

# Abbreviations

a.	<i>Appunto</i> (Note)
ACMOFA	Archives of the Chinese Ministry Of Foreign Affairs
ASMAE	<i>Archivio Storico del Ministero degli Affari Esteri</i> (Historical Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Italy)
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CCPIT	China Council for the Promotion of International Trade
COR	Commercial Office in Rome
DC	<i>Democrazia Cristiana</i> (Christian Democracy party)
DGAP	<i>Direzione Generale Affari Politici</i> (General Dictorate for Political Affairs - Italy)
FCO	Foreign and Commonwealth Office – United Kingdom
FEC	Forfeited Estates Commission – United Kingdom
ICE	<i>Istituto per il Commercio Estero</i> (Italian Trade Commission)
MAE	<i>Ministero degli Affari Esteri</i> (Ministry of Foreign Affairs – Italy)
MOFA	Ministry Of Foreign Affairs – China
NA	National Archives – United Kingdom
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PCI	<i>Partito Comunista Italiano</i> (Italian Communist Party)
PL	Personal Letter
PRC	People’s Republic of China
PSI	<i>Partito Socialista Italiano</i> (Italian Socialist Party)
PSU	<i>Partito Socialista Unitario</i> (Unitary Socialist Party – Italy)
ROC	Republic Of China
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
US	United States
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

# The Normalization of Relations between Italy and the People's Republic of China

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ABSTRACT – This chapter offers a broad description of Sino-Italian relations from the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949 to the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1970. The analysis is divided into three parts. It begins with an appraisal of the connection between the “lost opportunities” for normalization in 1949, 1955 and 1964 and the structure of the Cold War system. Following that is a discussion of the shift in China's domestic and foreign policy in the second half of the 1960s as the key factors enabling renewed Sino-Italian engagement in the morphing context of the Cold War. Finally, the chapter illustrates how Italy and the PRC, “third actors” in the Cold War system, seized a delicate window of opportunity to forge a diplomatic compromise of significant international import.

In the past, a diffuse interpretation of the role of the superpowers during the Cold War profoundly affected historical analysis. Identifying the Cold War essentially as the bipolar confrontation between Washington and Moscow led to a historical narrative that greatly weakened and often flawed our understanding of the rest of the world. In recent years, however, historians of international relations have managed to go beyond this prevailing “bipolar paradigm” and extend their analysis to the roles played by other actors – *third actors* – in the evolution of the Cold War system.

The impetus behind this chapter is in line with this new historical perspective. Europe and China were undoubtedly the most important *third actors* in the Cold War system. Being both territorial entities as well as political and economic spaces located at the crossroads of the mutual spheres of action of the two superpowers, they played a key role in the evolution and reshaping of the bipolar system.

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

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shift of the center of gravity of the international system towards Asia and hence to an *Asianization* of the international system, which is still in progress today.

Thanks to the progressive opening of the diplomatic archives in both Europe and China, many sources on Sino-European relations during the Cold War have emerged in recent years. Only a few of them, however, have thus far been transformed into historiography.<sup>2</sup>

This is particularly true in the case of Italy. The historical account of Sino-Italian relations over the last sixty years is still far from complete.<sup>3</sup> The documentation in the Historical Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (ASMAE) in Italy and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (ACMOFA) in China has yet to be fully analyzed by diplomatic historians. The same can be said for all those oral accounts of diplomats, both Italian<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of Sino-British relations see Ritchie Ovendale, "Britain, the United States, and the Recognition Of Communist China," *The Historical Journal* 26, no. 01 (1983): 139–158; David C. Wolf, "'To Secure a Convenience': Britain Recognizes China - 1950," *Journal of Contemporary History* 18, no. 2 (1983): 299–326; Zhai Qiang, *The Dragon, the Lion & the Eagle: Chinese-British-American Relations, 1949-1958* (London: Kent State University Press, 1994). On Sino-French relations see Laurent Cesari and Denis Varaschin, *Les relations franco-chinoises au vingtième siècle et leurs antécédents (Franco-Chinese relations in the twentieth century and their antecedents)* (Arras: Artois Presses Université, 2003); Bernard Krouck, *De Gaulle et la Chine: la politique française à l'égard de la République Populaire de Chine (1958-1969) (De Gaulle and China: French policy towards the People's Republic of China, 1958-1969)* (Paris: Les Indes savantes, 2012); Martin Garrett, "Playing the China Card? Revisiting France's Recognition of Communist China, 1963–1964," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 10, no. 1 (2008): 52–80; Zhai Qiang, "Seeking a Multipolar World: China and De Gaulle's France," in *Globalizing De Gaulle: International Perspectives on French Foreign Policies, 1958–1969*, ed. Christian Nuenlist, Anna Locher, and Garret Martin (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010), 181–202; Zhai Qiang, "China and the French Peace Initiatives," in *The Search for Peace in Vietnam, 1964-1968*, ed. Lloyd C. Gardner and Ted Gittinger (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004), 278–291. On Sino-Italian relations see Andrea Campana, *Sitting on the Fence: Italy and the Chinese Question. Diplomacy, Commerce and Political Choices, 1947-1971* (Firenze: Graficalito, 1995); Ennio Di Nolfo, *La normalizzazione delle relazioni diplomatiche tra la Repubblica italiana e la Repubblica popolare cinese (The normalization of diplomatic relations between the Italian Republic and the People's Republic of China)* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2010), 1–58; Paola Olla Brundu, "Pietro Nenni, Aldo Moro e il riconoscimento della Cina comunista," (Pietro Nenni, Aldo Moro and the recognition of communist China) *Le Carte e La Storia (Documents and History)* 2 (2004): 29–51.

