information, 2017).

With regard to the second strategic priority analysed in this section, Djibouti maintained a neutral position. Throughout the period examined (2012-2017), Djiboutian political representatives did not make public statements or take official positions on Xinjiang, nor was the issue mentioned in the signed joint documents (Styan, 2020). This neutrality confirms that

during the period under study, Djibouti refrained from expressing opinions on issues beyond the economic cooperation between the two countries in the Horn of Africa region.

4.2.2. Djibouti's positioning toward China's strategic priorities after BRI

After joining the BRI in September 2018, Djibouti's support for the 'one China' principle remained unchanged (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). Following US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan in August 2022, Djibouti's foreign minister issued a statement reaffirming the government's position and firm adherence to the 'one China' principle. The statement also expressed support for China's reunification efforts and opposition to any attempts to undermine China's sovereignty and territorial integrity (Ministère des Affaires Étrangères du Djibouti, 2022). In early 2024, the Ministry reiterated that, while Djibouti recognized the results of the elections held in Taiwan, it wished to reaffirm its support for Beijing (Ministère des Affaires Étrangères du Djibouti, 2024). This statement was echoed by the Chinese ambassador to Djibouti, Hu Bin (PRC Embassy in Djibouti, 2024).

In terms of Chinese policies in Xinjiang, Djibouti began to express its position on the issue after joining the BRI in September 2018. In international forums, Djiboutian officials echoed Beijing's narrative on counter-terrorism and the positive impact of economic development policies in the region (Chaziza, 2018). In July 2019, Djibouti was one of fifty countries to sign a letter addressed to the UNHRC defending China's treatment of Uyghurs and other Muslim minorities in Xinjiang (UNHRC, 2019). However, the issue remains unmentioned in bilateral statements and documents. It is important to note that while Djibouti's support on the issue has become more explicit, it remains cautious, balancing its growing relationship with China with its ties to Western partners.

By analysing the evolution of Djibouti's positioning on two key strategic priorities for China in the pre-BRI (2012-2017) and post-BRI (2018-2023) periods, it is possible to confirm

hypothesis H1.B. Djibouti's position on the Taiwan issue has not been significantly altered by its participation in the BRI, but rather has continued to follow its pre-existing diplomatic trajectory of firm adherence to the 'one China policy'. Conversely, China's political influence has partially increased on the issue of Chinese policies in the Xinjiang region, on which Djibouti had no preference before joining the BRI. This confirms that China is able to activate its capacity for discursive persuasion and institutional modelling towards some BRI target states. After 2018, and following the publication of the Xinjiang papers in 2019, Djibouti adopted a supportive position towards China and expressed itself in international contexts in defence of this national interest of Beijing.

4.3. BRI's main political effects in Djibouti

4.3.1. Political trust

Perceptions of China among Djiboutian elites and public opinion have evolved significantly since the country joined the BRI. Among political and economic elites, China is generally viewed positively as a key development partner and source of infrastructure investment necessary for the country's development (Styan, 2020; Vertin, 2020). Various Djiboutian government officials, from the Minister of Foreign Affairs to the Minister of Economy and the Speaker of the National Assembly, have on numerous occasions praised China's positive role in economic growth and in supporting Djibouti's modernisation efforts (Xinhua, 2019; Agence Djiboutienne d'Information, 2023; People's Daily, 2024). These accolades are complemented by the positive sentiments typically expresses by President Guelleh himself when referring to his Chinese counterpart (People's Daily, 2019, 2020; Xinhua, 2022).

However, broader public sentiment paints a more nuanced picture. While many Djiboutians appreciate the visible improvements in infrastructure and the economic opportunities brought by Chinese investment, they also have concerns about issues such as debt sustainability, labour practices, and cultural differences (Ursu & van den Berg, 2018). Surveys published by

Afrobarometer[79] in 2019-2020 suggest that China has a more positive reputation in Africa than in other regions of the world, with 63% of Africans surveyed in 34 countries believing that China is a positive external influence. However, only 22% see China as a model to emulate for their country's development in the near future. Moreover, approval of the Chinese model has declined compared to the percentages recorded in the same surveys conducted in 2014-2015 (Afrobarometer, 2019-2020). The 2019-2020 surveys also show that 54% of Djiboutians consider China's economic and political influence to be positive, a figure that indicates that a significant proportion, around half, of the population has reservations and concerns about Beijing (Sanny & Selormey, 2021).

In light of the evidence presented, and recalling the study's second hypothesis that BRI membership, except for a short period coinciding with the years 2017-2019, did not contribute to increasing the political trust of the participating countries towards China, nor did it improve mutual understanding, this hypothesis is partially confirmed for the case of Djibouti. The country's elite and ruling class have indeed developed an increasingly favourable sentiments towards Beijing, while the same cannot be said for the broader public opinion.

4.3.2. Policy coordination

The second aspect identified in relation to the political ambitions inherent in the BRI is policy coordination. An analysis of the limited number of bilateral documents signed between the two countries since Djibouti's accession to the Chinese initiative does not reveal an evolution in language favouring terms and expressions characteristic of Chinese foreign policy and the Xi era (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018, 2019a; Présidence de la République du Djibouti, 2018, 2023). In fact, not all documents are publicly available, including those signed on the

[79] Afrobarometer is an independent, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues across Africa. Founded in 1999, it is a pan-African, non-profit organization that measures public attitudes on social, political, and economic issues in African countries. Since 2016 Afrobarometer surveys are conducted through face-to-face interviews with a random sample of adult citizens in each country, typically every 2-3 years. Official website: https://www.afrobarometer.org/

occasion of Djibouti's accession to the BRI. Nevertheless, in the statements published after numerous bilateral meetings between the highest state officials, both parties indicate an evolution in their relations without any linguistic contamination (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019b, 2020, 2022).

Another aspect worth considering is whether the Chinese-origin language has permeated the documents adopted by the Djiboutian government following its entry into the BRI. As early as 2014, the government of Djibouti had equipped itself with its own long-term national foreign policy strategy called 'Djibouti 2035 vision' (Ministère de l'Economie du Djibouti, 2014). This development strategy envisages large investments in various infrastructure projects to expand transport capacity and transform the country into a regional hub for East Africa, similar to Dubai and Singapore (Elmahly & Sun, 2018; McCabe, 2019). Although, as noted above, the 'Djibouti 2035 vision' strategy predates the BRI, it is useful to consider that it shares some fundamental objectives, such as better connecting the Horn of Africa region to global markets (Styan, 2020). However, an examination of the documents published in relation to the implementation of the 'Djibouti 2035 vision' does not reveal any form of contamination by the BRI.

Recalling the third hypothesis of the research, according to which the language related to the BRI, as well as the terms coined by the PRC, are found to a limited extent in bilateral agreements and foreign policy doctrines of another country, it can be concluded that this hypothesis is verified for the case examined in this chapter.

4.3.3. Political mechanisms

Since joining the BRI, China has significantly expanded and deepened its relations with Djibouti through both bilateral and multilateral channels. At the bilateral level, high-level visits between Chinese and Djiboutian officials have increased in frequency and importance.

These include state visits by President Xi, the Premier, and Vice Premiers, as well as the organisation of ministerial-level meetings and joint committees focusing on economic cooperation and strategic partnership between the two countries (Le Nation, 2019a, 2019c, 2020a; People's Daily, 2019, 2020, 2023b; Xinhua, 2022; Styan, 2020; Djibouti Al-Qarn Newspaper, 2021b, 2022, 2023). At the same time, China has also invested in increasing its permanent diplomatic presence in Djibouti (Vertin, 2020).

At the multilateral level, China has focused on promoting the BRI through various organisations operating in the African context and the Horn of Africa region: the African Union (AU) in the former case and the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) in the latter. Over the years, China has made considerable efforts to create synergies between the BRI and the AU's Agenda 2063 (Raza & Khan, 2024). However, Beijing has been much more assertive in its use of two other multilateral channels in which Djibouti participates: the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (*Zhong Fei hezuo luntan* 中非合作论坛), also known as FOCAC, and the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (*Zhongguo Alabo guojia hezuo luntan* 中国－阿拉伯国家合作论坛), known as CASCF. Both are ad hoc mechanisms created by Beijing to cultivate its relations with several states— African states in the first case, and Arab states in the second.[80] These forums are closely linked to the implementation of the BRI, and the Djiboutian authorities and President Guelleh have become increasingly active participants, publicly demonstrating their support for China and its international programmes (La Nation, 2019d, 2020b, 2022b; Présidence de la République du Djibouti, 2023; Djibouti Al-Qarn Newspaper, 2021a, 2021c).

[80] Established in 2000, FOCAC brings together all 53 African states with the exception of Eswatini, which is the only African state that continues to recognise Taiwan instead of the PRC. On the other hand, the CASCF, established in 2004, was created to promote dialogue and cooperation between China and the member countries of the Arab League. Besides Djibouti, the countries that are members of both FOCAC and CASCF are: Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Somalia, Sudan and Tunisia.

Returning to the study's fourth hypothesis, which states that through the BRI, China has been able to primarily use the bilateral channel, while investing in the multilateral channel only in the case of Chinese-led organisations/formats such as FOCAC and CASCF, this hypothesis is confirmed for the case of Djibouti.

4.3.4. Political parties

The evolution of relations between the CPC and Djiboutian political parties is a crucial aspect to examine. Prior to the BRI, interactions were limited and largely ceremonial, as evidenced by visits by the CPC's International Department in 2013 (PRC Embassy in Djibouti, 2007; People's Daily, 2009; International Department CPC, 2013a, 2013b; China-Africa Friendly Economic and Trade Development Foundation, 2013; Dai, 2017). Following Djibouti's participation in the BRI, there has been a notable change in the frequency and nature of meetings and exchanges between the CPC and active political parties in Djibouti (Cabestan, 2022). This shift, however, is primarily observed in relation to a single political party: the People's Rally for Progress (*Rassemblement Populaire pour le Progrès*, RPP), which has dominated the country's political landscape since 1979. The RPP was the party of former President Gouled and is now the party of President Guelleh and currently holds 58 out of 65 seats in parliament, despite the country's adoption of a multi-party system by referendum in 1992.[81]

In reality, the relationship between the CPC and the RPP, while not driven by ideological affinities, has much deeper roots stemming from the fact that this party has been firmly in power for more than four decades (International Department CPC, 2024; Agence Djiboutienne d'Information, 2024). Recently, an increasing number of Chinese interlocutors have been present at RPP meetings, such as the extraordinary congress held on to the occasion

[81] A constitutional referendum was held in Djibouti on 4 September 1992. The new constitution would restore multi-party democracy for the first time since independence. The first multi-party elections were held in December that year. Retrieved from https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Djibouti_2010.pdf?lang=en

of the 40th anniversary of the party's founding (La Nation, 2019b; Présidence de la Republique du Djibouti, 2019; International Department CPC, 2019). Between 2022 and 2023, the two parties also organised two joint working sessions. In 2022, the Chinese ambassador to Djibouti, Hu Bin, organised a series of lectures for RPP cadres on the history of the CPC to celebrate the recent 20th Party Congress in Beijing (PRC Embassy in Djibouti, 2022; La Nation, 2022a). In 2023, a working meeting was held between the two parties to discuss ideological issues and develop future cooperation (International Department CPC, 2023; La Nation, 2023; People's Daily, 2023a). Finally, while there has been an evolution in relations with the RPP, the same cannot be said for the CPC's interactions with the few and relatively insignificant opposition parties present in Djibouti. Moreover, opposition parties have expressed concern about the possible adoption of more authoritarian practices by the RPP, inspired by the CPC model.

With regard to the study's final hypothesis, which posits that the BRI has strengthened dialogue between the CPC and other national parties where historical relations already existed, this appears to be confirmed in the case of Djibouti, particularly in relation to the development of relations between the CPC and Guelleh's RPP in recent years.

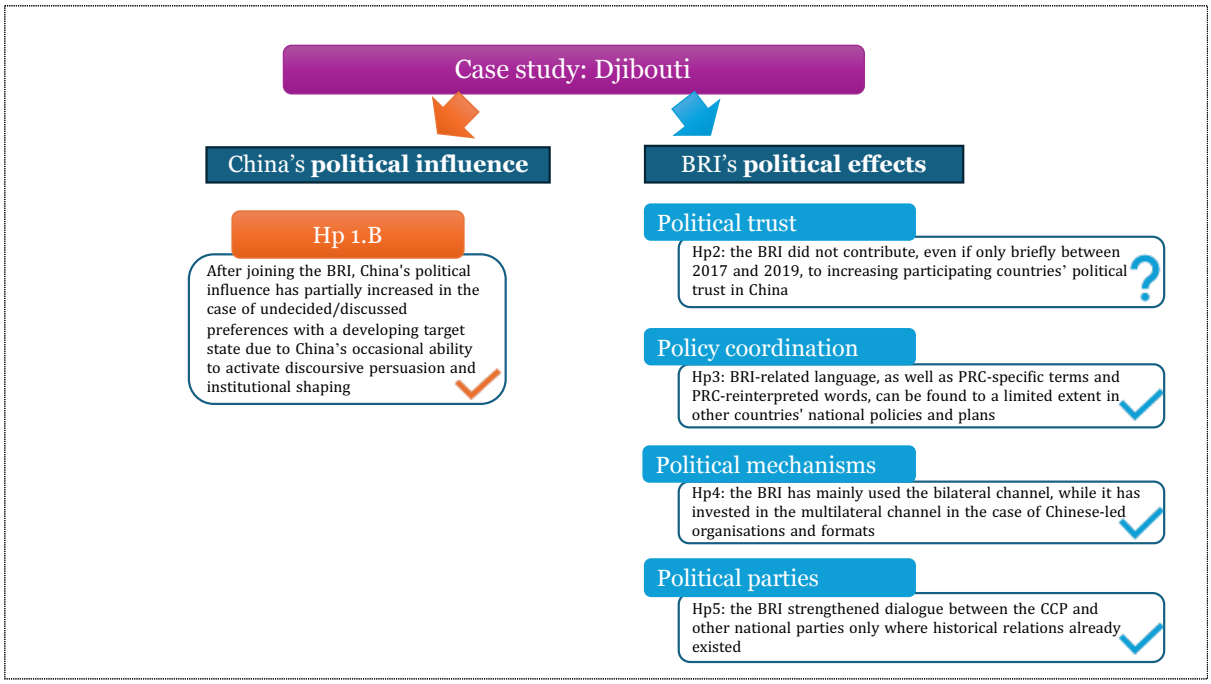
4.4. Discussion

The analysis in this chapter has highlighted several features of the political impact that the BRI has had on Djibouti since its official accession in September 2018. First, the chapter has synthesised the evolution of bilateral relations between the two countries, highlighting that at this historic juncture, both parties are investing considerable energy in fostering closer ties. In terms of political influence, compared to the pre-BRI period (2012-2017), Djibouti has not changed its stance on the Taiwan issue - already in favour of this Chinese strategic priority and supportive of the 'one China' policy. However, it has moved from silence on Chinese policy in Xinjiang to explicit support for Beijing on this issue, including in multilateral contexts (e.g. UNHRC).

