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Ressort: Politik

Chinese President Xi Jinping's state visit in Rome

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Chinese President Xi Jinping arrived in Rome on Thursday as part of a State visit during which Italy and People's Republic of China are ready to sign a memorandum of understanding for Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). President Xi is going to meet today President Sergio Mattarella and Premier Giuseppe Conte on Saturday. At the moment, Italy wants to be the first G7 nation to sign a

Memorandum of Understanding on the Belt and Road Initiative, China's massive infrastructure and connectivity project. Through the Memorandum, Italy seeks more market access in China for Italian companies and "Made in Italy" products, as well as more Chinese investments in Italy under the Initiative framework. Besides commercial consequences, there are important geo-strategic implications to consider. Italy is rolling out red carpet for Xi Jinping but giving Italy's endorsement of Chinese President's signature foreign policy initiative is also destabilizing European Union efforts at finding a common stance vis-à-vis Beijing. The Italian sinologist Francesco Sisci who teaches in Beijing declared about this extemporaneous initiative

of the government of Rome: "this new Italian government doesn't know the alphabet of politics. It didn't manage its allies before it jumped into this."

Indeed, the populist government in Rome wants more market access in China and more Chinese investments in Italy. To this end, some sectors of the government are enthusiastic to defy EU unity and US concerns in order to send a friendly message to China. Challenging EU unity is not a big problem for the current Italian government which has essentially adopted a Eurosceptic attitude.

The Italian government has become increasingly sidelined in Europe, having neglected, and on some occasions even irritated, traditional founder fathers of the European Union like France and Germany.

At the same time, the populist government established closer links with the Trump administration.

Following a Trumpian "libretto", the Italian government is implementing policies that put national interest above EU rules. It is an "Italy First" approach, which means support to only those initiatives that benefit Italian companies and producers.

In this scenario, breaking ranks with the rest of EU member states to obtain trade and political privileges from China is considered to be in line with the national interest. Italian populists have not always been pro-China. During the electoral campaign for parliamentary elections last year, both M5S and the League used anti-China rhetoric to persuade blue-collar workers and the

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declining middle class, using themes reminiscent of Trump's presidential campaign in 2016.

Yet, things have been altering since summer 2018, as Italy's populist government has looked for additional resources to follow through on expensive electoral pledges: the flat tax for the League and the universal basic income for the M5S. It was in this perspective that Economy Minister Giovanni Tria made his first trip abroad to China in August 2018, investigating whether Beijing would be disposed to help Italy economically, including through the prospect of China buying Italian bonds after the European Central Bank's quantitative easing comes to an end.

Italy's Economy Minister has several times praised China but European Union's connectivity strategy is linked to a new piece of legislation aimed at limiting China's penetration into key industrial and strategic sectors in the bloc: the screening mechanism.

The European Commission first proposed to establish a framework for member states, and in certain cases the Commission itself, to screen foreign direct investments in the EU in September 2017. After 18 months of negotiations, the European Council of 21–22 March is expected to give the green light to the screening mechanism, which would enter into force in April. But Italy seems to prefer to do it all alone.

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