<sup>3</sup> Two recently published books in Italian marked an important step in this direction: Laura De Giorgi and Guido Samarani, *Lontane, vicine: le relazioni fra Cina e Italia nel Novecento (Far away, nearby: relations between China and Italy in the twentieth century)* (Roma: Carocci, 2011); Mario Filippo Pini, *Italia e Cina, 60 anni tra passato e futuro (Italy and China, 60 years between past and future)* (Roma: L'Asino d'oro edizioni, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Roberto Gaja, *L'Italia nel mondo bipolare: per una storia della politica estera italiana (1943-1991) (Italy in the bipolar world: toward a history of Italian foreign policy)* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1995); Giorgio Luti, *Tra politica e impresa: vita di Dino Gentili (Between politics and enterprise: life of Dino Gentili)* (Firenze: Passigli, 1994); Domenico Zucaro, *Pietro Nenni: i nodi della politica estera italiana (Pietro Nenni: pivotal points in Italy's foreign policy)* (Milano: Sugarco, 1974); Giuliana Nenni and Domenico Zucaro, *Pietro Nenni: tempo di guerra fredda, diari 1943-1956 (Pietro Nenni: cold war times, diaries 1943-1956)* (Milano: Sugarco, 1981); Pietro Nenni, *I conti con la storia: diari 1967-1971 (Coming to terms with history: diaries 1967-1971)* (Milano: Sugarco, 1983); Mariano Rumor, *Memorie (1943-1970) (Memories, 1943-1970)* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 1991); Egidio Ortona, *Anni d'America: la cooperazione,*

and Chinese<sup>5</sup>, who took part in constructing Sino-Italian relations after the PRC was founded.

The space of one chapter does not suffice for such a complex historical account. This contribution intends to take a first step in this direction by presenting a general description of Sino-Italian relations from the founding of the PRC in 1949 to the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1970.

The analysis is divided into three parts. The first part focuses on the connection between the “lost chances” for normalization in 1949, 1955 and 1964 and the structure of the Cold War system. The second part describes how the shift in China’s domestic and foreign policy in the second half of the 1960s affected the Cold War structure and became the key factor paving the way for a new Sino-Italian engagement. The last part sheds light on how these two ‘third actors’ converted this opportunity into a successful diplomatic compromise that took into account their respective interests.

The research is based on the documents held at the ACMOFA in Beijing (1949-1965), ASMAE in Rome (1968-1970), at the National Archive (NA) in London (1970) and on all the accounts of the protagonists, both Italian and Chinese, published so far.<sup>6</sup>

#### **“Lost opportunities”: 1949-1964**

The establishment of the PRC in October 1949 and the consequent transfer of the former nationalist government of the Republic of China (ROC) to the island of Formosa in 1949 gave rise to one of the most controversial issues in the history of contemporary diplomacy: recognizing the legitimate government of the entire territory of China.

Diplomacy now lay in the difficulty of determining the political and legal status of Taiwan. Indeed, both the PRC and the ROC claimed to be the legitimate successor of the former government that controlled all of Chinese territory, including Taiwan, prior to the Japanese invasion. The political assertion was strongly connected with the legal one, as both Governments naturally professed to be legitimized to gain sovereignty over the island.<sup>7</sup> They both agreed in fact that Japanese sovereignty over Taiwan – passed on to Tokyo by the defeated Qing dynasty in May 1895 – was nullified by the ROC’s

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1967-1975 (*The American years: cooperation, 1967-1975*) (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1989).

<sup>5</sup> Cai Fangbo, “From De Gaulle to Sarkozy” (Shanghai: Shanghai Shiji Chubanshe, 2007); Zhu Hong, *Huang Zhen Biography* (Beijing: Renmin Ribao Chubanshe, 2000); Xiong Xianghui, “The Prelude to the Opening of Sino-American Relations,” *Zhonggong Dangshi Ziliao (Source Materials for CCP History)* 42, no. 61 (1992).

<sup>6</sup> The lack of Chinese documentation on the crucial years of the negotiations (1968-1970) prevented the author from fully understanding the construction of the Chinese diplomatic process in its final stage. Their future publication will help the author and other historians prove the validity of some of the conclusions reached by this research.