In terms of the outcomes of the initiative in Djibouti, the study has shown that during the period of BRI participation (2018-2023), the country has not seen an increase in public trust towards China, although it has reinforced the already positive opinion of political elites, starting with President Guelleh. In terms of policy coordination, the study highlighted that since joining the BRI, there has been no mixing of typical Chinese foreign policy language in documents signed by both parties. Moreover, while there has been some alignment between the BRI and Djibouti's long-term 'Djibouti 2035 Vision' strategy— as they share some basic principles - there has been no actual contamination between the two.

In terms of mechanisms, it is clear that China has invested primarily in developing the bilateral channel - as evidenced by the increase in high-level diplomatic interactions between the two countries and frequent state visits and ministerial meetings - while at the same time favouring and exploiting the use of clearly Chinese-led multilateral channels, such as FOCAC and CASCF. Finally, in terms of the evolution of political party relations, there has been a significant deepening of relations between the CPC and President Guelleh's RPP party. Figure 7 summarises the main findings of the analysis.

Figure 7: Summary of the application of the analytical framework to the case of Djibouti



Source: elaboration of the author

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Chapter 5. Evaluating political impacts in Italy: China's political influence and BRI's political effects

This final empirical chapter examines the case of Italy. As with the previous two cases, Kyrgyzstan and Djibouti, this chapter is divided into two main sections. The first section aims to understand if and how China's political influence on Italy has changed in recent years. Given that Italy officially joined the BRI following the signing of the memorandum by the Conte I government in March 2019, the chapter compares the Italian government's official positions on two of Beijing's strategic priorities– namely the Taiwan issue and China's policies in Xinjiang – in the five years prior to Italy's entry into the Belt and Road (2014-2018) with the positions expressed in the following five years (2019-2023). It is worth noting that this periodisation corresponds to Italy's decision to withdraw from the initiative, the first country in the world to opt for this solution, which was communicated to the Chinese counterpart in December 2023.

The hypothesis formulated in previous chapters (hypothesis H1.C) suggests that China's political influence on Italy has not increased after joining the BRI. This is due to the fact that Italy's preferences do not always coincide with those of China and that China has a limited capacity to exert influence, known as 'power to prevail.' Through a documentary and thematic analysis conducted of 81 official documents (agreements, memoranda of understanding, official statements, speeches by presidents, prime ministers and foreign ministers, triennial

action plans) and a corpus of 139 articles published in the Chinese[82] and Italian press,[83] the chapter aims to test this hypothesis.

In the second part of the chapter, the main political outcomes recorded in Italy during the five years of BRI implementation (2019-2023) are analysed. The study therefore focuses on the four hypotheses (Hp2, Hp3, Hp4, Hp5) related to the 'political effects' of the initiative. Each hypothesis is examined in turn, highlighting the main evidence that emerged from the analysis of various sources, including national surveys on the perception of China in Italy among both the ruling class and the general population, agreements and documents signed following bilateral meetings between the two countries, national foreign policies measures adopted by Italy, and articles published in the Italian and Chinese press on the development of relations between the two countries. A complete list of all the sources consulted and collected for the discussion in this chapter can be found in the Appendix.

The structure of this fifth chapter is articulated as follows: paragraph 5.1 provides an overview of the evolution of relations between Italy and China over the last decade (2014-2023). The following paragraph 5.2 presents the main findings that emerged from the analysis of Italy's positioning in relation to China's strategic priorities before and after its entry into the Belt and Road. Section 5.3 discusses the main 'political effects' of the initiative in the Italian context. Finally, section 5.4 summarises the main points that emerged from the treatment of this case study.

[82] For the Chinese press, this study carried out documentary research on the following three publications: People's Daily (*Renmin Ribao* 人民日报), Guangming Daily (*Guangming Ribao* 光明日报), Xinhua Daily Telegraph (*Xinhua Meiri Dianxunbao* 新华每日电讯报). This is supplemented by analysis of news published on the Xinhua News Agency website (*Xinhua Wang* 新华网) and, where relevant, other sources such as China Daily.

[83] For the Italian press, in order to take into account sources with different political orientations, the following seven newspapers were examined: Corriere della Sera, la Repubblica, la Stampa, il Sole24ore, il Manifesto, il Giornale, and il Foglio. In addition, news published on the ANSA news agency website and in-depth articles published by the online newspapers Formiche.net and il Post were also included.

5.1. The evolution of Sino-Italian relations (2014-2023)

The yellow-green government led by Giuseppe Conte (formed by a coalition between the Five Star Movement and the Northern League, in office from June 2018 to September 2019) has often been described in the Italian press as responsible for reorienting Italian foreign policy towards China and away from traditional European and Atlantic alliances (Formiche.net, 2019; il Manifesto, 2019a; il Post, 2019a; il Giornale, 2020b). However, the process of gradual rapprochement between Italy and China has deeper roots, well before this government's term. As early as 2004, Italy and China signed a comprehensive strategic partnership agreement (*quanmian zhanlüe huoban guanxi* 全面战略伙伴关系) to upgrade their bilateral relations (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2004; Coralluzzo, 2008).[84] While Men & Jiang note that in the years following this signing there were moments of friction due to ideological differences and divergent interpretations of economic issues between the two countries (Sisci, 2009), the establishment of permanent and structured dialogue channels has been an effective method of managing these differences (Men & Jiang, 2020, 2021). These mechanisms include, for example, the Italy-China Governmental Committee, which was established in 2004 and is still active today (Comitato Governativo Italia-Cina, 2013, 2016, 2017, 2019, 2020; Boni, 2022, p. 746).

The need for greater cooperation between Italy and China took on new significance with the onset of the 2008-2009 economic crisis. During this period, Italy began to see China as a potential source of investment (with the partial exception of the Berlusconi government between 2008 and 2011, on which see Diodato & Niglia, 2019). This is evident from the speeches made during President Hu Jintao's visit to Italy in July 2009 (Guangming Daily,

[84] In 2004, a few months after the signing of the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, the then President of the Italian Republic, Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, paid a five-day state visit to China (from December 4 to 9) during which he met with PRC President Hu Jintao and Prime Minister Wen Jiabao. Further details of the state visit are available at the following link:
http://presidenti.quirinale.it/Ciampi/dinamico/ContinuaCiampi.aspx?tipo=visita&key=26027.
This is the speech delivered by Ciampi at the conclusion of the meeting with Chinese President Hu Jintao. Retrieved from: https://presidenti.quirinale.it/elementi/183258.

2009; Xinhua, 2009; la Stampa, 2009), which motivated Prime Minister Monti's participation in the Boao Forum for Asia in China in April 2012 during his Asian tour[85] (Talia, 2012; Men & Jiang, 2021, p. 401) and pushed for Italy's accession to the AIIB in 2015 (Gabusi, 2019). Subsequent governments led by Matteo Renzi (2014-2018) and Paolo Gentiloni (2016-2018), both members of the Democratic Party (PD), continued along this path. Notably, the Renzi administration was responsible for two significant moments in the development of Rome-Beijing relations in just two years: the first corresponds to the signing of a Three-Year Action Plan (2014-2016) to strengthen economic cooperation between the two countries (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014a) at the end of a state visit to China in June 2014, which received considerable media coverage in the Chinese press (Xinhua, 2014a; People's Daily, 2014; for a detailed analysis of this aspect, see Dossi, 2014) and, among other things, established the Italy-China Business Forum. The second moment corresponds to the Joint Declaration signed by Renzi and Premier Li Keqiang during the latter's visit to Rome in October 2014, in which both parties expressed their willingness to deepen cooperation in various sectors (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014b; Presidenza del Consiglio, 2014; Xinhua, 2014b).[86] Interestingly, the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative was first mentioned by China two years later in documents related to official meetings with Italy, in the context of the meeting between Prime Minister Renzi and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi in Rome in May 2016 (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016a; China Daily, 2016).[87]

[85] Between March and April 2012, Prime Minister Mario Monti paid state visits to four Asian countries– China, South Korea, Japan, and Kazakhstan– with the aim of promoting a new image of Italy around the world.

[86] As evidenced by the joint statement signed by the parties during the bilateral visit, Prime Minister Li Keqiang was received by the President of the Republic, Napolitano, and the Presidents of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, Boldrini and Grasso respectively (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014b).

[87] Furthermore, a few weeks before tendering his resignation due to the failure of the constitutional referendum he had promoted, on November 17, 2016, Renzi met again with President Xi Jinping in Sardinia (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016b; Xinhua, 2016; ANSA, 2016). It is worth noting that Renzi's resignation was perceived in China as a genuine shock. On this, see Sun, Y. (2017). *Gongtou hou Yidali zhengju zouxiang ji dui Ouzhou de yingxiang* [The direction of Italy's political situation after the referendum and the implications for Europe]. *Contemporary World*, no.1, 61-64.

For his part, Paolo Gentiloni, the successor at the helm of the Italian government, personally attended the first BRI Forum in Beijing in May 2017 (Xinhua Daily Telegraph, 2017; il Sole24Ore, 2017a; Andornino, 2021, p. 92) and, in the same period, signed a subsequent three-year action plan 2017-2020 between the two countries (Guangming Daily, 2017; PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017). Another notable event during the same period was the state visit of the President of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella, in February 2017 (la Repubblica, 2017; il Sole24 Ore, 2017b; Xinhua, 2017). The packed agenda– which included various meetings not only with President Xi and Prime Minister Li Keqiang, but also with the Chairman of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, the Mayor of Shanghai Municipality, and the CPC Secretary of Chongqing Municipality (Quirinale, 2017)– and the tone expressed in official speeches and statements conveyed an "Italian interest in the Belt & Road Initiative, to which Italy expressed readiness to contribute even in dimensions beyond the strictly economic and commercial sphere" (Ambasciata d'Italia a Pechino, 2017).

In light of the framework outlined above, the activism towards China attributed exclusively to the yellow-green government since its inauguration in June 2018 cannot be interpreted as a break with the past. Rather, it should be seen as the culmination or high point of the rapprochement between Italy and China, in continuity with the positions and efforts of the last two decades (Dossi, 2020; Pugliese, 2020; Andornino, 2021, 2023). Moreover, even in the case of the rapprochement sought by the Five Star Movement (M5S) and the Northern League (LN) alliance, the underlying Italian motivations remain economic. The populist-leaning government, which is particulalrly Eurosceptic on issues such as austerity and the management of migration flows, needed alternative solutions to finance the projects on which both parties had built their electoral consensus (namely, the minimum income for the M5S and the flat tax for the LN). China, with its strong economic performance, was in their eyes the perfect partner to implement this plan (il Manifesto, 2019b). The most striking aspect of this phase is the timing with which Italy and China, within a few months, elevated their relationship, culminating in the signing of a strengthened global strategic partnership and a

MoU for Italy's adherence to the BRI (Presidenza del Consiglio, 2019a, 2019b; PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019a; Guangming Daily, 2019a).[88] It is also significant that the date of Italy's signature coincided with those of a European Council meeting convened to discuss a common European approach to China (Casarini, 2019, p. 60).

Scholars agree that the acceleration is at least partly attributable to the dynamism adopted by one of the two governing parties, the M5S, and some of its representatives, on the China dossier (Diodato, 2022; Pugliese et al., 2022). The frequent trips to China by the then Minister of Economic Development, Di Maio, are often cited as an example (il Corriere della Sera, 2018a, 2018b, 2019b). In this context, however, it is useful to broaden the perspective to understand not only the Italian motivations underlying the rapprochement of 2018-2019, but also the Chinese ones. Synthesising both, Andornino suggests interpreting Italy's adherence to the BRI in terms of a status concession by Italy in favour of the People's Republic, in exchange for agency in areas where Italy needs it– namely trade, infrastructure, and more frequent and deeper bilateral political interactions (Andornino, 2020, p.11). In terms of timing, therefore, it is not surprising that China exerted pressure for the signing of Italy's accession to the BRI to take place in March 2019, a few months before the European elections scheduled for May that year.

The main studies published after Italy's adherence to the Belt and Road Initiative in March 2019 immediately highlighted the main motivations underlying this choice (Casarini, 2019; Dossi, 2020; Pugliese, 2020; Pugliese et al., 2022). Among these, the principal reason remains, as already outlined, the economic opportunity for investment at a time of particular pressure on the Italian budget and finances (Casarini, 2019, p. 2). This is also reiterated by Prime Minister Conte in a Senate hearing in March 2019, when he states that "the perimeter of the

[88] On March 23, 2019, Chinese President Xi Jinping engaged throughout the day with several key figures of the Italian system, including the President of the Republic Mattarella, Prime Minister Conte, and the Presidents of the Chamber of Deputies and Senate, Fico and Casellati (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2019e).

