

COVID-19's Reshaping of International Alignments: Insights from Italy

Written by Carlo Catapano

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CARLO CATAPANO, APR 25 2020

Experts and policymakers are debating the impact of the current crisis on the international system. Some suggest that the pandemic represents a turning point that is accelerating the end of the American-led world order and the rise of China. Others argue that the pandemic will bring substantial changes to the system but without altering its underlying structure. No one, however, seems to disagree on the immediate effect of the crisis: the intensification of the US-China global struggle. A related issue concerns the position of third countries. Indeed, if the current crisis is escalating the rivalry between Washington and Beijing, what will be the effect for other states? Will the crisis change their alignment choices? These questions are particularly urgent for Western countries, which were already navigating a period of tension and distrust with Washington and now are targeted by Beijing's campaigns. The question is: Are recent developments pushing some of those countries away from the US and closer to China? There is no ready answer. However, the mere fact that Western countries' alignment can be under questioning is a notable development.

The Italian case might help to explain the recent dynamics. Italy has been the first country outside Asia to be invested by the epidemic and among the most impacted. Amid the dramatic escalation of the contagion, Rome has also found itself caught in between Washington and Beijing's skirmishes. At three different levels. Firstly, the issue of medical assistance. In the early phase of the crisis, the Italian government was in desperate need of masks and ventilators. The response by the traditional allies had been slow and unsatisfactory; neither the European institutions nor the US had yet come to assist Rome at that stage. China was the first and most active country in delivering help to Italy. The images of the Chinese doctors arriving in Rome – at the beginning of March – with tonnes of medical equipment have travelled throughout the world. Beijing's embassy conducted a successful campaign through social media to emphasise this act of solidarity and the Italian government publicly praised the initiative.

This episode did not go unnoticed. Many pointed to this manifestation of solidarity as part of China's campaign to boost its soft power and change the narrative on the outbreak of the pandemic; similarly, they warned about the true intentions that could be concealed behind those acts – not only from China but from Russia as well. It was in reaction to this campaign that the US decided to take the initiative. Trump announced the shipping of over \$100 million in medical supplies to Italy at the end of March. Then, the US President also signed the Memorandum on Providing COVID-19 Assistance to the Italian Republic. This document set an official channel through which Washington could support Italy's needs for medical equipment, and it also established that all the American military personnel on the Italian territory had to be activated in the assistance operations. Most importantly, the document openly stated that the initiative was aimed at 'demonstrating United States leadership in the face of Chinese and Russian disinformation campaigns'.

Overall, not only the US support has been consistent, but it has also been carried through the collaboration between the Defence apparatus of the two countries, which served as a reminder of the strong alliance between them. Nevertheless, Beijing's initiative proved to be more effective – at least in terms of public reception. As a survey by SWG demonstrated, the percentage of Italians that considers China as a friendly country has jumped from 10% in January to over 50% in March; moreover, an average of 36% of the Italian public looks at China as the best international ally, while the percentage for the US is around 30%. These reactions are easily explained. During crises,

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timing is vital; and the Chinese response was rapid and highly mediatic, while the American (and European) one was slow and less spectacular – although quantitatively and qualitatively superior.

The US-China rivalry was also made visible by the spread on social media of fake news and conspiracy theories. Needless to say, none of them can be ascribed directly to Washington or Beijing. However, their content was clearly designed to denigrate either the US or China. For instance, the latter was considered responsible for the pandemic as the genesis of the COVID-19 was attributed to a secret experiment conducted in Wuhan. Washington has not been exempted. For example, the images of military contingents in different parts of Italy's territory have been diffused with the attached message that their mobilisation was requested by the US to prepare an offensive against Russia and China – those movements were due exclusively to the NATO exercise, Defender Europe 2020, planned several years ago. Of course, all this news was promptly denied and its spuriousness easily demonstrated by journalists and scientists; however, they had a massive diffusion and dominated the public debate for weeks. Even worse, this misinformation has been replicated and used by Italian politicians.

This brings us to the last sign of the Sino-American animosity emerged during the crisis. The cleavage between Washington and Beijing is increasingly reflected in the positions assumed by Italian political parties. For instance, the far-right populist party, Lega Nord, has repeatedly made clear its anti-Chinese stance, either resorting to racist stereotypes against the Chinese community and using their official social media to post the fake news – Matteo Salvini, the party's leader, even asked the PM to report to the Parliament about the (false) information of the experiments in Wuhan. On the other hand, the populist 5 Stars Movement has taken a strong pro-China position. Alessandro Di Battista – a key figure of the Movement – indicated as the best option for Italy's foreign policy to align with China and bet on its success in the current struggle with the US. These evolutions signify that the US-China divide is permeating the domestic political arena and, in case the struggle between them deteriorates further, the two superpowers might find their respective 'fifth columns' already in place.

What do these events tell about Italy's international alignment? Two considerations can be made. The developments of the last months do not suffice to claim that the Italian government has attempted to switch its positioning at the international. On the one hand, those facts certainly demonstrated the close and friendly relationship that Rome maintains with Beijing. On the other hand, however, Washington's commitment and the way its support has been delivered proved that Italy is firmly part of the US camp, still deeply embedded in its traditional alliance network. Nevertheless, the latest events might accelerate a process of convergence between Italy and China that was already ongoing. Almost a year ago, Italy joined the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative by signing a Memorandum of Understanding with Beijing. The agreement – highly criticised by Italy's allies – represented an extraordinary success for China's diplomacy, although it did not produce immediate, relevant consequences.

In light of the latest evolutions, however, it can acquire a different meaning: it can represent the key for Italy's further leaning towards China. Now that a significant part of the political leadership and the public opinion looks favourably to Beijing and with increasing disappointment to Washington, indeed, Italy might start to seriously consider the possibility to enter a deeper partnership with the former while loosening its ties with the latter. This prospect, no matter how remote it might appear now, should be a reason for concern in Washington: if the struggle with Beijing will continue and intensify, international allies will become an invaluable resource.

What suggestions does the Italian case offer to other countries? Hard to say. Italy is a peculiar case, particularly because of its previous entanglement with China. However, two features are valid for other actors as well. Firstly, the Sino-American struggle will become the central political issue for most countries. It will certainly influence many important foreign policy decisions. Moreover, this issue will increasingly permeate their domestic political debate: parties and leaders will divide according to their ties and sympathies for one or the other power, and many internal decisions – on technology, infrastructures, investments – will be conditioned by those positions. Secondly – and specifically for European countries – the Italian case suggests that the US-China competition can become a trap.

Although both US and Chinese actions are commendable and much needed in the short term, behind them a certain degree of interest will inevitably be concealed. Consequently, it would be too hazardous for European countries to confuse those demonstrations of solidarity with an alliance, bet all their cards on either Washington or Beijing to

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overcome the current crisis and then face its dramatic economic consequences. For these states, the only way forward will be to join forces with those actors that share the same basic interests and with whose economies they are most interdependent – in other words, only a strong and coordinated response from the whole European Union will help these countries getting through the challenges produced by the pandemic.

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