<sup>7</sup> According to Sullivan and Hsiao, however, before 1943 the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) held a different position over Taiwan as they believed that the Taiwanese were a different “nation,” whose struggle was independent from that of the CCP. Frank S. T. Hsiao and Lawrence R. Sullivan, “The Chinese Communist Party and the Status of Taiwan, 1928-1943,” *Pacific Affairs* 52, no. 3 (1979): 446–467.

declaration of war on Japan in December 1941 and by the terms laid down in the Potsdam Declaration in July 1945. With the Potsdam agreement, which was accepted by Tokyo, the Allies asked that Taiwan be returned to the ROC after the war. In October 1945, however, Japanese troops in Taiwan surrendered to the representatives of Chiang Kai-Shek, Supreme Allied Commander in the China Theatre on behalf of the Allied forces under the directions of General Douglas MacArthur, head of the United States Military Government. Taiwan then became part of the occupied territory of Japan, but with administrative authority delegated to the nationalist forces of the ROC by the Allied forces. At that point in time, the transfer of sovereignty over Formosa to China “had not yet been formalized.”<sup>8</sup>

Immediately after the establishment of the PRC, a few European governments took the initiative and recognized the communist regime in Beijing. The British Labour government was the first, followed immediately by Denmark, Finland, Holland, Sweden and Switzerland. In January 1950, London sent Beijing a note accepting it as the “*de jure*” government of China and proposed sending a Chargé d’Affaires “pending the appointment of an ambassador.” The decision of the British government was mainly spurred by its intention to protect the colony in Hong Kong, maintain close diplomatic relations with the parts of the Asian Commonwealth in favor of the rise of communism in China and at the same time discourage a close Sino-Soviet alliance, whose profiles were being discussed between Mao and Stalin during those weeks in Moscow.<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, the Chinese were willing to increase their global status by expanding international recognition of their newly formed regime in order to take ROC’s place on the Security Council of the United Nations. Beijing also had a special interest in preserving a good neighbor relationship with Hong Kong as it could become a useful source of foreign exchange earnings and at the same time provide the Chinese State with trading corporations having access to world markets. Despite all these compelling interests, the concomitant presence of a British consul in Taiwan made the British step vis-à-vis the PRC rather ambivalent in the eyes of the communist leaders, spurring them to consider the British delegate not as a Chargé d’Affaires, but merely a delegate in discussing the establishment of relations.

The signing of the Sino-Soviet Friendship Treaty at the beginning of 1950 and the outbreak of the Korean War opened the first interlude in the relationship between China and the West and further complicated the political and legal problem of Taiwan’s status. The US intervention in Korea – under the banner of the United Nations – and Truman’s decision to send the Seventh fleet to “neutralize” the Taiwan Strait, provoked China’s involvement in the Korean peninsula. Consequently, relations between the PRC and the West became seriously strained and the UN’s condemnation of Beijing’s regime as an aggressor prevented Beijing from taking the ROC’s place at the UN.

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<sup>8</sup> Memorandum from the Department of State Legal Advisor (L/EA – Robert I. Starr) to the Director of the Office of Republic of China Affairs (Charles T. Sylvester), July 13, 1971, Subject: “Legal Status of Taiwan”. This Memorandum is reprinted as Appendix C in John Tkacik, *Rethinking One China* (Washington D. C.: Heritage Foundation, 2004), 181–193.

<sup>9</sup> David Clayton, “British Foreign Economic Policy Towards China 1949-60” Article, *Electronic Journal of International History* 6, December 2000, <http://sas-space.sas.ac.uk/3393>, accessed September 25, 2011.

This tension also had a direct impact on the political and legal status of Taiwan. The US intervention in the Taiwan Strait – consolidated in 1954 by the Mutual Defense treaty between Washington and Taipei – coupled with American recognition of the ROC as the legitimate government of China, have ever since been considered by the PRC as ‘interference’ in China’s internal affairs and have become a major obstacle in the diplomatic relations between Washington and Beijing.

Furthermore, when Japan signed the San Francisco Peace Treaty in 1952 and waived all claims and titles over Taiwan, neither the ROC nor the PRC were invited since several major powers, including the US and USSR, disagreed on which of them was the legitimate government of China. Without any international provision, this led to a ‘legal limbo’ that considered the sovereignty over Taiwan an “unsettled question.”<sup>10</sup>

The end of the Korean War and the 1954 Geneva Conference on Indochina opened another window of opportunity for improving relations with Beijing. The PRC proved willing to recover some room to maneuver internationally and decided to relax relations with the West. Some of the European countries, like France and the UK, attracted by the prospects of tighter economic relationships with Beijing, seemed disposed to take advantage of Beijing’s overtures although they were obliged to reconsider in the face of the strong opposition raised by Washington. In fact, even though the “spirit of Geneva” had favored an initial thawing in Sino-American relations – with the opening of the ambassadorial talks in Warsaw – Washington was still extremely sensitive to maintaining a compact front vis-à-vis Beijing in order to prevent its allies from offering Beijing any concessions that could strengthen the PRC’s negotiating position on the Taiwan issue.

The American containment policy towards the PRC and US interference in the Taiwan Strait led Beijing to radicalize its policies in the second half of the 1950s and drove Beijing to raise objections to the climate of détente that was growing between the US and the USSR in those years. Mao strongly opposed Khrushchev’s policy of “peaceful coexistence” with the imperialist camp as he viewed the process of détente between the superpowers as an attempt to exclude Beijing and consolidate a bipolar approach in favor of the status quo.

The PRC’s antagonism to the superpower duopoly – and its search for trade opportunities after the failure of the Great Leap Forward (1958-1960) and the collapse of Sino-Soviet economic cooperation in the 1960s – opened another chapter in Sino-European relations. In Europe, De Gaulle’s policies of independence vis-à-vis Washington and his aversion to the nuclear détente between the Anglo-Saxon powers and Moscow – symbolized by the Test Ban treaty of 1963 – echoed Beijing’s criticism of the bipolar condominium and led the two countries to move closer, first economically and then politically. On 27 January 1964, the two Governments jointly decided to establish diplomatic relations and three months later France, first among all the principal Western countries, sent an Ambassador to Beijing.