MoU on the BRI is purely economic (...) and does not imply a rethinking of our [Italy's] Euro-Atlantic posture" (Camera dei Deputati, 2019). However, from the outset, the core of the Italian motivation shows limitations when compared to the great political value that the Chinese leadership, and more generally Chinese analysts, express after this signature, the first of a G7 country (Zeng et al., 2019; Sun, 2019a, 2019b; Zhao & Zhang, 2019; Lou, 2019). Indeed, one of the aspects cited as critical of the Italian decision is that decision-makers in Rome pursued the signature by underestimating the extent of the growing tensions between China and the US (Pugliese, 2020).

Over time, studies have also downplayed the importance that the populism, one of the ley elements of the yelow-green alliance, appears to have played in this decision. As Coticchia (2021) observes, the sovereignist and Eurosceptic foreign policy invoked by both parties turned out to be more symbolic and rhetorical than substantive (Coticchia, 2021, p. 740). In other words, Italy's adherence to the BRI was a 'political marketing' move through which the yellow-green government used the brand of the Chinese initiative to repackage the commitment that its predecessors had already conveyed in cultivating relations with China (Pugliese et al., 2022, p. 1039). On this point, Jakimów et al. note that although the impact of populism is not direct, in the Italian case it seems to be mediated by three interrelated variables, namely substantive ideology, economic pragmatism, and international positioning (Jakimów et al., 2024). In this context, it is also useful to recall the role of the President of the Republic as a guarantor of the alliance system yo which Italy belongs (Giurlando, 2021).

Conversely, the element that stands out more in the yellow-green experience is the fact that the two coalition parties were not equally involved and did not express the same position as regards commercial relations with China. On the one hand, the M5S, a party in its first government experience that had to 'invent' its own foreign policy (Diodato, 2022), seems to have opted to give more space to the activism, not always coordinated, of some individual exponents, which led in a short time to the adoption of a pro-China stance (for an in-depth

analysis of the M5S's foreign policy, see also Coticchia & Vignoli, 2021). Di Maio primarily, but various sources agree in citing the then Minister of Economy Tria as another key figure in the signing of the MoU (Il Sole24Ore, 2018; il Corriere della Sera, 2018c). Some authors have also highlighted that the adotion of this stance by the M5S actually reflects a favourable positioning towards Chinese investment opportunities taken by a part of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the diplomatic corps (Pugliese et al., 2022, p. 1040-1041). On the other hand, the LN led by Salvini immediately showed less committment and some doubts about the possibility of Italian participation in the BRI, also in the light of its traditional allegiance to the Atlantic camp (Dossi, 2020). Nevertheless, the League's calculation seems to have accepted to take a step back– with the exception of the activities of Undersecretary Geraci aimed at obtaining trade agreements for the benefit of the LN's electorate (Guangming Daily, 2018) – in exchange for M5S support on the migration dossier, a priority for Salvini.

The subsequent Conte government, the so-called yellow-red coalition in power from September 2019 to February 2021, did not significantly alter Italy's stance towards China. Di Maio, transitioning from Minister of Economic Development to Minister of Foreign Affairs, visited China in November 2019 to meet with his counterpart and the Minister of Commerce. The aim was to follow up on previous agreements and organise events commemorating the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries (Ministero degli Affari Esteri, 2019a, 2019b). Shortly after this meeting, the world came to a standstill due to the COVID-19 pandemic. China and Italy, as the first two countries to be severely affected by the pandemic, kept diplomatic channels open (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2020; PRC Embassy in Italy, 2020; Ministero degli Affari Esteri, 2020a, 2020b) and beyond. However, as Maracchione et al. suggest, and as evidenced by articles published in the Italian press, the Italian public opinion on Chinese assistance shifted from initially positive tones to increasingly critical as the pandemic progressed (Maracchione et al., 2023; il Giornale, 2020a; la Repubblica, 2020; ANSA, 2020; Formiche.net, 2020a; il Manifesto, 2020).

In addition, other events during this period contributed to a negative shift in opinion towards China. First, with the departure pf the Northern League from the governing coalition, which mitigated populist and anti-European tendencies, the Conte II government moderated its tone in favour of a more productive relationship with the EU (Ministero degli Affari Esteri, 2020c). The negotiation of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) in the context of the Next Generation EU exemplifies this shift (Pugliese, 2020, p. 76). Furthermore, images of the protests that erupted in Hong Kong following Beijing's imposition of the National Security Law contributed to fostering an increasingly cold and distant Italian sentiment. In this regard, the Senate's decision to host pro-democracy activist Joshua Wong via video conference is noteworthy (Radio Radicale, 2019).[89] China's immediate reaction was to define the event as 'a serious mistake and irresponsible behaviour' on the part of Italy (PRC Embassy in Italy, 2019).

At the same time, the main motivation that had led Italy to embark on a long path of rapprochement with China since 2004, based on double-digit Chinese economic growth, faded with the setback experienced by the Chinese economy since the outbreak of the pandemic (which would last until at least the beginning of 2023). Finally, these various factors should be interpreted in the light of changing circumstances in the international context. On the one hand, growing tensions between China and the United States made it increasingly difficult for Italy to defend its position close to Beijing (Dossi, 2020, p. 71). On the other hand, the European approach that simultaneously identified China as a partner for cooperation and negotiation, an economic competitor, and a systemic rival, although approved the previous year, seemed to bear its first fruits during this phase (European Commission, 2019).[90]

[89] Representatives from various parties, including the League, Forza Italia, Democratic Party, and Brothers of Italy, were present at the event organized by Brothers of Italy and the Global Committee for the Rule of Law 'Marco Pannella' and the Nonviolent Radical Party Transnational Transparty. The Five Star Movement was the only major party absent (il Post, 2019b).

[90] In December 2021, the European Commission and the EU High Representative also presented the 'Global Gateway' project, which in many respects is antithetical to the BRI and provides a framework for the Union's action in the field of infrastructure investments. Retrieved from https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/global-gateway_en.

In the transition from the Conte II government to the 'government of national responsibility' led by Draghi in February 2021, the government responded to these changes by adopting a position more in line with traditional European and Atlantic alliances (il Post, 2021; Formiche.net, 2022). This change of course was evident in the Prime Minister's inaugural speech to the Senate of the Republic (Senato della Repubblica, 2021b). In addition, two aspects are worth noting. First, while Di Maio, whose activism towards China was previously emphasised, remained at the helm of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, he seemed to adopt a more distant and cautious attitude during this phase (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021; Ministero degli Affari Esteri, 2021a). Second, between December 2021 and August 2022, Draghi, along with all other G7 leaders, was a signatory to two declarations on the erosion of democracy occurring in Hong Kong following the elections held in March (G7 Statement 2021, 2022a). The only apparent exception to this evident cooling of relations seems to be the meeting between Ambassador Ferrari and the Vice Secretary of the People's Consultative Conference, Zou Jiayi, in November 2021 (Ministero degli Affari Esteri, 2021b).

Finally, the Meloni government, which took office in October 2022 – the first among those discussed here to be led by a more homogeneous coalition composed of three right and center-right parties – immediately appeared intent on continuing in the direction previously charted by Draghi. However, it placed particular emphasis on re-establishing regular diplomatic relations, also in light of the decision not to renew membership in the BRI, which was explicitly stated, albeit quietly to avoid offending the Chinese counterpart, only in December 2023 (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023a; la Repubblica, 2023; il Post, 2023). This is evident from Premier Meloni's words, pronounced during the press conference following her bilateral meeting with President Xi on the sidelines of the G20 in Bali and during some press conferences (Presidenza del Consiglio, 2022a, 2022b, 2023; PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs,

2022a), and following Foreign Minister Tajani's mission to China in September 2023 (Ministero degli Affari Esteri, 2022a, 2022b; PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022b).[91]

5.2. China's political influence in Italy before (2014-2018) and after BRI (2019-2023)

Having outlined the main features of the evolution of bilateral relations between China and Italy over the past decade, this section analyses whether and how Italy's positioning towards China's strategic priorities has evolved over the same period. To recall the theoretical framework of the thesis, a manifestation of influence occurs when, following the introduction of an initiative such as the BRI by an influence-seeking country, the recipient country changes its behaviour to support of the former's interests. For Beijing, the strategic priorities identified are: the Taiwan issue and the policies pursued in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region. Given that Italy's accession to the BRI was officially announced in March 2019, the following analysis examines the five years prior to accession (2014-2018) and the five years thereafter (2019-2023).

Section 5.2.1 presents a mapping of the position taken by Italian authorities on these two issues during the period 2014-2018, while section 5.2.2 discusses what, if any, developments have taken place in the subsequent five-year period.

[91] Although the period analyzed in this paragraph concludes with 2023, it is worth mentioning that during 2024, Premier Meloni visited China for a four-day state visit (from July 28 to 31) during which she met with President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Qiang, spoke at the Italy-China Business Forum (Presidenza del Consiglio, 2024a, 2024b; PRC State Council, 2024; People's Daily, 2024a, 2024b), six memoranda of understanding were signed between the parties, and a three-year Action Plan (2024-2027) was concluded (Preisenza del Consiglio, 2024c; PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2024).

5.2.1. Italy's positioning toward China's strategic priorities before BRI (2014-2018)

The severing of diplomatic relations between Italy and the Republic of China was one of the main conditions set by Beijing during the negotiations for its recognition by Italy in 1970 (Coralluzzo, 2008; Rostagni, 2017; Pelaggi, 2022).[92] Since then, official documents signed between the two parties have often included a clause referring to Italy's adherence to the 'one China policy' (for an example, see the Consular Convention signed in 1986).[93] During President Ciampi's state visit in 2004, in discussions with his counterpart Hu Jintao and Prime Minister Wen Jiabao, this adherence was reaffirmed, along with Italy's opposition to "any unilateral act that may serve to modify the status of Taiwan and increase tensions" (PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2004; Quirinale, 2004b).

Although this passage was not reiterated in the joint declaration signed on the 10th anniversary of the global strategic partnership in 2014, nor in the statements released during official meetings in the period 2014-2016 (Xinhua, 2014b; PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016a, 2016b), this support, now consolidated, gave way to formulations emphasising the positive development of political dialogue and cooperation between the two countries and expressing the mutual commitment to deepen bilateral relations (Presidenza del Consiglio, 2014). Indeed, the absence of references to the 'one China policy' during this period can be attributed to the improvement in relations between Taipei and Beijing during the two presidential terms of Taiwanese politician Ma Ying-jeou (in office from 2008 to 2016). Indeed, this period witnessed an unprecedented détente, sealed by the establishment of an institutional dialogue between China and Taiwan (Pelaggi, 2023, p.71). A concrete example of this more favourable

[92] Joint Communiqué of Government of People's Republic of China and Government of Republic of Italy on Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between China and Italy (6 November, 1970). Cited in Snyder, F.G. (2009). *The European Union and China, 1949-2008: Basic Documents and Commentary*, Portland, Hart, pp. 31-32. On this topic, see also the manual edited by Di Nolfo, E. (ed.). (2010). *La normalizzazione delle relazioni diplomatiche tra la Repubblica Italiana e la Repubblica Popolare Cinese Atti e Documenti*, Rubbettino.

[93] Consular Convention between the Italian Republic and the People's Republic of China (1986, 19 June). Retrieved from: https://it.vlex.com/vid/ratifica-ed-esecuzione-della-852602911

climate is the approval by the Italian government in 2015 of the law against double taxation in relations between Italy and Taiwan.[94]

Furthermore, although the 2017-2018 biennium was characterised by a deterioration in relations between Taipei and Beijing and increased attention from Italian media to the Taiwanese issue, no significant changes were recorded during these years. While the description of Taiwan as a pluralistic democracy in contrast to the authoritarian regime of the PRC gained ground, the issue continued to be absent from both official documents and the intense diplomatic exchanges that took place during this biennium, paving the way for Italy's accession to the BRI in the following year (Quirinale, 2017; PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2017).

As far as Chinese policies in Xinjiang are concerned, Italy did not take a position on the matter throughout the period 2013-2018. The great geographical distance, the limited awareness among Italian elites of Xinjiang's very existence and its social, ethnic, and political issues, as well as the almost non-existent media coverage on the issue, are all factors that have contributed to Italy's silence during these years. For its part, China did not insist, as it did in the case of neighbouring countries, on including its concept of the 'three evils' of terrorism– terrorism, extremism, and separatism– in the documents signed with the Italian Republic during those years. The word Xinjiang never appears in the documents signed between Rome and Beijing during 2013-2018 (Comitato Governativo Italia-Cina, 2013, 2016, 2017; PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2014a, 2017; Presidenza del Consiglio, 2014). No changes were recorded even during 2017, the year in which the first testimonies from the ethnic Kazakh minority residing in Xinjiang regarding the existence of 'internment camps' began to open the eyes of the international community[95] (Sciorati, 2019). An exception to this Italian silence was

[94] Law 62 of 7 May 2015. Norms containing special tax regime in relation to relations with the territory of Taiwan. Retrieved from: https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/gu/2015/05/16/112/sg/pdf.

[95] Reuters (2018, 29 November). Tracking China's Muslim Gulag. Retrieved from: https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/muslims-camps-china/. Radio Free Asia (2019, 20 May).

an initial discussion on the topic within the European Union. In October 2018, the then High Representative Federica Mogherini was called to express her views on the issue before the European Parliament. On that occasion, she said that "the EU is deeply concerned by credible reports pointing to a serious deterioration of the human rights situation there (...) This expresses alarm about reports of mass detentions in political re-education camps affecting Uighurs and other minorities; of mass surveillance; of restrictions on travel; and of Uighurs abroad being returned to China involuntarily".[96]

5.2.2. Italy's positioning toward China's strategic priorities after BRI (2019-2023)

According to the documents signed by Italy concurrently with the MoU marking its official entry into the BRI, it states: "The parties intend to develop their comprehensive strategic partnership based on mutual respect for their respective sovereignty and territorial integrity, strengthening their bilateral dialogue in accordance with the United Nations Charter. Italy confirms its adherence to the 'one China policy'" (Presidenza del Consiglio, 2019a; PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019a). It is noteworthy that in the documents published after the meeting between Foreign Ministers Di Maio and Wang Yi on the sidelines of the 74th UNGA, only the Chinese version attributes to the Italian Minister the reaffirmation of Rome's adherence to the 'one China policy' (Ministero degli Affari Esteri, 2019b; PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019f).

