

# MASK DIPLOMACY: SHIFTING THE COVID-19 NARRATIVE?

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**T**HE ORIGINS OF COVID-19 in Wuhan and early missteps by authorities in containing the outbreak caused many people around the world to blame the People's Republic of China (PRC) for the global pandemic.<sup>1</sup> As soon as the outbreak was stabilised at home, Beijing began a strategic effort to shift the global narrative and restore its image by sending shipments of medical equipment and personnel, combined with a vigorous public diplomacy campaign.<sup>2</sup> This campaign popularised the concept of 'mask diplomacy' — a term originally employed to describe shipments of masks sent by Japan to China in the earliest days of the outbreak.<sup>3</sup>

The strategic campaign enjoyed varied degrees of success, including within single countries over time. The case of Italy illustrates how domestic political factors played a key role in determining how well Beijing was able to rehabilitate its image.

From the outset of the Italian outbreak (Europe's first) in late February, it was evident the country was short of medical supplies. With Italy's European neighbours freezing exports of medical equipment to maintain their own emergency stocks, China seized the opportunity to ship masks and respirators, and even send doctors to Italy, along with children's drawings and messages of solidarity.<sup>4</sup>

These donations came from private companies, state-owned enterprises, and charitable entities like the Jack Ma 马云 and Alibaba foundations. Local governments in China with twin-city agreements also provided medical equipment to their Italian counterparts. Italian Chinese communities donated and distributed masks within their cities, offering their help to the local police.

Mask diplomacy also involved efforts to shape public discourse about China's pandemic efforts at home and abroad. Even before the virus arrived in Europe, the social media accounts of China's diplomatic missions were actively lauding the success of Chinese authorities in fighting COVID-19, and refuting rumours regarding its origin and accusations that China had failed to contain it.

Once the virus arrived in Italy, the message shifted to one of friendship, solidarity, and multilateral co-operation to fight the pandemic.<sup>5</sup> Beijing sought to promote its COVID-19 narrative in local Italian media. Many articles were published promoting the friendship and solidarity of the Chinese people with Italians.<sup>6</sup> China's ambassador also gave interviews to the country's most important newspapers.<sup>7</sup> On 5 April, he said:

'There is no geopolitics of masks, the aid from China to Italy is based on two considerations: the importance of a life, and our friendship.'<sup>8</sup>

In the early months of the pandemic, China's mask diplomacy enjoyed a major success in Italy. On 12 March, a Chinese Red Cross plane full of masks and medical equipment landed in Rome. Italian Foreign Affairs Minister Luigi di Maio livestreamed the flight's arrival, giving it the title: 'We are not alone.'<sup>9</sup> This act reflected strongly positive popular sentiment towards China within Italy from politicians, the media, and the public.<sup>10</sup>

The reasons were twofold. First, Rome was arguably the Western European capital with the closest ties to Beijing, being the first G7 country to sign a Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Memorandum of Understanding (MoU), in March 2019.<sup>11</sup> In the pandemic's early weeks, di Maio attributed China's solidarity to the friendship strengthened through the BRI.<sup>12</sup> Second, in Italy, an increasingly Eurosceptic country, Beijing was able to play 'good cop' to the 'bad cop' of the European Union (EU), which had been missing in action at the very beginning of the pandemic's spread in Italy.



**Tonnes of medical supplies were flown into Italy as part of China's efforts to help Italy contain the coronavirus outbreak**  
Source: NATO North Atlantic Treaty Organization, Flickr

Di Maio praised China's help while condemning the EU's lack of solidarity. This rhetoric may well have been an attempt to get more bargaining power at the European table, where a battle of 'north versus south' was taking place over the pandemic support mechanisms for member states, especially financial backing. While this strategy did not yield the desired Eurobonds, the head of the European Commission formally apologised to Italy in early April.<sup>13</sup>