Two different strategies had inspired this breakthrough in relations between Europe and

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<sup>10</sup> Memorandum from the Department of State Legal Advisor (L/EA – Robert I. Starr) to the Director of the Office of Republic of China Affairs (Charles T. Sylvester), July 13, 1971, Subject: “Legal Status of Taiwan” in John Tkacik, *Rethinking One China*, Appendix C, 181–193.

China. On the one hand there was De Gaulle's idea to use the recognition of China as a lever to shift the global equilibrium and as a reminder to all States of French *grandeur*; on the other hand there was Mao's attempt to break the US's policy of diplomatic isolation and attract the recognition of other countries in both the West and in the Third world.<sup>11</sup>

The Sino-French entente proved to Mao that the monolithic blocs of the first part of the Cold War were cracking and that there was room for action in the "intermediate zone" among them. At the time, Chinese leaders understood that Washington's policy of non-recognition created contradictions in the imperialist front and consequently they started using economic leverage to widen those contradictions by attracting Washington's allies closer and progressively creating a stronger constituency in favor of recognizing the PRC.<sup>12</sup>

It is in this precise context that the first steps were taken towards normalizing Sino-Italian diplomatic relations. At the end of the Second World War, with the Peace treaty of February 1947 (signed by the Allied powers, including the ROC), Italy had renounced all its rights, concessions and titles in China. In April 1949, just a few months before the Communist takeover, Italy signed a Friendship Treaty with the government of Chiang Kai-Shek. As a result, when the Nationalists moved to Taiwan and the PRC was established on the mainland, the Italian government, led by the Christian Democrat Alcide De Gasperi, found itself in an embarrassing situation, pressed as it was by the Socialist (PSI) and Communist Parties (PCI) to recognize the PRC immediately. After a few weeks of hesitation, De Gasperi made up his mind to follow the British approach and recognize the newly formed government in Beijing. In February 1950, Italian Foreign Minister Carlo Sforza drafted a telegram for Zhou Enlai in which he affirmed the intent of the Italian Government to recognize the PRC.<sup>13</sup> While in the previous months Washington seemed willing to let the European countries move first – and prepare American public opinion to a step that they felt needed to be taken sooner or later<sup>14</sup> – the events in the first half of the 1950's rapidly changed the climate. The Sino-Soviet alliance, McCarthy's anti-communist campaign in the US and the outbreak of the Korean War suddenly hindered the Italian initiative.

This obstruction was further strengthened by Italy's request for admission to the UN, where the ROC played a key role as a permanent member of the Security Council. In addition, recognition of the PRC by the Italian government might be seen as inconveniently pressuring the majority of the members within the UN that did not have diplomatic relations with Beijing. The UN's condemnation of Beijing as an aggressor in the Korean War, Beijing's policies in South East Asia and the radical campaign against Catholic missionaries within the country further complicated the development of relations between Rome and Beijing. Consequently, the Italian government decided to take a prudent stance and adopt a provision that linked and subordinated the concession

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<sup>11</sup> France's recognition accelerated the normalization of diplomatic relations between Beijing and some francophone countries such as Tunisia (January 1964), the Republic of Congo (Brazzaville) (February 1964) and the Central African Republic (September 1964).

<sup>12</sup> ACMOFA: 110-00605-01 (June 25, 1955), "Industrial Italian Delegation to China," Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) to London Embassy; ACMOFA: 110-01765-01 (December 4, 1964) "Sino-Italian Relations," Bern Embassy to MOFA.

<sup>13</sup> Pini, *Italia e Cina*, 67.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

of diplomatic recognition of Beijing to resolving the problem of the PRC's admission to the UN.<sup>15</sup>

Italy's admission to the UN in December 1955 untied the knot linking Rome and Taipei and helped ease relations with Beijing at a time when the PRC's foreign policy seemed disposed to relaxing and opening up relations with the West. Beijing's openness was particularly welcomed in Italy. The cultural and ideological stance evoked by Mao's China in the Italian left fit in well with the economic appeal that such a potentially enormous market had for the Italian business community. Moreover, it reinforced the politically transversal conviction that the isolation of the PRC represented a serious threat to the stability of the international system.<sup>16</sup> At the time, the Italian PSI and its Secretary Pietro Nenni were the best interpreters of these trends. In 1955, Nenni traveled to Beijing seeking an independent trajectory for the Italian foreign policy that could reinforce his political stature by showing his autonomy from Washington's diktats. Nonetheless, Washington's intransigence limited Nenni's room to maneuver and the contacts between the PRC and Italy continued only through unofficial economic channels. These channels were established in 1953, when Dino Gentili, a socialist businessman close to Nenni, managed to avoid the restrictions the US had placed on trade with communist countries and developed a promising set of business contacts with the China Council for the Promotion of International Trade (CCPIT), set up in 1952 by Zhou Enlai to promote trade with foreign countries. The contacts then expanded after 1957, when the British government unilaterally denounced the embargo on the PRC (put into place during the Korean War), thus opening new opportunities for Italian companies to expand trade with Beijing.