Despite variations in the wording of official documents, the substance of Italy's position remains unchanged. However, from 2020 onwards, following a broader redefinition of relations between Brussels and Beijing, concerns about the stability of the Taiwan Strait have

Xinjiang Re-education Camp Detainees Appointed 'Crying Time' Every Two Weeks. Retrieved from: https://www.rfa.org/english/news/uyghur/crying-05202019171525.html.

[96] European Union External Action (2018, 4 October). Speech on behalf of the High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini at the European Parliament urgency debate on "Mass arbitrary detention of Uyghurs and Kazakhs in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region". Retrieved from: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/51670_en.

become more frequent both within the European Union and in Italy (Pelaggi, 2023). A significant example is the G7 statement of August 2022, signed by Prime Minister Draghi, in response to the visit to Taiwan of Nancy Pelosi, speaker of the US House of Representatives. It "expresses concern about the threatening actions announced by the PRC" and calls on the PRC "not to unilaterally change the status quo in the region by force and to resolve differences across the strait peacefully". The statement also reiterates that "there is no change in the respective One China policies, where applicable, and basic positions on Taiwan of the G7 members" (G7 Statement, 2022b).

The Taiwan issue has also become relevant in Italian domestic politics. During the 2022 election campaign, Giorgia Meloni, leader of the winning party, met with Taiwanese diplomatic representative Andrea Sing Ying Lee, referring to him as the 'Ambassador of Taiwan to Italy' (Il Tempo, 2022). In an interview with Taiwan's Central News Agency, Meloni announced her intention to strengthen relations with Taipei (Malincoli, 2022). This position provoked a reaction from the Chinese embassy in Rome, which reiterated that "Taiwan is an inalienable part of China" and that "Taiwan affairs are China's internal affairs that do not tolerate external interference" (PRC Embassy in Italy, 2022). Once in power, however, the Meloni government adopted a more cautious approach, repeatedly postponing a parliamentary delegation mission to Taipei, composed mainly of Fratelli d'Italia members (il Foglio, 2023). Moreover, during her state visit to China in July 2024, Meloni reaffirmed Italy's adherence to the 'one China policy' (PRC State Council, 2024), demonstrating continuity with the positions of previous governments.

Regarding the other issue, namely Chinese policies in Xinjiang, the period 2019-2023 was characterised by several changes. First, after years of raising awareness of the Uyghur issue by civil society and the international community, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe awarded the Václav Havel Human Rights Prize and the European Parliament the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought to Ilham Tohti, a former Uyghur professor of

international economics who has been imprisoned since 2014 on charges of inciting separatism (Sciorati, 2019).[97] Furthermore, in July of the same year, ambassadors from 22 countries sent a letter to the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) condemning the CPC's treatment of ethnic minorities in Xinjiang and urging the closure of internment camps (UNHRC, 2019a). It is interesting to note that a certain agitation seems to have animated Italian diplomatic chancelleries during these days. Probably driven by the desire not to upset the Chinese partner a few months after signing the MoU that marked its entry into the BRI, Italy was not among the original signatories of this document (Il Foglio, 2019). However, four days later, the Italian representation to the United Nations sent a note to the Human Rights Council informing it of the decision to also add its signature (UNHRC, 2019b).

With the publication of government documents revealed by The New York Times and the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists in November 2019,[98] the Uyghur issue in Xinjiang entered the institutional debate more systematically.[99] On March 22, 2021, the European Union, together with the US, Canada, and the United Kingdom, sanctioned China for violations of fundamental human rights. In Italy, in the same days, the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Chamber of Deputies, after a long debate on the appropriateness of using the word 'genocide', which was eventually removed from the text, unanimously adopted a resolution condemning China's persecution of the Uyghurs (Commissione Affari Esteri, 2021a, 2021b).[100] Interestingly, the final version of the text also removed an earlier reference to the

[97] 2019 Václav Havel Prize shared by Ilham Tohti and the Youth Initiative for Human Rights. Retrieved from: https://www.coe.int/en/web/portal/-/2019-vaclav-havel-prize-shared-by-ilham-tohti-and-the-youth-initiative-for-human-rights. Sakharov Prize. Retrieved from: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/sakharovprize/en/home.

[98] Ramzey, A. & Buckley, C. (2019, 16 November). The Xinjiang Papers: 'Absolutely No Mercy': Leaked Files Expose How China Organized Mass Detentions of Muslims". *The New York Times*. Retrieved from: https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/11/16/world/asia/china-xinjiang-documents.html. See also "China Cables" documents (2019, 24 November). *International Consortium of Investigative Journalists*. Retrieved from: https://www.icij.org/investigations/china-cables/read-the-china-cables-documents/.

[99] Council Implementing Regulation (EU) 2021/478 of 22 March 2021 implementing Regulation (EU) 2020/1998 concerning restrictive measures against serious human rights violations and abuses, *Official Journal of the European Union*, 64, 2021, 1-12. See also 2022/2700(RSP). Resolution on the human rights situation in Xinjiang, including the Xinjiang police files.

[100] It should be noted that in April 2021, some senators also addressed a message to the Minister of Foreign Affairs to clarify the Italian position on the Xinjiang dossier. Senate of the Republic (2021). Act n. 4-05298. Retrieved from: https://www.senato.it/japp/bgt/showdoc/showText?tipodoc=Sindisp&leg=18&id=1214938

'strategic importance of Xinjiang for the Chinese government as a transit area in BRI projects' (Formiche.net, 2021a).

On the same day, the Chinese Embassy in Italy issued a statement which reads: “On May 26, the Foreign and Community Affairs Committee of the Italian Chamber of Deputies, disregarding the firm position of the Chinese side, adopted a resolution on Xinjiang defaming China and interfering in China's internal affairs under the pretext of so-called human rights issues. We express our resolute discontent and firm objection to this” (PRC Embassy in Italy, 2021). Furthermore, in November of the same year, the embassy organised a conference entitled 'Xinjiang is a wonderful land' in the presence of the Presidents of the Foreign Affairs Committees of the Chamber and Senate. The President of the Foreign Affairs Committee Fassino, from the PD, expressed his doubts and criticisms also on this occasion (Formiche.net, 2021b). Finally, a few months later, Italian concern for the situation in Xinjiang was reiterated by Foreign Minister Di Maio during a bilateral meeting in Rome with his counterpart Wang Yi (Ministero degli Affari Esteri, 2021a). In the 2022-2023 biennium, in the wake of reduced international attention on the issue, Italy has not released further statements on the matter.

By analysing the evolution of Italy's positioning on two major strategic priorities of China in the pre-BRI (2013-2018) and post-BRI (2019-2023) periods, it is possible to confirm hypothesis Hp1.C. In both cases, the Italian government has gradually assumed a position more distant from Beijing's strategic interests, despite its adherence to the BRI. This illustrates China's limited ability to exert political influence through the BRI via the 'power to prevail'. With regard to Taiwan, Italy maintains its adherence to the 'one China policy’ – this formula continues to be present in official documentation released on the occasion of bilateral meetings between the two countries – but since 2020, to react to changed international conditions, it has aligned its positions with European and Atlantic alliances, condemning potential escalations in the strait. Despite some signals of openness towards Taiwan given by the leader of Fratelli d'Italia during the election campaign in the summer of 2022, the Meloni

government then adopted a more cautious approach once in office. Concerning Xinjiang, a dossier on which Italy found itself obliged to express itself, despite its adherence to the BRI, after the publication of the so-called *Xinjiang Papers* and the international clamour that followed, the Italian government has been a signatory, albeit with some difficulty and delay, to UN and EU resolutions denouncing mass detentions by China in the region. At the national level, the only official act adopted to date on the matter is the resolution of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Chamber approved in May 2021.

5.3. BRI's main political effects in Italy

5.3.1. Political trust

As highlighted in the second chapter of this study, among the various political ambitions projected by China within the BRI was the desire to improve mutual political trust between China and partner countries. To understand how this aspect has evolved in contexts that have joined the BRI, this section discusses how Italy's political trust, as expressed by the country's elites, has evolved since Rome joined the Chinese initiative in March 2019.

In this regard, Andornino published a study in 2021 that examines the attitude of Italian parliamentarians of the XVIII legislature towards China. Through the analysis of non-legislative acts containing salient positions related to China produced between March 2018 and August 2021, the study reveals that 80% of the acts denote a generally negative attitude from the main five Italian political parties, with the sole exception of the M5S (Andornino, 2021, p. 96-99). Several factors may have contributed to the deterioration of China's prestige in such a short period: the management of the pandemic, the Hong Kong protests, the growing tension with Taiwan, and the worsening of relations between China and the United States. This demonstrates that when a status-seeking actor like China exceeds certain critical normative thresholds, mechanisms of social closure prevail over the coherence of maintaining a given position in foreign policy. More specifically, the research observes that among the

various parties represented in the Italian parliament, it is the right-wing and center-right parties that express a strong negative sentiment. This aspect may be exacerbated by the need for the leadership of one party, the LN– which in the period considered records the most pronounced oscillation from positive to negative– to rectify the pro-BRI position briefly supported during the government alliance with the M5S during the first Conte government that signed the MoU in March 2019 (Andornino, 2021, pp. 96-99).

These results can be read in conjunction with some studies conducted on the broader Italian public opinion. A survey by the Demopolis Institute in 2019 showed that 51% of the population supported the Italian government's decision to sign a memorandum of understanding to join China's Belt and Road (Istituto Demopolis, 2020). However, as noted by scholar Wei, in the early phase of the pandemic (March-April 2020), the Italian press, in contrast with the prevalent negative portrayals in the media of other European countries, gave ample and positive coverage to aid coming from Beijing (Wei, 2021, pp. 447-453). From the analysis of content published on X/Twitter by Italians in the first months of the pandemic crisis (April-May 2020), authors Maracchione et al. suggest that the apparently positive opinion towards China is actually primarily due to the decrease in trust expressed towards Western institutions, particularly American ones, rather than China's ability to create consensus through 'mask diplomacy' initiatives (Sciorati, 2020; Maracchione et al., 2024; this point is also highlighted by the Chinese press, for an example see Guangming Daily, 2019b).[101]

To these considerations, Zeneli & Santoro add that if at the beginning of the pandemic China, thanks also to diplomatic campaigns aimed at mounting animosity towards Italy's traditional allies, is portrayed on social media as a 'friend and saviour' – in this phase 58% of Italians see China as an actor with greater influence – by the end of 2020 attitudes seem to have changed.

[101] To confirm this evidence, a survey conducted by SWG during the first wave of the pandemic yielded similar results. To the question "Who should Italy look to for developing its international alliances outside of Europe?", 36% of Italians indicated China, while only 30% chose the United States. Formiche.net (2020b, 7 April). W la Cina! Il sondaggio Swg che non ti aspetti. Parla Pier Ferdinando Casini. Retrieved from https://b.net/2020/04/cina-usa-sondaggio-swg-casini-ventura/.

According to data collected at the end of the year, more than half of Italians describe the Chinese aid received during the pandemic as an attempt by the PRC to exert political influence in the country. At the same time, the percentage of Italians who have a negative opinion of Beijing increases (to 62%) (Zeneli & Santoro, 2023). Analysing interviews and editorials published by Italian and Chinese media, in light of the agreement signed between the Chinese and Italian news agencies Xinhua and ANSA in 2019,[102] as well as public activism by the Chinese Ambassador in Rome, the will to project China's image around some key themes clearly emerges, including (1) the effectiveness of measures implemented against the pandemic, emphasizing President Xi Jinping's role in guiding the country's response; (2) China as a responsible global partner that has shared information with other countries and international organizations during the pandemic (Boni, 2022, p.747).

Furthermore, in a study conducted on public opinion regarding China in September and October 2020 in 13 European countries, including Italy,[103] Turcsányi et al. add further points for reflection. Considering various aspects of interactions, the authors identify in Italy a positive perception of China in relation to trade exchanges and the BRI, to the extent that the economic power of China and the US is considered almost equal, while they associate a negative perception with Chinese investments. However, the issue perceived most negatively is China's effect on the democracy of other countries, suggesting that overall China's soft power in Europe still seems to be very limited (Turcsányi et al., 2020, p. 3). Comparing the trust associated with China to that of the United States, Russia, and the European Union, Italy expresses one of the highest preferences towards the United States and a high level of trust towards the EU (Turcsányi et al., 2020, pp.4-5). Finally, according to Men & Jiang, it is important to note that a prejudice against China still persists in Italy. This is partly attributable

[102] ANSA (2019, 22 March). ANSA e Xinhua News Agency: accordo di collaborazione per la distribuzione di contenuti. Retrieved from: https://www.ansa.it/corporate/it/news_eventi/comunicati_stampa/2019/03/22/ansa-e-xinhua-news-agency-accordo-di-collaborazione-per-la-distribuzione-di-contenuti_ee954be9-cc57-4b63-9199-c03b4cff128c.html

[103] For Italy, the sample consists of 1500 units. It is representative of the population aged between 18 and 70 years in terms of gender, age, education, location within the country, region, settlement density, and settlement size.

to the fact that the majority of Italians are deeply rooted in the concept of Western democracy and have little familiarity with Chinese culture (Men & Jiang, 2021).

In light of what has been highlighted and recalling the second hypothesis of the study according to which adherence to the Belt and Road has not contributed, except for a brief period coinciding with the years 2017-2019, to increasing the political trust of participating countries towards China nor has it improved mutual understanding with China, it is verified for the Italian case. The Italian adhesion itself came at the end of the years in which China was most able to convey a positive message of the initiative and of itself, and as a product of a contingent political context that in a short time changed significantly and was complicated by developments on the international level (growing tensions between Washington and Beijing).

5.3.2. Policy coordination

The second aspect previously highlighted concerns the political ambitions of the BRI project that relates to policy coordination. Regarding the Italian case, it is possible to advance two main observations. The first derives from the analysis of the language used in the Memorandum of Understanding signed with China in March 2019, while the second concerns the stimulus that BRI membership has represented for the adoption of policies aimed at facilitating its implementation.