China's positive image in Italy did not last, however. The tipping point came in mid-April, when Alessandro Di Battista, a former parliamentarian from the anti-establishment Five Star Movement (M5S), the largest party in the ruling coalition, wrote an article

in the left-wing, populist newspaper *Il Fatto Quotidiano* arguing that China would win World War III without firing a single shot. He stated that Rome should use the Sino-Italian relationship as leverage in negotiations with the EU.<sup>14</sup>

The effusiveness of the article created a political opportunity for the Italian opposition to pressure the coalition government, which was struggling to contain the outbreak. The leading opposition figure, Matteo Salvini of the right-wing Lega (League) party, sharply escalated his criticism of China and of the Italian Government's close ties with Beijing. Salvini and his party had long positioned themselves as China sceptics, including through their criticism of the BRI MoU.<sup>15</sup> But

in the early weeks of the pandemic they had been muted in the interests of national solidarity at such a challenging time. Di Battista's article created the opportunity for the Lega party to revive and strengthen its hawkish China policy, while simultaneously criticising the government's pandemic management.

From mid-April onwards, the bilateral relationship with China became highly politicised, distinctly partisan and inextricably linked to the pandemic. Even as the pandemic's first wave was brought under control, China-related issues — not just about COVID-19's origins but also about Hong Kong, human rights, and the security trade-offs of Italy's deepening ties with China — remained constantly in the news.<sup>16</sup> The politicisation of these issues put the government on the defensive, and the need to neutralise the opposition's critique was arguably

a factor in subsequent policy positions less favourable to Beijing. These included di Maio himself saying that preserving Hong Kong's autonomy was indispensable (having previously refused to comment on the issue), a tougher stance on the involvement of Chinese companies Huawei and ZTE in Italy's 5G network, and the Minister for European Affairs, Vincenzo Amendola, declaring that the BRI MoU with China was a mistake.<sup>17</sup>

While di Maio's complaints about the lack of EU solidarity and his praise of China were not excessively criticised in the beginning, a strongly positive discourse surrounding China became increasingly difficult to defend. In addition to the partisan critiques, domestic and international media reported on a pro-China disinformation campaign conducted through Twitter, alerting the public



**Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio**  
Source: Giffoni\_Experience, Flickr

to the more ominous aspects of closer ties with China. Moreover, the public became more aware of publishing channels created under bilateral agreements signed at the same time as the BRI MoU, which provided a vehicle for Chinese state media to publish on Italian platforms — a seemingly benign act at the time that appeared more problematic with the benefit of hindsight.<sup>18</sup>

Italy's closer relationship with China may have made it more amenable, at least at first, to China's mask diplomacy than most other EU states. However, this channel of influence came at a price, because a relationship that was prominent in the public mind was also exposed to the risk of politicisation.

The Italian case, therefore, offers an interesting insight into the dynamics of China's growing influence. Beijing's objective was to shift the public narrative around COVID-19. It leveraged an existing relationship to achieve this: mask diplomacy built on existing goodwill to shape Italian public opinion. Surveys conducted

in June and July still showed Italians saw China in a comparatively more positive light than citizens of other European countries.<sup>19</sup>

However, the very prominence of the bilateral relationship with China, especially M5S's centrality to the MoU, also left it open to politicisation as a partisan issue. As 2020 progressed, domestic political dynamics, including internal pressure on M5S from within the ruling coalition and opposition criticism, as well as external pressure to express more solidarity with the EU as the collective pandemic response gathered momentum, saw the Italian Government create a little distance from Beijing. These political dynamics could remain a firm constraint on Beijing's future efforts to influence Italy. Mask diplomacy may represent a relatively novel form of humanitarian assistance, but Italy's experience suggests that it cannot simply smooth over all political frictions and is just as vulnerable as other forms of diplomacy to the vagaries of domestic politics.

This text is taken from *China Story Yearbook: Crisis*, edited by Jane Golley and Linda Jaivin with Sharon Strange, published 2021 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

[doi.org/10.22459/CSY.2021.01A](https://doi.org/10.22459/CSY.2021.01A)