The combination of increasing domestic economic interest in tightening economic relations with Beijing and the emergence of center-left Governments in Italy – thanks to the crucial role played by the PSI – led to a drastic shift in strategy towards China starting in early 1964. At that time, diplomatic recognition started to be seen as a step that had to be taken before the PRC's admission to the UN, and not after. This shift was strongly influenced by the French decision to recognize Beijing at the beginning of 1964, a courageous step taken by Paris without preventive consultation with the Allies.<sup>17</sup>

Italy's new position was made public on 14 February 1964, a few weeks after the official French declaration, when the Minister of Foreign Affairs Giuseppe Saragat, speaking at the Senate, declared: "We need not question *whether* our government should reach an agreement with the government in Beijing for the recognition of its legitimacy and the representativeness of China, but *when* it will be best to do so in the interest of Italy and the free world in the West."<sup>18</sup> A few weeks later, the socialist Senator Paolo Vittorelli met with Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai and the PRC's Foreign Minister Chen Yi in Beijing to discuss possible developments in Sino-Italian relations. As proven by Chinese documents, the conversations were extremely frank and clearly showed Italy's intention

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<sup>15</sup> ASMAE, Pietro Nenni, Serie Governo, b.115, fasc.2388 (November 27, 1968), "Italian Policy towards the PRC," Direzione Generale Affari Politici (DGAP) Uff. XI to Nenni.

<sup>16</sup> De Giorgi and Samarani, *Lontane, vicine*, 106.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> ASMAE (no date, probably May 5, 1970), "Sino-Italian negotiations for the mutual recognition," Appunto (a.) Gabinetto to Moro.



to achieve normalization as soon as possible, “American pressures notwithstanding.”<sup>19</sup> The Italians offered to begin by opening an unofficial commercial office of the Italian Trade Commission (ICE) and of the CCPIT in the respective countries. The offices, unofficial in form only, were to be staffed with diplomatic personnel in order to serve as *de facto* embassies and achieve the normalization of diplomatic relations within one year.<sup>20</sup>

Mao, however, who was probably aware of the weakness of the Italian government and its dependency on Washington,<sup>21</sup> seemed less anxious than Vittorelli to achieve full diplomatic relations and recommended that he “focus first on the normalization of economic relations, as they are the real basis for diplomatic normalization.”<sup>22</sup>

Together with De Gaulle’s recognition, the commercial agreement signed in December 1964 marked another important success for the PRC’s diplomacy. It confirmed the effectiveness of Mao’s strategy to enhance the contradictions within the imperialist front.<sup>23</sup> The agreement strongly eased commercial relations and political communication between the two countries, but failed to produce the progress towards normalization anticipated by Vittorelli.

America’s harsh reactions to the Italian initiative, in fact, impeded Rome from following the French path.<sup>24</sup> Washington could not accept the “timing” of the French and Italian

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<sup>19</sup> ACMOFA: 110-02011-08 (May 29, 1964), Memorandum, ACMOFA to Chen Yi. Vittorelli said that if they opened the Commercial Office, Italy promised that it would not play the “two China” card and that it would treat the ROC embassy as a “political exile” (政治流亡者, *zhengzhi liuwangzhe*).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.; See also ACMOFA: 1110-2011-011 (June 10, 1964), Memorandum of Conversation: Chen Yi-Vittorelli. Chen Yi said that the office would represent the government and would have diplomatic status (代表政府, 具有外交身份, *daibiao zhengfu, juyou waijiao shenfen*), but not in an official way. This could push the ROC to recall its ambassador and pave the way for normalizing relations between Rome and Beijing. According to Chen Yi, Italy and China had the opportunity to create a new, “Sino-Italian model for normalization” (我们创立中意方式, *women chuangli Zhong Yi fangshi*).

<sup>21</sup> ACMOFA: 110-01765-01 (March 10, 1964), “The status of Sino-Italian relations,” Bern embassy to MOFA. According to the Chinese Embassy in Switzerland, Italy could not afford to follow De Gaulle’s path because of the expansive American influence over its foreign policy. The Chinese diplomats in Rome believed that Italy was a second rank country in the imperialist front, without much power at the international level. This deeply weakened Italian foreign policy, which undoubtedly heeded American wishes whenever possible. The diplomats, however, believed that it was possible to exploit Italy’s desire to trade with Beijing to mitigate the US influence and attract Italy towards the PRC. ACMOFA, 110-02033-02 (June 20, 1965), Commercial Office in Rome (COR) to MOFA.

<sup>22</sup> ACMOFA: 1110-2011-013 (June 2, 1964), Memorandum of Conversation: Mao-Vittorelli-Santagnello.

<sup>23</sup> See Mao Zedong, “Interview with the Japanese Socialists on the Theory of the Intermediate Zone,” *Sekat Shubo*, August 11, 1964. The importance that Beijing attributed to the opening of the Commercial Office was also reflected by the high political profile of Xu Ming, director of the Chinese office in Rome, a member of the Central Committee of the CCP and former head of the Office for Western Europe at Beijing’s MOFA.