As observed by Pugliese et al., there are at least four elements that demonstrate a certain coherence with the EU framework and its constitutive projects in the documents. Firstly, the content of the MoU aligns with EU standards in terms of its formulation. It is thus possible to identify a genuine intention to insert Italy's participation in the BRI within the EU framework and to avoid friction with Brussels (and Washington). Similarly, compared to other such documents signed between China and other partner states, the notions of Chinese foreign policy underlying the BRI (e.g., the vision of a Community of Shared Destiny) are not

mentioned. To this aspect, Pugliese et al. add two others: the second coincides with the lack of initial opposition from Brussels to Italian membership. Moreover, the authors highlight that although concerns were expressed at the EU level in the months immediately before and after the signing, the origin of these sentiments seems more associated with the fact that a populist government was signing rather than the signing itself. Furthermore, the fact that Brussels has shown increasing skepticism towards the Italian decision over the years is attributable to the changed geopolitical scenario. Confirming this, criticisms and pressure were initially advanced by Washington and only later by Brussels. The third aspect identified shows how the process that led to the actual signing was characterized by several rounds of informal talks that began at least two years before the actual signing (in this regard, the meetings of former Foreign Minister and then Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni can be cited) (Pugliese et al., 2022, p. 1044-1048; on this topic see also Ghiretti, 2022).

Regarding the second reflection, following its adhesion to the BRI, Italy has not particularly followed up with the adoption of *ad hoc* policies to incentivize its implementation. In this sense, Italy has continued to maintain a cautious posture towards the BRI, characterized by documents gradually adopted in relation to specific projects (Pugliese, 2020; for an example, see the case of the port of Trieste analyzed by Gabrielli, 2022). For instance, Zhao observes that among the main challenges China faces in this regard is the need to improve supervision and guidance exercised towards Italy (Zhao, 2019).

Recalling the third hypothesis of the research, according to which the language related to the BRI, as well as the terms coined by the PRC, are found to a limited extent in bilateral agreements and foreign policy doctrines of another country, it is possible to conclude that this hypothesis is verified for the Italian case.

5.3.3. Political mechanisms

This section focuses on understanding how China has utilized bilateral and multilateral channels in its relationship with Italy. On the bilateral front, as early as the fourth meeting of the Government Committee in 2013, there was a clear commitment to "bilateral plans, acknowledging the increased frequency of reciprocal visits by central and local authorities, which lend depth and substance to bilateral cooperation, contributing to mutual understanding and strengthening of friendship ties between Italy and China. The parties agree to ensure continuity in intergovernmental dialogue, at both political and senior official levels, as well as to further develop territorial partnerships between Italian Regions and Chinese Provinces, drawing inspiration from the positive experience of the MAE-Regions-China Program" (Comitato Governativo, 2013; Boni, 2022). This concept was further reinforced in an op-ed titled 'The East Meets the West - A New Chapter in Sino-Italian Friendship' published in the Italian newspaper Corriere della Sera by Chinese President Xi Jinping ahead of his visit in March 2019. In the article, President Xi expressed the desire to "plan for greater cooperation between governments, parliaments, political parties, and subnational entities (...) of the two countries" (il Corriere della Sera, 2019a).

From 2004 to 2019, the Chinese president made two state visits to Italy, and the Chinese premier visited Italy three times; during the same period, the Italian president and prime minister visited China eight times.[104] Moreover, members of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the CPC Central Committee, the Foreign Minister, and the Defense Minister met with high-level Italian officials more than ten times (Men & Jiang, 2021, p. 402). Analysis of official documents reveals that bilateral meetings between Italy and China had already accelerated from at least 2014. Although 2019 represented a particularly intense year due to numerous visits on the occasion of the MoU signing, no significant changes were recorded beyond the aforementioned missions of President Di Maio to China (Ministero degli Affari Esteri; 2019a, 2019b). The same trend is observable in the years following Italy's

[104] PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2024). *Zhongguo tongyi dali de guanxi* [China-Italy Relations]. Retrieved from: https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/oz_678770/1206_679882/sbgx_679886/

adherence to the BRI, during which bilateral exchanges continued at the same pace (both in-person and online during the most acute moments of the pandemic).

On the multilateral front, however, the interaction between Italy and China has unfolded, not without complications, intersecting with the complex relationship between China and the European Union. While this chapter has already mentioned the deterioration of European sentiments towards China, after the Eurozone crisis, there was also a drastic decrease in Beijing's confidence in the EU as a political interlocutor. With increasing intensity, Beijing invested in economic relations with the EU, while turning to individual European countries to invest in political relations (Dossi, 2020). It is interesting to note how Italy, instead, used the European channel to counterbalance its adherence to the BRI with support for EU initiatives aimed at adopting a screening mechanism for Chinese investments. While Prime Minister Gentiloni was the only G7 head of government to participate in the first BRI forum in 2017, his government was indeed the most convinced supporter of such a mechanism (Pugliese, 2020, p. 81-82). With the exception of the yellow-green government, which led to Italy's abstention when the foreign investment screening mechanism was voted on in 2019 (Pugliese et al., 2022, p. 1044; European Commission, 2020), under Draghi there was a return to a more positive evaluation of the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI).

Recalling the fourth hypothesis of the study, according to which through the BRI China has been able to primarily use bilateral channels, while investing in the multilateral channel only in the case of Chinese-led organizations/formats, this hypothesis is confirmed for the Italian case.

5.3.4. Political parties

The final dimension to analyse is the evolution of political relations, specifically the ties that the CPC has established with Italian political parties. Various forms of interaction were already

present and consolidated between Italian political parties and the CPC well before Italy's adhesion to the BRI. In fact, since the formal recognition in 1970, the Parliamentary Association 'Friends of China' was created within the Parliament, which is still active today and gathers parliamentary memberships from all political parties (Senato della Repubblica, 2011; PRC Embassy in Italy, 2014). Within this framework, in September 2023, a delegation led by President Vinicio Peluffo, affiliated with the PD, was received in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing (People's Daily, 2023b). Beyond this institutional channel, the CPC has traditionally maintained individual relationships with Italian communist-oriented parties up to their recent evolutions (Bordone, 1983; De Giorgi & Samarani, 2011; Li, 2021; Samarani & Graziani, 2023). For instance, in the context of the meeting 'The Communist Party in dialogue with political parties of the world' organized online in March 2023, delegations from both the Communist Refoundation Party (CRP) and the Communist Party of Italy (CPI) participated.[105]

However, with the evolution of the Italian political scenario and the downsizing of communist-oriented parties, since 2010, the CPC has paid considerable attention to investing in dialogue with the main Italian parties, regardless of their political orientation. Evidence of this is provided by the meeting that took place in 2011 between then Vice-President Xi Jinping and the National Secretary of the PD, Bersani, in which the Democratic leader expressed his party's willingness to deepen exchanges and cooperation with the CPC (People's Daily, 2011; Radio China International, 2011a). During those same days, Xi engaged with various exponents of the center-right party Forza Italia (FI), including Prime Minister Berlusconi, Ministers Frattini, Tremonti, and Romani, and the governor of the Italian region of Lombardy, Formigoni (Radio China International, 2011b). Then, with the advent of the M5S starting from the 2013 national elections, Chinese authorities and analysts immediately showed interest in understanding the

[105] The Chinese Communist Party dialogues with political parties of the world. Retrieved from: http://www.rifondazione.it/esteri/index.php/2023/03/17/il-partito-comunista-cinese-dialoga-con-i-partiti-politici-del-mondo/; https://ilpartitocomunista.it/ieri-si-e-tenuto-in-incontro-storico-promosso-dal-partito-comunista-di-cina-pcc-in-dialogo-con-partito-politici-del-mondo-dialogo-di-alto-livello-il-titolo-e-stato-il-percorso-verso-la-mode/. In May 2023, a representative of the PCI Francesco Maringiò travelled to China between April 16 and 19 to take part in a work program organized by the CPC. He had participated in a similar event in 2018. Retrieved from: https://www.ilpartitocomunistaitaliano.it/2023/05/20/il-pci-in-cina/

electoral success of this new party (Shen, 2017; Wang, 2017; Cao, 2018). Indeed, between 2013 and 2020, there were successive meetings between the Chinese Ambassador to Rome, Li Junhua, and exponents of the CPC's International Department with the founder of the movement, Beppe Grillo, and some of its representatives, including political leader Luigi Di Maio, international relations coordinator Rosario Petrocelli, and the group leader of the movement in the Senate, Ettore Antonio Licheri.[106] Paradoxically, right after Italy's adhesion to the BRI in March 2019, and following the political crisis that led to the premature end of the yellow-green government in the summer of the same year, the leaders of the M5S gradually began to distance themselves from the Chinese leadership. While some individual exponents, such as leader Di Maio, sought to defend the previously made decisions for a longer period, they eventually adapted to the changed perceptions within the party and the country following the Covid pandemic, the Hong Kong protests, and the growing tensions in the Taiwan Strait and with the United States (Tian, 2020; Ji, 2022; Diodato, 2022).

Finally, it should be noted that in June 2023, at a particularly delicate moment in Sino-Italian dialogue – given Italy's increasingly evident unwillingness to renew its adhesion to the BRI – the head of the CPC's international relations department visited Italy. On that occasion, the CPC emissary Liu Jianchao met with the President of the Senate La Russa, a member of the Brothers of Italy party (FDI), Foreign Minister Tajani and coordinator of FI, former Prime Minister Massimo D'Alema, the secretary of the PD Elly Schlein, and the parliamentarians of the 'Friends of China' Association in an evident attempt to stimulate a rethinking of the Italian counterpart on multiple fronts (People's Daily, 2023a; Formiche.net, 2023; Partito Democratico, 2023).

[106] Beppe Grillo was at the Chinese embassy for two and a half hours. Retrieved from: https://www.agi.it/politica/news/2019-11-23/grillo_cena_ambasciatore_cinese_m5s_cina-6605280/. Qian Hongshan Holds Video Talks with Leaders of M5S of Italy. Retrieved from: https://www.idcpc.org.cn/english2023/lldt/202011/t20201116_160536.html.

With reference to the study's final hypothesis, which posits that the BRI has strengthened the dialogue between the CPC and other national parties where historical relations already existed, this seems to have been partially verified for the Italian case. While on one hand, parties with a Marxist-Leninist matrix, albeit strongly downsized in electoral terms, have continued to maintain strong ties with Beijing, other Italian political parties have kept the dialogue open, some with more difficulty (center-right and right) and some with less (center-left), without the BRI representing a critical node for the evolution of these relationships. A single exception is represented by the case of the M5S, which, however, registered its proximity to Beijing in the preparatory years, from its advent in 2013 to 2019, and due to a confluence of factors, began to alleviate precisely after Italy's adhesion to the BRI.

5.4. Discussion

The analysis of the Italian case, the only G7 country to join the BRI, has highlighted several significant dynamics. This chapter has primarily examined the main developments in Sino-Italian relations over the last decade, focusing on the factors that have influenced Italian behavior and Chinese reactions to these changes.

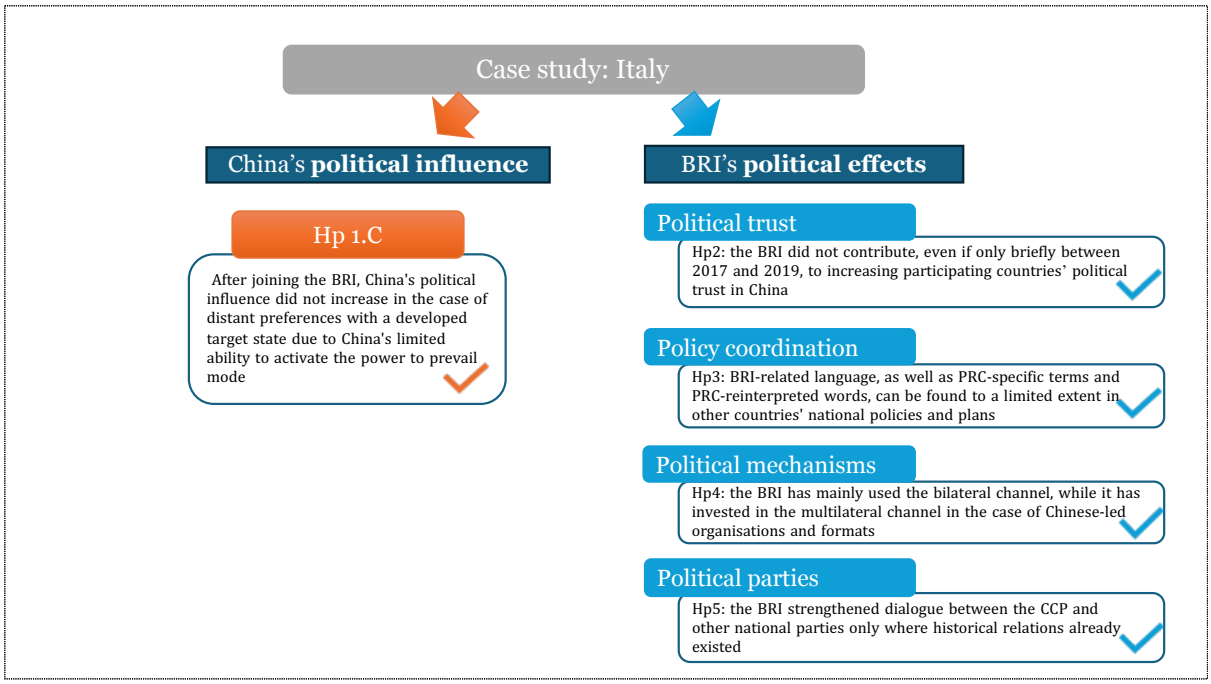
A detailed analysis of Chinese political influence on Rome has confirmed the hypothesis that Italy's position regarding Beijing's strategic priorities has not substantially changed, even after joining the BRI in March 2019 (Hp1.C). In fact, the Italian government has gradually adopted a more distant stance from Chinese strategic interests. Regarding Taiwan, Italy has never questioned its adherence to the ‘one China policy’. The Italian strategy has been to capitalize on a moment of détente between China and Taiwan—securing the adoption of double taxation in relations with Taiwan in 2015—and then implicitly adopting the 'one China policy’, which is no longer explicitly mentioned in official documents. Post-2019, despite some joint G7 declarations on tensions in the strait and the intentions of the FDI leader Meloni to move closer to Taipei, Italy's adherence to the 'one China policy’ remains the norm. As for Xinjiang,

from 2014 to 2023, Italy has transitioned from total silence to a gradual alignment with the international community, signing UN and EU resolutions against mass detentions in the region.