<sup>24</sup> Because of the conflict in Vietnam, the Chinese thought that the US had forced the Italians to cool down the political side of their relation with the PRC. ACMOFA: 110-01902-01 (December 15, 1965), “Change in Italian diplomacy,” COR to MOFA.

initiatives as Beijing was supporting the North Vietnamese in Indochina and many American soldiers were dying on the ground at the time. While Paris could take the liberty of violating Washington's *desiderata*, such was not the case for Rome.<sup>25</sup>

Both in 1949 and in 1955, the international community and American supervision posed strict limitations on Italian autonomy and frustrated its strategy. Despite these restrictions, opening a commercial office with a high profile diplomatic status in 1964 enabled Italian diplomacy to take an important step forward in the process of engaging with Beijing, a step that did not patently violate the dogmas of the Atlantic alliance. This step was made possible by two main elements that were to facilitate the rapprochement between Rome and Beijing in subsequent years: the influence of the PSI on the foreign policy of Italy's center-left governments and the emerging crisis of the Sino-Soviet alliance. Compared with previous years, these two factors were a great boon to enlarging Italy's scope of action in 1964, a scope whose limits rested mainly on American opposition to Beijing, which was exacerbated by China's support of the North Vietnamese.

The outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in the PRC and the radicalization of its domestic political struggle further strengthened Washington's view of China as a pariah of the international system and consequently interrupted the dialogue between Rome and Beijing. The degradation caused by the political turmoil in China, compounded by the parallel escalation of tensions with Moscow, paved the way for a radical shift in Beijing's foreign policy towards Washington that opened the door to a softer approach in Indochina and a new era of "socialization" between China and the West. It was at that point that the "*when*" mentioned by Saragat in 1964 became a reality.

### **China goes West: the PRC's foreign policy shift in 1968-69**

It could be claimed, with Wallerstein, that the Cold War in Asia could be better defined as a "Hot War".<sup>26</sup> While an era of détente with Moscow was beginning in Europe during the 1950s and 1960s, in Asia conflicts were ongoing in Korea and in Vietnam. Maoist China played a crucial role in this dynamic. Chinese revolutionary radicalism fed Washington's anti-communist radicalism and was the reasoning behind escalating American intervention in Vietnam: 'The fundamental obstacle to a more imaginative American foreign policy' wrote Kissinger "was Mao's concept of continuous revolution."

In the summer of 1968, this paradigm started to shift.

Moscow's military intervention to suppress the "Prague Spring" in August 1968, coupled with Brezhnev's doctrine of limited sovereignty – which implied military intervention in any socialist country threatened by ideological deviation – represented an imminent threat for Beijing. At that time, the Cultural Revolution in China was at its highest point.

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<sup>25</sup> In January, Fanfani told the Chinese diplomats that the tension caused by the Vietnam War prevented them from normalizing their relations. ACMOFA: 110-01899-01 (September 20, 1965), "Sino-Italian relations," COR to MOFA.

<sup>26</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, "What Cold War in Asia? An Interpretative Essay," in *The Cold War in Asia: The Battle for Hearts and Minds*, ed. Zheng Yangwen, Liu Hong, and Michael Szonyi (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010), 19.

Seen from Washington, the soundly ideological tones during those months confirmed the radical antagonism of Beijing's political stance. However, the main target of the Cultural Revolution was not the "usual suspect," namely American Imperialism, but rather so-called "Soviet revisionism." Mao believed that the Soviet model, which inspired many of Mao's adversaries, had to be eradicated in order to make his leadership stronger and allow the PRC, driven by his revolutionary ideas, to become the leader of the international proletarian movement.

In Mao's view, in fact, capitalism had been restored in the USSR and – as the Leninist dictionary equates imperialism with the highest stage of capitalism – the Soviet attack against the Czech Republic was to be seen as an imperialist move, the expression of a "social-imperialist' country," or rather socialist in theory, but imperialist in actions. Driven by the Brezhnev doctrine, Soviet "social-imperialism" presented itself as an imminent threat to Beijing, especially at a time of domestic political turmoil precisely against the Soviet socialist model. Therefore, in Mao's opinion, Soviet social-imperialism became the most dangerous form of imperialism, justifying a new rapprochement with the United States.

This move was deeply connected to the shift in the course of the Cultural Revolution that was occurring at exactly the same time. In the summer of 1968, in fact, Mao started deflating the Red Guard Movement and changed the focus of his public discourse from "revolutionary tension" to "consolidating the revolution."<sup>27</sup> As Chen Jian clearly put it, Mao's aims in the Cultural Revolution were twofold: first, to seek new ways to impose his ideals and transform China into a land of prosperity and justice and second, to reinforce his authority as the best guarantee to achieve the first goal. Mao achieved the second goal, but not the first; and in the summer of 1968, when he realized that the political struggle was getting out of control, he decided to "consolidate" the results achieved up to then.<sup>28</sup>

The "consolidation" of the goals of the revolution – Mao's absolute authority – and the imminence of the Soviet threat led the Chairman to profoundly revise the country's defensive strategy, moving its strategic center North and away from the South – away from confrontation with American imperialism in Indochina. This occurred at a time when the United States, wanting to pull out of the Vietnamese quagmire and scale down their military presence in Eastern Asia, had already begun to examine the chances of reconciling with Beijing.

Between the end of 1968 and the beginning of 1969, Beijing reciprocated. The Chinese suddenly seemed to accept the idea of holding negotiations between Washington and Hanoi in Paris, reversing their traditional posture of radical opposition almost overnight. In November 1968, Beijing responded with "unprecedented speed" to the American offer to reopen the Warsaw channel and mentioned for the first time the possibility of "coexisting" with the US.<sup>29</sup> A few weeks later, in January 1969, *Renmin Ribao* (People's

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<sup>27</sup> Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 244.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 243–244.

<sup>29</sup> ASMAE (December 20, 1968), a. "Chinese Question," Gaja to Moro.

Daily) surprisingly published the entire text of Nixon's inaugural speech.<sup>30</sup>

It was a dramatic moment. In order to elaborate a coherent strategy, Mao decided to recall four Marshals of the PLA – who were “sent down” to some factories in the provinces during the Cultural Revolution for the purpose of “investigation and study” – and asked them to begin analyzing China's strategic options.<sup>31</sup>

During those weeks between March and August, the conflict with the Soviet Union escalated and the level of border conflicts expanded. The Marshals told Mao that the PRC should prepare for a major confrontation with Moscow and the Chinese called for a mobilization of their military assets along all of China's borders.<sup>32</sup> We now know that they were right. The Soviets had in fact begun to inquire through diplomatic channels how the US would react to a Soviet pre-emptive attack on Chinese nuclear installations. At a National Security meeting in August 1969, Nixon decided that the US could not be passive in the case of a Soviet attack as it was against American interests for the Soviets to become more powerful by “smashing” China.

“It was a revolutionary moment in U.S. foreign policy,” Kissinger recently wrote. “An American President declared that we had a strategic interest in the survival of a major Communist country with which we had no meaningful contact for twenty years and against which we had fought a war and engaged in two military confrontations.” The “revolutionary” American policy in support of the PRC produced the expected results and forced the Soviets to postpone the project.<sup>33</sup>

In September, the Marshals suggested that Mao and Zhou eventually play the “American card,” that is, return to the Warsaw ambassadorial talks and take the initiative to propose Sino-American talks at a higher level. The purpose was to solve the basic problems in Sino-American relations, bearing in mind the strategic significance of this relationship. “We should not raise any prerequisite [...] the Taiwan question can be *gradually solved* by talks at a higher level.”<sup>34</sup>

Between December 1969 and February 1970, the Warsaw channel was reactivated. Moreover, the Chinese agreed to high-level meetings with the Americans and did not make such talks conditional on the settlement of the Taiwan issue.<sup>35</sup> However, when Mao accepted the Marshals' suggestions, he did so mainly to contain Soviet attacks and avoid war.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the Chairman seemed ready to create a united front with the West against Moscow only for the sake of security, but was not going to abandon his traditional notion of class struggle and world revolution. As elegantly shown by the Chinese historians Yang Kuisong and Xia Yafeng, in those months Mao seemed quite

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<sup>30</sup> Henry Kissinger, *On China* (New York: Penguin Group US, 2011), 209.

<sup>31</sup> The Marshals were Chen Yi, Nie Rongzhen, Xu Xiangqian and Ye Jianying.

<sup>32</sup> Chen, *Mao's China and the Cold War*, 248.

<sup>33</sup> Kissinger, *On China*, 217–219.

<sup>34</sup> Chen Jian and David Wilson, “All Under Heaven Is Great Chaos. Beijing, the Sino-Soviet Border Clashes and the Turn Toward Sino-American Rapprochement,” *Cold War International History Project Bulletin* 11 (1998): 170.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 251.

<sup>36</sup> Gao Wenqian, Peter Rand, and Lawrence R. Sullivan, *Zhou Enlai: The Last Perfect Revolutionary* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2007), 310.

pessimistic about the prospects of a world revolution. The former “world proletarian motherland”—the Soviet Union— became revisionist, but also more than one hundred communist parties of the world gave up their strict adherence to Marxism-Leninism.

In Mao’s view, the absence of revolution in the world posed a great danger for the future of communism,<sup>37</sup> which is why he accepted the realist choice to “play the American card.” But when signs of a possible revolutionary outbreak manifested themselves, he was ready to rediscover his ideological beliefs and “side with the people.”<sup>38</sup> This explains the sudden shift in PRC’s foreign policy towards the West at the beginning of 1970. While the Warsaw Channel seemed, in fact, to be producing impressive results in February, a few days later events in Indochina reversed the situation.

At the end of March, Nixon’s decision to extend the war to Cambodia and disrupt the bases of Hanoi’s offensive against the South was met by massive, anti-war demonstrations in the US. Mao was particularly excited by those events and in April and May urged Zhou Enlai to have a more militant revolutionary foreign policy. The Warsaw meetings were cancelled and China and US communications suddenly interrupted.<sup>39</sup> One domestic factor further complicated the contacts between the two sides. In the summer of 1970, the political conflict between Mao and his designated successor Lin Biao, who had emerged one year earlier, reached a climax. This power struggle took much of Mao’s time and energy until the plenary session of the Central Committee held at Lushan at the beginning of September, in which Lin Biao and his supporters were eventually silenced.<sup>40</sup>

By the second half of 1970, after the US withdrawal from Cambodia and Mao’s victory over Lin, Beijing sent Washington a clear signal. The newly appointed PRC ambassador in France, Huang Zhen – the same diplomat who in those days was conducting the final negotiations with Italy for mutual recognition – was instructed to urgently contact Edgar Snow, the leftist American journalist who had been Mao’s close friend since the time in Yan’an, and invite him to Beijing to take part in the National Day parade on 1 October. Snow was the first American to have such an honor. The picture of him next to Mao on the wall of the Forbidden City overlooking Tiananmen Square was a clear message of the direction that China was taking.