Regarding the political effects of the BRI, the following considerations emerge. The cited studies show that in the post-BRI period, Italy's political trust towards China has deteriorated, both among the ruling class and in public opinion, including that expressed on social media. Factors such as the management of the pandemic, the Hong Kong protests, and growing tensions with Taiwan and the US have contributed to this deterioration. The example of Chinese aid during the pandemic is emblematic: initially perceived positively, the so-called 'mask diplomacy' was soon viewed as an attempt by Beijing to exert negative political influence. Some sources suggest that renewed confidence in Western institutions has also contributed to this deterioration. Concerning policy coordination, Italy appears to have limited the presence of Chinese foreign policy language as early as the March 2019 Memorandum. Moreover, no specific initiatives or policies from the Italian government followed to facilitate the implementation of the Belt and Road.

On the mechanism front, the bilateral channel remains Beijing's preferred method for developing political relations. However, the deterioration of China-EU relations and the adoption of a screening mechanism for Chinese investments, combined with Italy's firm adherence to the EU as a founding member, have led China itself to downsize the opportunities of this channel. Finally, despite the BRI's ambition to improve relations between the CPC and foreign parties, Italy has not seen an increase in these ties after its accession, with the exception of parties already close to the CPC orbit (i.e., Communist Refoundation and the Communist Party of Italy). Finally, Figure 8 summarises the main results of the analysis.

Figure 8: Summary of the application of the analytical framework to the case of Italy



Source: elaboration of the author

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Conclusions

This dissertation presents an analysis of an initiative adopted by the Chinese leadership a decade ago— the Belt and Road Initiative. From the outset, the study uncovered the multidimensional nature of this initiative and, as in previous studies, identified the political sphere as the primary dimension of investigation. However, in discussing the 'political impacts' generated by the initiative since its inception, the study has identified a conceptual issue regarding the use of this term in political science and international relations literature. What exactly is meant by the term 'political impacts'? To answer this first question, the study has conducted a conceptual analysis focused on this term, which revealed an underlying duality: the term is often used to encompass the terms of 'influence' and 'effect', which are generically and ambiguously associated with the term 'impact'. The use of the political scientist Sartori's guidelines (and subsequent more recent reinterpretations) has allowed for clarity at the definitional level and the identification of a framework for analysing political impacts in the international context. Indeed, studying the 'political impact' of the BRI can mean two different things: on the one hand, considering whether China has increased its political influence following the launch of this initiative, understood as the ability to change the positioning of another state in favour of its strategic priorities; on the other hand, analysing the political effects recorded by the initiative in a given context. The first contribution of this study is therefore to have highlighted that, within the vast literature dedicated to the BRI, some importance should be attached to the need to define the lens through which one wishes to study the BRI.

After identifying the analytical framework, the study analyses various official BRI documents to map the political ambitions projected by the Chinese authorities within this initiative. It shows that different ambitions have been present since the launch of the BRI in 2013, and that these have been redefined and modified over the ten years of its implementation. Indeed, a

second contribution of the study is to understand these ambitions not as fixed in time, but rather as in constant evolution, with potential implications for member states, also in relation to the year of their accession to the initiative. The application of the analytical framework for assessing the political impact of China's BRI then leads to the identification of the study's various hypotheses. On the one hand, the discussion of China's political influence shows that the literature, especially the work of Goh & colleagues (Goh, 2014, 2016), acknowledges Beijing's diversified capacity to exercise it, depending on the countries with which China interacts. Taking these differences into account, and considering the year of accession to the BRI as a turning point between a pre-BRI and a post-BRI period, the first hypothesis considers three different scenarios: an increase in political influence in cases of already aligned preferences, a partial increase in cases of undefined preferences, and no increase in cases of distant preferences (H1.A, H1.B, H.C). A third novelty of the study is that it treats political influence exclusively in these terms: it is the evolution of a country's political positioning before and after its entry into the BRI in relation to Chinese strategic priorities— these are Taiwan and Xinjiang. Finally, with regard to the analysis of BRI's effects at the political level, the study identifies the following four dimensions, thanks to the mapping of BRI's ambitions and the author's interactions with Chinese and Taiwanese scholars: political trust, policy coordination, political mechanisms, and political parties. Through an ad hoc discussion of each of these, the study identifies four further hypotheses to be referred to (H2, H3, H4, and H5). A fourth contribution promoted by the study is represented by the parallel treatment of these dimensions, all of which relate to the political sphere.

The application the analytical framework and the discussion of its hypotheses to the study of the three case studies identified, namely Kyrgyzstan, Djibouti, and Italy, allows to make the following observations. Firstly, in tracing the evolution of relations between China and these different countries, a certain investment and dynamism on the part of Beijing to deepen these relations, especially in recent years, can be seen. The proliferation of bilateral documents and joint action plans signed between China and these countries is evidence of this. More

specifically, in terms of political influence and whether this has changed with the BRI, it is clear that China does indeed have diversified capacity with respect to the country it is dealing with, whether it is a country that is aligned with China or a country that expresses preferences that are distant from it. In this context, the BRI has acted as a multiplier in the case of countries already close to Beijing. The case of Kyrgyzstan, one of the countries traditionally close to China, confirms that although the Bishkek authorities had already expressed preferences converging with Beijing's on Taiwan and Xinjiang in the years before joining the initiative, in the post-BRI period the number and tone of statements explicitly expressing the Kyrgyz government's support for these two Chinese strategic priorities. An examination of the case of Djibouti, a developing country whose preferences towards China are undecided and/or debated, shows instead that Chinese political influence towards it has partially increased. On the issue of Taiwan, where Djibouti had already expressed its adherence to the 'one China policy', it has not changed its position or intensified its tone after joining the BRI. On the contrary, China's political influence has increased on the issue of China's policies in the Xinjiang region, on which Djibouti had not expressed any preference before joining the BRI and on which it has positioned itself not only in defence but also in support of Beijing's policies at the UN (signing of the letter at the UNHRC). In this aspect, Italy's case rather confirms that, despite its commitment to the BRI, a country such as Italy, which expresses preferences that are far from those of China, has gradually adopted a position that is more distant from Beijing's strategic interests. With regard to Taiwan, Italy continues to adhere to the 'one China policy', but in parallel and in response to some changes in the international context, it has increased its condemnations of a possible escalation in the Strait, in line with traditional European and Atlantic alliances. With regard to the other strategic priority, Xinjiang, Italy has also signed UN and EU resolutions condemning China's mass detentions in the region, despite some initial hesitation shown and given precisely by its accession to the BRI.

When it comes to the results of the initiative in the political sphere, the evidence is more mixed. In terms of political trust, all three case studies show that a degree of mistrust towards China

persists after the BRI, with a gradual deterioration in public sentiment towards Beijing. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, although the political leadership is increasingly close to Chinese institutions, it continues to express a degree of distrust and caution towards its Chinese counterparts, even after the BRI. Similarly, Kyrgyzstan is the Central Asian country with the lowest percentage of people who believe in China's positive contribution to their country. In Djibouti, on the other hand, since joining the BRI, there has been a stark contrast between the views of the political leadership and the broader public. The country's elite and ruling class have become increasingly favourable towards Beijing, while half of the population expresses concerns and reservations about China. In Italy, paradoxically, the peak of consensus expressed by politicians and public opinion was recorded in the months leading up to the signing of the MoU sealing Italy's accession to the BRI. Subsequently, and at a more decisive pace after Covid, both Italian parliamentarians and the population have adopted a generally negative attitude towards China.

With regard to policy coordination and the fact that the language accompanying the BRI (CSDM, win-win cooperation) and the Chinese matrix has not contaminated the documents signed between China and a given country or the foreign policy plans of that country, this hypothesis is verified for the case of Djibouti and for the case of Italy. In both cases, the Chinese language is found in a limited way in the bilateral agreements and has no reference in the foreign policy programmes of these two countries. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, however, a distinction must be made. In the documents signed by the Kyrgyz government and China, the language of the Chinese matrix has been increasingly present in recent years (the same bilateral relationship between the two countries has been upgraded to a 'comprehensive strategic partnership for a new era'), while no such elements are detectable in the national documents adopted on foreign policy matters.

In terms of policy mechanisms, in all three cases, after these countries joined the BRI, China was able to use mainly the bilateral channel and the multilateral channel only in the case of

Chinese-led organisations or formats. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, China has invested, with increasing intensity since 2013, in strengthening bilateral relations, including between different administrative levels. At the multilateral level, it has instead for years used a channel already active in the region, the SCO, and more recently promoted its own initiative (the 5+1 format), which is configured more as a sum of bilateral relations between China and Central Asian countries than as a fully-fledged multilateral context. Similarly, in Djibouti, Beijing has not only invested heavily in the exclusive relationship with the country, but has also focused its efforts on long-standing Chinese-led multilateral contexts such as FOCAC and CASCF. In the case of Italy, China has invested almost exclusively in the bilateral channel, given the complicated relationship between China and the EU. Indeed, Italy itself seems to have used the European channel to balance its accession to the BRI with support for EU initiatives aimed at adopting a screening mechanism for Chinese investments.

Finally, as regards the development of relations between the CPC and political parties, dialogue between the CPC and other national parties seems to have taken place only in the presence of consolidated historical relations. In Kyrgyzstan, even after joining the BRI, the CPC maintained relations with the Kyrgyz Communist Party and the Social Democratic Party. Recently, however, as the electoral consensus of these parties has become particularly tenuous, the CPC appears to be in an exploratory phase to understand whom to focus on in the near future within the diverse and complex Kyrgyz multi-party system. In Djibouti, the relationship between the CPC and the country's dominant party, the Rassemblement Populaire pour le Progrès, has evolved significantly since joining the BRI. The relationship between the two parties is deeply rooted, but since 2019 the growing presence of Chinese interlocutors in party forums has become evident. In Italy, in the years since joining the BRI, the CPC has continued to maintain relations with the parties of the Marxist-Leninist matrix that are still active in the Italian scenario, focusing on the M5S, at least before its reorientation and the recent contraction of the consensus. The other Italian political parties have instead maintained an open dialogue with the CPC, some with more difficulty (centre-right), some with less difficulty

(centre-left), without the BRI representing a critical node for the development or contraction of these relations.

Having presented the main findings of the analysis, it is also appropriate to examine its main limitations. First, this study proposes an exploratory conceptual analysis of the notion of political impact, developing the analysis by considering both the influence and effect components. Alternative approaches could have adopted a different definition of the term and chosen to focus on the analysis of only one of these components. In terms of sources, the study gives equal weight to the analysis of Chinese sources and those of the various case studies in order to provide a balanced perspective between the potentially influencing country and the target country. However, the corpus of documents analysed is not particularly homogeneous. In fact, it is based mainly on two typologies: official documents issued by Beijing and bilateral documents signed between China and the country under study, as well as articles published in the Chinese press on the one hand, and in the Kyrgyz, Djiboutian and Italian press on the other. The inclusion of other types of sources and the expansion of this database could strengthen the results highlighted in the previous paragraphs. Similarly, the qualitative methodology identified, that of thematic and content analysis, although capable of bringing out important key elements for analysis, could be complemented by the combination of other methodologies (e.g. interviews, process tracing, QCA, etc.). Thirdly, although the study examined three case studies belonging to different regional contexts— in order to take into account the heterogeneity highlighted by previous studies and the hypotheses identified— the analysis of only three cases could limit the generalisability of the evidence presented. Relatedly, the study adopted a rather rigid pre- and post-BRI analysis scheme, assuming that a given country's accession to the BRI represents a critical turning point in the development of its relations with China.

Future studies of the BRI and its political impact could aim to explore one of the dimensions of the framework used in this study in more detail. For example, in terms of political influence,

the analysis might consider other strategic priorities for Beijing besides Taiwan and Xinjiang, such as Hong Kong and the issue of disputes in the South China Sea. Similarly, subsequent studies may select one of the dimensions of political impact discussed here, such as the issue of mechanisms, for a larger number of case studies. For example, a paper that examines China's behaviour towards a group of countries belonging to the same region before and after their entry into the BRI at the bilateral level with its behaviour at the multilateral level could provide a more comprehensive reading of the dynamics at work at both levels. Another example could be a more systematic and in-depth analysis of the evolution of relations between the CPC and the national parties of a given country before and after the BRI. Finally, given the recalibration that the BRI has undergone since the post-Covid period, it would be interesting to develop future and comparative analyses that take into account the new initiatives implemented by China in recent years (the aforementioned GDI, GSI and GCI). In this context, it is important to focus on how China's policy ambitions have been reconfigured within and between these four initiatives in order to identify an updated analytical framework to be tested against selected empirical cases.

Appendix

Case study: Kyrgyzstan

List of official documents (2003-2023) [n=30]

Year	Document title	Source
ND	The main international treaties between the Kyrgyz Republic and the People's Republic of China	Embassy of the Kyrgyz Republic in the People's Republic of China
2003	胡锦涛会见吉乌塔三国元首 [Hu Jintao meets with heads of state of the three countries of Kyrgyzstan, Ukraine and Tajikistan]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2005	胡锦涛会见吉尔吉斯斯坦代总统 [Hu Jintao meets with Acting President of Kyrgyzstan]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2006	中华人民共和国和吉尔吉斯共和国联合声明 [Joint Declaration of the People's Republic of China and the Kyrgyz Republic]	PRC State Council Gazette
2006	胡锦涛与吉尔吉斯斯坦总统会谈 [Hu Jintao talks with Kyrgyz President]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2006	吴邦国温家宝分别会见吉尔吉斯斯坦总统 [Wu Bangguo and Wen Jiabao meet separately with Kyrgyz President]	PRC State Council Gazette
2007	中华人民共和国和吉尔吉斯共和国关于进一步深化睦邻友好合作关系的联合声明 [Joint Declaration of the Kyrgyz Republic and the People's Republic of China on the further deepening of relations of good-neighbourliness, friendship and cooperation]	PRC State Council Gazette
2007	吉总理会见我外长 [The Prime Minister of Kyrgyzstan met with Foreign Minister]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2008	胡锦涛会见吉尔吉斯斯坦总统 [Hu Jintao meets with President of Kyrgyzstan]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2009	胡锦涛会见吉尔吉斯斯坦总理 [Hu Jintao meets Kyrgyz Prime Minister]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2009	李克强会见吉尔吉斯斯坦总理 [Li Keqiang meets Kyrgyz PM]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2010	习近平会见吉尔吉斯斯坦外长 [Xi Jinping meets Kyrgyz foreign minister]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2010	温家宝会见吉尔吉斯斯坦过渡时期总统奥通巴耶娃 [Wen Jiabao Meets with Kyrgyzstan's Transitional President Otunbaeva]	PRC State Council Gazette

2011	习近平会见吉尔吉斯斯坦第一副总理 [Xi Jinping meets with Kyrgyzstan's First Deputy Prime Minister]	PRC State Council Gazette
2012	中华人民共和国和吉尔吉斯共和国联合宣言 [Joint Declaration of the People's Republic of China and the Kyrgyz Republic]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2013	全面探讨中吉关系前景——访吉尔吉斯斯坦总统阿坦巴耶夫 [Comprehensive Discussion on Prospects of China-Kyrgyzstan Relations - Interview with Kyrgyz President Atambaev]	PRC Consulate in New York
2013	中国和吉尔吉斯共和国建立战略伙伴关系的联合宣言 [Joint Declaration of the Kyrgyz Republic and the People's Republic of China on the establishment of strategic partnership relations]	PRC State Council Gazette
2014	中国和吉尔吉斯共和国关于进一步深化战略伙伴关系的联合宣言 [Joint Declaration of the Kyrgyz Republic and the People's Republic of China on further deepening of strategic partnership relations]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2015	中华人民共和国政府和吉尔吉斯共和国政府联合公报 [Joint communiqué of the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2016	中华人民共和国政府和吉尔吉斯共和国政府联合公报 [Joint communiqué of the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2018	中华人民共和国和吉尔吉斯共和国关于建立全面战略伙伴关系联合声明 [Joint Declaration of the Kyrgyz Republic and the People's Republic of China on the establishment of a comprehensive strategic partnership]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2018	Национальная стратегия развития Кыргызской Республики на 2018-2040 годы [National Development Strategy of the Kyrgyz Republic 2018-2040]	Government of Kyrgyzstan
2019	Bilateral talks were held between Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic Chingiz Aidarbekov and Member of the State Council of the PRC, Minister of Foreign Affairs of the PRC Wang Yi	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2019	Press release on Ambassor Baktygulova visit to China's XUAR	Embassy of the Kyrgyz Republic in the People's Republic of China
2020	Meeting between Ambassor Baktygulova and the Vice Minister of the International Department of the Communist party of China Central Committee Qian Hongshan	Embassy of the Kyrgyz Republic in the People's Republic of China

2022	中华人民共和国主席习近平同吉尔吉斯共和国总统扎帕罗夫联合声明 [Joint statement by President Xi Jinping of the People's Republic of China and President Zaparov of the Kyrgyz Republic]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2022	Minister of Foreign Affairs Kulubaev held bilateral talks with the Member of the State Council, the Minister of Foreign Affairs Wang Yi	Embassy of the Kyrgyz Republic in the People's Republic of China
2022	The Minister of Foreign Affairs Kulubaev received the Ambassador of the PRC to the Kyrgyz Republic Du Dewen	Embassy of the Kyrgyz Republic in the People's Republic of China
2022	习近平同吉尔吉斯斯坦总统扎帕罗夫就中吉建交 30 周年互致贺电 [Xi, Kyrgyz President Zaparov exchange congratulatory messages on 30th anniversary of China-Kyrgyzstan diplomatic ties]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2023	中华人民共和国和吉尔吉斯共和国关于建立新时代全面战略伙伴关系的联合宣言 [Joint Declaration of the People's Republic of China and the Kyrgyz Republic on the Establishment of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in the New Era]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Case study: Djibouti

List of official documents (2012-2023) [n=58]

Year	Document title	Source
2012	外交部副部长翟隽出席吉布提国庆招待会 [Vice Foreign Minister Zhai Jun Attends Djibouti's National Day Reception]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2012	胡锦涛与吉布提总统盖莱举行会谈 [Hu Jintao Holds Talks with His Djibouti Counterpart Guelleh]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2013	吉布提总统盖莱会见艾平率领的中共友好代表团 [Djibouti President Guelleh meets with the Chinese Communist Party Friendship Delegation led by Ai Ping]	Central People's Government of the PRC
2013	Djibouti President meets with the CPC goodwill delegation	International Department – CPC
2013	Delegation of Communist Party of China visits Djibouti	International Department – CPC
2014	王毅与吉布提外长优素福举行会谈 [Wang Yi Holds Talks with Foreign Minister Mahamoud Ali Youssouf of Djibouti]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2014	吉布提总统盖莱会见王毅 [President of Djibouti Ismail Omar Guelleh Meets with Wang Yi]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2014	外交部部长助理钱洪山出席庆祝中国和吉布提建交 35 周年招待会 [Assistant Foreign Minister Qian Hongshan Attends Reception Marking the 35th Anniversary of the Establishment of China-Djibouti Diplomatic Ties]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2014	外交部副部长张明集体会见非洲国家驻华使节 [Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Ming Holds a Group Meeting with Envoys of African Countries to China]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2014	李克强会见吉布提总理卡米勒 [Li Keqiang Meets with Prime Minister Abdoulkader Kamil Mohamed of Djibouti]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2015	Le Président de la République s'entretient avec son homologue chinois [The President of the French Republic holds talks with his Chinese counterpart]	Présidence de la Republique de Djibouti
2015	Djibouti renvoie à l'image de modèle de réussite dans les partenariats de la Chine avec les Pays d'Afrique au sein du FSCA [Djibouti is a model of success for China's partnerships with African countries within the FSCA]	Présidence de la Republique de Djibouti
2015	Le Chef de l'Etat reçoit l'un des principaux conseillers de son homologue chinois [The Head of State receives one of the main advisors to his Chinese counterpart]	Présidence de la Republique de Djibouti

2016	Une cérémonie de signatures d'importants accords économiques sino-djiboutiens placée sous le haut patronage du Président Guelleh [A ceremony to sign major economic agreements between China and Djibouti under the patronage of President Guelleh]	Présidence de la Republique de Djibouti
2016	Le Président de la République reçoit une délégation des hauts fonctionnaires de la TICAD [The President of the French Republic receives a delegation of senior TICAD officials]	Présidence de la Republique de Djibouti
2016	Le Président chinois fait parvenir un message de félicitation au Président de la République [The Chinese President sends a message of congratulations to the President of the French Republic]	Présidence de la Republique de Djibouti
2016	习近平主席特使出席吉布提总统盖莱就职仪式 [President Xi Jinping's Special Envoy Attends Inauguration Ceremony of President Ismail Omar Guelleh of Djibouti]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2016	Le Président de la République reçoit une délégation chinoise de haut niveau [The President of the French Republic receives a high-level Chinese delegation]	Présidence de la Republique de Djibouti
2016	王毅会见吉布提外交与国际合作部长优素福 [Wang Yi Meets with Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Mahamoud Ali Youssouf of Djibouti]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2016	Le Président de la République reçoit le Vice-Ministre chinois pour les Affaires africaines du Ministère des Affaires étrangères [The President of the Republic receives the Chinese Vice-Minister for African Affairs from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs]	Présidence de la Republique de Djibouti
2017	Le Président de la République reçoit le vice Premier Ministre de Chine [The President of the Republic receives the Vice Prime Minister of China]	Présidence de la Republique de Djibouti
2017	外交部副部长张业遂访问吉布提 [Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Yesui Visits Djibouti]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2017	Le Président de la République s'entretient avec son homologue chinois [The President of the French Republic holds talks with his Chinese counterpart]	Présidence de la Republique de Djibouti
2017	习近平同吉布提总统盖莱举行会谈 [Xi Jinping Holds Talks with President Ismail Omar Guelleh of Djibouti]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2017	Le Président Guelleh poursuit ses entretiens avec les hauts responsables politiques chinois [President Guelleh continues talks with senior Chinese politicians]	Présidence de la Republique de Djibouti
2017	李克强会见吉布提总统盖莱 [Li Keqiang Meets with President Ismail Omar Guelleh of Djibouti]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs

2018	Message de félicitation du Président de la République à son homologue chinois [Message of congratulations from the President of the French Republic to his Chinese counterpart]	Présidence de la Republique de Djibouti
2018	王毅会见吉布提外交与国际合作部长优素福 [Wang Yi Meets with Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Mahamoud Ali Youssouf of Djibouti]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2018	Xu Lyuping Meets with PRP General Secretary of Djibouti	International Department – CPC
2018	Le Président de la République s'entretient avec son homologue chinois [The President of the French Republic holds talks with his Chinese counterpart]	Présidence de la Republique de Djibouti
2018	习近平会见吉布提总统盖莱 [Xi meets Djiboutian president]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2018	Arrivée du Président de la République à Pékin, la capitale chinoise [Arrival of the President of the French Republic in Beijing, the Chinese capital]	Présidence de la Republique de Djibouti
2018	Le Président de la République prend part aux travaux du 1er jour du 3ème Forum du Sommet sur la Coopération Chine-Afrique [The President of the French Republic takes part in the proceedings on the 1st day of the 3rd China-Africa Cooperation Summit Forum]	Présidence de la Republique de Djibouti
2018	Le Président de la République prend part au 2ème et dernier jour du Forum sur la Coopération Chine-Afrique [The President of the French Republic takes part in the 2nd and final day of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation]	Présidence de la Republique de Djibouti
2019	习近平同吉布提总统盖莱就中吉建交 40 周年互致贺电 [Chinese, Djibouti presidents exchange congratulations on 40th anniversary of ties]	PRC Embassy in Djibouti
2019	习近平同吉布提总统就中吉建交 40 周年互致贺电 [Chinese, Djibouti presidents exchange congratulations on 40th anniversary of ties]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2019	王毅与吉布提外长优素福会谈 [Wang Yi Holds Talks with Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Mahamoud Ali Youssouf of Djibouti]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2019	王岐山会见吉布提外长优素福 [Wang Qishan Meets with Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Mahamoud Ali Youssouf of Djibouti]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2019	Guo Yezhou to Lead CPC Delegation to Attend Special Conference on the 40th Anniversary of the Founding of the PRP of Djibouti and to Visit Djibouti and Burkina Faso	International Department – CPC
2019	President of Djibouti Meets with Guo Yezhou	International Department – CPC
2019	Le Président de la République reçoit le Chef de la délégation chinoise du PCC participant aux festivités du 40ème anniversaire du RPP	Présidence de la Republique de Djibouti

	[The President of the Republic receives the head of the Chinese CCP delegation taking part in the RPP's 40th anniversary celebrations]	
2019	习近平会见吉布提总统盖莱 [Xi Jinping Meets with President Ismail Omar Guelleh of Djibouti]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2019	Le Président de la République reçoit une délégation chinoise de haut niveau [The President of the French Republic receives a high-level Chinese delegation]	Présidence de la Republique de Djibouti
2019	吉布提总统盖莱会见宋涛 [President of Djibouti Meets with Song Tao]	International Department – CPC
2020	« Nous souhaitons voir Djibouti jouer un rôle plus important dans les affaires régionales, internationales, y compris au sein du Conseil de Sécurité des Nations Unies », dixit le Ministre chinois des ['We would like to see Djibouti play a more important role in regional and international affairs, including in the United Nations Security Council,' said the Chinese Minister of Foreign Affairs]	Présidence de la Republique de Djibouti
2020	吉布提总统盖莱会见王毅 [Djibouti President Guelleh Meets Wang Yi]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2020	王毅同吉布提外交与国际合作部长优素福举行会谈 [Wang Yi holds talks with Djibouti's Minister for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Mahmoud Ali Youssouf]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2020	外交部部长助理邓励会见非洲驻华使团代理使团长、吉布提驻华大使 [Assistant Foreign Minister Deng Li Meets with Acting Head of the African Diplomatic Mission to China and Djibouti Ambassador to China]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2021	Message de félicitation du Président de la République à son homologue chinois [Message of congratulations from the President of the French Republic to his Chinese counterpart]	Présidence de la Republique de Djibouti
2022	吉布提外长优素福会见外交部非洲之角事务特使薛冰 [Djiboutian Foreign Minister Mahamoud Ali Youssouf Meets with Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa Affairs of the Foreign Ministry Xue Bing]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2022	吉布提总统盖莱会见中国外交部非洲之角事务特使薛冰 [Djiboutian President Ismail Omar Guelleh Meets with Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa Affairs of the Foreign Ministry Xue Bing]	PRC Embassy in Djibouti
2022	外交部非洲之角事务特使集体会见非洲之角地区国家驻华使节 [Special Envoy for the Horn of Africa Affairs of the Foreign Ministry Holds a Collective Meeting with Diplomatic Envoys of Countries in the Horn of Africa Region to China]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs

2022	外交部亚非司李连和大使访问吉布提 [Ambassador Li Lianhe of the Department of West Asian and North African Affairs of the Foreign Ministry Visits Djibouti]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2022	习近平会见吉布提总统盖莱 [Xi Jinping Meets with President Ismail Omar Guelleh of Djibouti]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2023	Message de félicitation du Président de la République à son homologue réélu de Chine [Message of congratulations from the President of the Republic to his re-elected Chinese counterpart]	Présidence de la Republique de Djibouti
2023	Le Président Guelleh reçoit un message de félicitation de son homologue chinois, à l'occasion de notre Fête d'Indépendance nationale [President Guelleh receives a message of congratulations from his Chinese counterpart on the occasion of our National Independence Day]	Présidence de la Republique de Djibouti
2023	Li Mingxiang Meets with a Delegation of the People's Rally for Progress of DjiboutiLi Mingxiang Meets with a Delegation of the People's Rally for Progress of Djibouti	International Department – CPC
2023	Djibouti réaffirme son attachement d'une seule Chine [Djibouti reaffirms its commitment to one China]	Ministère des affairs étrangèrs

Case study: Italy

List of official documents (2014-2023) [n=81]

Year	Document title	Source
2013	Comitato Governativo Italia-Cina – Comunicato Congiunto [Italy-China Government Committee - Joint Communiqué]	Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2014	L'Ambasciatore Li Ruiyu incontro con la delegazione dell'Associazione Parlamentare "Amici della Cina" [Ambassador Li Ruiyu meeting with the delegation of the Parliamentary Association 'Friends of China']	PRC Embassy in Italy
2014	China-Italy Three-Year Action Plan for Strengthening Economic Cooperation (2014-2016)	PRC State Council Gazette
2014	李克强同意大利总理伦齐举行会谈时强调推动中意战略伙伴关系取得更丰富成果　推动中欧关系和亚欧合作取得更大发展 [Li Keqiang holds talks with Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2014	中华人民共和国政府和意大利共和国政府联合声明（全文） [Joint Statement by the Government of the People's Republic of China and the Government of the Italian Republic (Full Text)]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2014	Dichiarazione congiunta fra i governi della Repubblica Italiana e della Repubblica Popolare cinese [Joint Declaration between the Governments of the Republic of Italy and the People's Republic of China]	Italian government
2015	王毅会见意大利外交与国际合作部长真蒂洛尼 [Wang Yi Meets with Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Paolo Gentiloni]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2016	Comitato Governativo Italia-Cina – Comunicato Congiunto (settimo) [Italy-China Government Committee - Joint Communiqué (7th)]	Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2016	王毅会见意大利总理伦齐 [Wang Yi Meets with Italian Prime Minister Renzi]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2016	习近平会见意大利总理伦齐 [Xi Jinping meets with Italian Prime Minister Renzi]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2017	Mattarella in visita ufficiale in Cina: Pechino, Shanghai e Chongqing e Xi'an [Mattarella on official visit to China: Beijing, Shanghai and Chongqing and Xi'an]	Quirinal
2017	Mattarella: Indirizzo di saluto alla sessione conclusiva della IV edizione del Business Forum Italia-Cina e del I Forum Culturale italo-cinese [Mattarella: Addressing the concluding session of the 4th Italy-China Business Forum and the 1st Italy-China Cultural Forum]	Italian Embassy in China
2017	Mattarella: Lectio Magistralis all'Università 'Fudan' di Shanghai [Mattarella: Lectio Magistralis at Shanghai 'Fudan' University]	Italian Embassy in China

2017	李克强会见意大利总理真蒂洛尼 [Li Keqiang Meets with Italian Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2017	中国和意大利关于加强经贸、文化和科技合作的行动计划（2017年－2020年） [Action Plan between China and Italy on Strengthening Economic, Trade, Cultural and Scientific Cooperation (2017-2020)]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2017	Comitato Governativo Italia-Cina – Comunicato Congiunto (ottavo) [Italy-China Government Committee - Joint Communiqué (8th)]	Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2018	Partecipazione del sottosegretario Di Stefano alla riunione plenaria della task force Cina [Participation of Under-Secretary Di Stefano in the plenary meeting of the China Task Force]	Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2018	李克强会见意大利总理孔特 [Li Keqiang Meets with Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2019	Comunicato congiunto della 9a riunione congiunta del comitato governativo Cina-Italia [Joint Communiqué of the 9th China-Italy Joint Government Committee Meeting]	Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2019	Comunicato congiunto tra la Repubblica Italiana e la Repubblica Popolare Cinese sul rafforzamento del partenariato strategico globale [Joint Communiqué between the Republic of Italy and the People's Republic of China on Strengthening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership]	Italian government
2019	中华人民共和国和意大利共和国关于加强全面战略伙伴关系的联合公报（全文） [Joint Communiqué between the People's Republic of China and the Italian Republic on Strengthening Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (Full Text)]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2019	近平和意大利总统马塔雷拉共同会见出席中意企业家委员会、中意第三方市场合作论坛、中意文化合作机制会议代表 [Xi Jinping and Italian President Sergio Mattarella jointly met with representatives attending the China-Italy Entrepreneurs Committee, China-Italy Third-Party Market Cooperation Forum, and China-Italy Cultural Cooperation Mechanism Conference]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2019	习近平同意大利总理孔特举行会谈 [Xi Jinping holds talks with Italian Prime Minister Conte]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2019	习近平会见意大利众议长菲科 [Xi Jinping Meets with Italian House of Representatives Speaker Fico]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs

2019	习近平会见意大利参议长卡塞拉蒂 [Xi Jinping Meets with Italian Senate President Casellati]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2019	Memorandum d'intesa tra Italia e Cina [Memorandum of Understanding between Italy and China]	Italian government
2019	习近平会见意大利西西里大区主席穆苏梅奇 [Xi Jinping meets with President of the Sicily Region of Italy]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2019	习近平会见意大利总理孔特 [Xi Jinping meets with Italian Prime Minister Conte]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2019	李克强会见意大利总理孔特 [Li Keqiang Meets with Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2019	Incontro del Ministro Di Maio con il ministro degli esteri cinese, Wang Yi [Minister Di Maio's meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi]	Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2019	王毅会见意大利外长迪马约 [Wang Yi Meets with Italian Foreign Minister Di Maio]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2019	Missione del Ministro degli Esteri Luigi di Maio in Cina [Foreign Minister Luigi di Maio's mission to China]	Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2019	Incontro del Ministro degli Esteri Luigi Di Maio con il Ministro del Commercio della Repubblica Popolare cinese Zhang Shan [Meeting of Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio with the Minister of Commerce of the People's Republic of China Zhang Shan]	Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2019	Scalfarotto partecipa al salone del mobile Milano – Shanghai [Scalfarotto attends the Milan-Shanghai furniture fair]	Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2019	Il portavoce dell'Ambasciata Cinese in Italia chiarisce la posizione in merito alla videoconferenza di Joshua Wong con alcuni politici italiani [Chinese Embassy in Italy spokesman clarifies position on Joshua Wong's video conference with Italian politicians]	PRC Embassy in Italy
2020	Di Stefano riceve il vice sindaco della municipalità Tianjian [Di Stefano receives the deputy mayor of Tianjian municipality]	Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2020	Incontro del Ministro degli Esteri Luigi Di Maio con l'Ambasciatore della Repubblica Popolare cinese a Roma, Li Junhua [Meeting of Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio with the Ambassador of the People's Republic of China in Rome, Li Junhua]	Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2020	外交部副部长秦刚要求意大利方面取消停止直航的决定意方同意临时恢复两国间部分商业航班 [Vice Foreign Minister Qin Gang asked Italy to cancel its decision to stop direct flights. Italy agreed to temporarily resume some commercial flights between the two countries]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2020	王毅：中国和意大利的友谊将在抗疫斗争中得到新的发展 [Wang Yi: The friendship between China and Italy will gain new development in the fight against the epidemic]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2020	习近平同意大利总理孔特通电话	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs

	[Xi Jinping Speaks with Italian Prime Minister Conte on the Phone]	
2020	Colloquio telefonico tra il Presidente Xi Jinping e il Presidente del Consiglio italiano Conte [Telephone conversation between President Xi Jinping and Italian Prime Minister Conte]	Italian government
2020	Italia-Cina: sottosegretario Di Stefano su accordo per produzione di auto elettriche in Emilia-Romagna [Italy-China: Undersecretary Di Stefano on agreement for electric car production in Emilia-Romagna]	Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2020	Nota Farnesina – Cina [Note Farnesina – China]	Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2020	UE-USA, Scalfarotto: "Ora rilanciare rapporti" [EU-US, Scalfarotto: 'Now to relaunch relations']	Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2020	习近平同意大利总统马塔雷拉通电话庆贺中意建交 50 周年 [Xi Jinping holds phone call with Italian President Mattarella to celebrate 50th anniversary of establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Italy]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2020	李克强同意大利总理孔特就中意建交 50 周年互致贺电 [Li Keqiang and Italian Prime Minister Conte exchanged congratulatory messages on the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and Italy]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2020	Colloquio telefonico tra Presidente Xi e Mattarella [Telephone conversation between President Xi and Mattarella]	Italian government
2020	Sereni interviene al Convegno sui 50 anni di relazioni tra Italia e Cina [Sereni speaks at the conference on 50 years of relations between Italy and China]	Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2020	Comunicato Congiunto della 10a Riunione del Comitato Governativo Italia – Cina [Joint Communiqué of the 10th Meeting of the Italy-China Government Committee]	Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2021	Discorso inaugurale Draghi [Inaugural speech Draghi]	Italian government
2021	La vice Ministra Sereni convoca alla Farnesina l'ambasciatore cinese in Italia Li Junhua [Deputy Minister Sereni summons Chinese Ambassador to Italy Li Junhua to the Farnesina]	Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2021	Sulla repressione della minoranza uigura nello Xinjiang cinese [On the repression of the Uyghur minority in Chinese Xinjiang]	Italian Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee
2021	Atto n. 4-05298 [Act No. 4-05298]	Italian Senate
2021	Approvazione della risoluzione n. 8-00120 [Approval of Resolution No. 8-00120]	Italian Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee
2021	李克强同意大利总理德拉吉通电话	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs

	[Li Keqiang Speaks with Italian Prime Minister Draghi on Phone]	
2021	Dichiarazione del Portavoce dell'Ambasciata Cinese sulla risoluzione relativa allo Xinjiang passata dalla Commissione Esteri della Camera dei deputati Italiana [Statement by the Chinese Embassy Spokesperson on the resolution on Xinjiang passed by the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Italian Chamber of Deputies]	PRC Embassy in Italy
2021	Nota Farnesina – XIV sessione commissione economica mista Italia-Cina [Note Farnesina - 14th session Italy-China Joint Economic Commission]	Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2021	Nota Farnesina – Incontro del Ministro Di Maio con il Ministro degli Affari Esteri cinese, Wang Yi [Note Farnesina - Minister Di Maio's meeting with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi]	Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2021	王毅同意大利外交与国际合作部长迪马约举行会谈 [Wang Yi Holds Talks with Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Luigi Di Maio]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2021	意大利总理德拉吉会见王毅 [Italian Prime Minister Draghi meets with Wang Yi]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2021	L'Ambasciatore Ferrari incontra la vice sottosegretaria della conferenza Consultiva del Popolo, Zou Jiayi [Ambassador Ferrari meets the Deputy Undersecretary of the People's Consultative Conference, Zou Jiayi]	Italian Embassy in China
2021	Riunione del sistema Italia Pechino [Italy Beijing system meeting]	Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2022	Hong Kong Elections, December 2021: G7 Foreign Ministers Joint Statement	Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2022	G7 Foreign Ministers' Statement on the Hong Kong Chief Executive Selection	Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2022	G7 Foreign Ministers' Statement on preserving peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait	Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2022	Dichiarazione del portavoce dell'Ambasciata Cinese in Italia in merito alle osservazioni negative su Taiwan [Statement by the spokesperson of the Chinese Embassy in Italy regarding negative remarks on Taiwan]	PRC Embassy in Italy
2022	Incontro bilaterale del Presidente Meloni con il Presidente della Repubblica Popolare Cinese, Xi Jinping [President Meloni's bilateral meeting with the President of the People's Republic of China, Xi Jinping]	Italian government
2022	习近平会见意大利总理梅洛尼 [Xi Jinping meets with Italian Prime Minister Meloni]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2022	王毅同意大利副总理兼外长塔亚尼通电话 [Wang Yi Speaks on Phone with Italian Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Tajani]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2022	Colloquio telefonico tra il Ministro Tajani e l'omologo cinese Wang Yi (I)	Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs

	[Telephone conversation between Minister Tajani and Chinese counterpart Wang Yi]	
2022	Colloquio telefonico tra il Ministro Tajani e l'omologo cinese Wang Yi (II) [Telephone conversation between Minister Tajani and Chinese counterpart Wang Yi (II)]	Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2022	Conferenza stampa di fine anno del Presidente Meloni [Year-end press conference of President Meloni]	Italian government
2023	意大利总统马塔雷拉会见王毅 [Italian President Mattarella meets with Wang Yi]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2023	王毅会见意大利副总理兼外长塔亚尼 [Wang Yi Meets with Italian Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Tajani]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2023	Consiglio europeo del 29 e 30 giugno, le Comunicazioni alla Camera dei Deputati [European Council of 29 and 30 June, Communications to the Chamber of Deputies]	Italian government
2023	Conferenza stampa del Presidente Meloni a Washington [President Meloni's press conference in Washington]	Italian government
2023	外交部发言人就媒体称意大利考虑不再延期共建"一带一路"合作文件答记者问 [Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Answers Questions Regarding Media Reports That Italy Considers No Longer Extending the Belt and Road Cooperation Document]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2023	王毅同意大利副总理兼外长塔亚尼举行会谈 [Wang Yi Holds Talks with Italian Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Tajani]	PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2023	Conclusa la missione in Cina del Ministro degli Affari Esteri Tajani: focus sulla "diplomazia della crescita" [Foreign Minister Tajani's mission to China ends: focus on 'growth diplomacy']	Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
2023	Vertice G20, il Presidente Meloni incontra il Primo Ministro della Repubblica Popolare Cinese [G20 Summit, President Meloni meets the Prime Minister of the People's Republic of China]	Italian government
2023	Vertice G20, punto stampa conclusivo del Presidente Meloni [G20 Summit, concluding press point by President Meloni]	Italian government