The profound revision of Beijing’s foreign policy and the overture of Sino-American rapprochement progressively cancelled the limits – namely Washington’s obstructionism – that had previously frustrated Italian moves towards Beijing. At the same time as Snow’s visit to Beijing (October 1970), in fact, Huang Zhen finalized, in Paris, the agreement with Italy for the mutual recognition.

### **Time for normalization: when form is substance**

The systemic change that the degeneration of the Sino-Soviet split and the beginning of

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<sup>37</sup> Yang Kuisong and Xia Yafeng, “Vacillating Between Revolution and Détente: Mao’s Changing Psyche and Policy Toward the United States, 1969–1976,” *Diplomatic History* 34, no. 2 (2010): 400–401.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 401.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 401–402.

<sup>40</sup> Chen, *Mao’s China and the Cold War*, 253.

the Sino-American entente was creating at the international level coupled with a new turn in Italian domestic politics to favor the promotion Sino-Italian relations: in December 1968, Pietro Nenni and the socialists took control of Italian foreign policy.

The Italian legislative election of May 1968 had led to the creation of the fourth center-left government since 1963, a government headed by the Christian Democrat Mariano Rumor with Nenni as Minister of Foreign Affairs. The elections however had created a very fragile equilibrium that put the experiment of the center-left itself at risk. The Unified Socialist Party (PSU) – a coalition of the former socialist and social-democratic parties achieved in 1966 – faced a painful electoral defeat and raised the stakes of the left wing of the party in favor of more radical policies. The Christian Democrats, the major party in the Italian political spectrum, were also divided into two main groups. Some asked for a return to moderate politics and a revision of the center-left experiment; others, aware of the deep crisis within the socialist camp, believed in the need for dialogue with the left and started considering an engagement with the PCI.<sup>41</sup>

Nenni's appointment as Minister of Foreign Affairs fit perfectly within this framework. His decision to break with the PCI after the Soviet invasion in Hungary in October 1956 elicited support both from the moderate Christian Democrats (DC) and key quarters in Washington.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, his determination to make the recognition of the PRC the main point of the PSU program gave him strong credit among leftists within the PSU.

The decision to recognize Beijing was thus a choice charged with many political considerations, mostly aimed at raising the profile of the PSU while positioning it closer to the political mainstream. Its anti-American profile partially mitigated the frustration that leftists felt towards Nenni's "Atlanticism" and nodded at the vast majority of Italians who did not look favorably on Washington's policies in Indochina. Its anti-Soviet imprint reassured the moderates and eroded part of the popular consensus enjoyed by the PCI, by warning its supporters of the PCI's complete submission to Soviet desiderata.<sup>43</sup> Last but not least, the expectations of trade benefits with Beijing lured a vast part of the Italian business community and made it more sympathetic towards the socialists.<sup>44</sup>

Ever since the PRC had been founded in October 1949, the Christian Democrats seemed willing to move towards Beijing too, but they had always been more prudent than the socialists in balancing their desires with Washington's expectations. Therefore, the Italian government's problem of whether to recognize the PRC was not a matter of "if" but rather of "how." Nenni put time above form and pushed to achieve the goal as rapidly as possible. The Christian Democrats, however, and many of the key diplomats involved in the negotiations, appeared more cautious and tended to pay more attention to signals coming from the US. But form is often very close to substance in the

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<sup>41</sup> Antonio Varsori, *L'Italia nelle relazioni internazionali dal 1943 al 1992 (Italy in international relations from 1943 to 1992)* (Bari: Laterza, 1998), 172.

<sup>42</sup> Leopoldo Nuti, *Gli Stati Uniti e l'apertura a sinistra: importanza e limiti della presenza americana in Italia (The United States and the opening to the left: importance and limits of the American presence in Italy)* (Bari: Laterza, 1999), 614–619 and 669–676.

<sup>43</sup> Olla Brundu, "Pietro Nenni, Aldo Moro e il riconoscimento della Cina comunista," 31.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

diplomatic world, and this was particularly true in recognizing the PRC, which raised the difficult question of the political and legal status of Taiwan.

The Director of the Office of Political Affairs of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MAE), Roberto Gaja, was fully aware of the delicacy of this issue and suggested that Nenni follow the French model for recognizing the PRC. When Paris had recognized Beijing in 1964, Mao had not posed a contemporary break of diplomatic relations with Taipei as a *conditio sine qua non*. Indeed, the rupture was the result of Chiang Kai Shek's initiative, motivated by the humiliation inflicted to nationalist diplomats by the French government when it decided to transfer their former embassy building to the PRC.<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, in the official Sino-French communiqué of 1964, the two governments simply recognized each other without mentioning the political and legal status of Taiwan. Therefore, if combined with an action of persuasion towards Chiang Kai Shek, the French model offered the possibility of recognizing Beijing while maintaining relations with Formosa at the same time. Were such outcome to be achieved, Italy would have been the first country to have regular relations with both Beijing and Taipei, not as a supporter of the theory of the 'two Chinas', but as promoter of the *de facto* existence of two different countries: "one China" and "one Taiwan."<sup>46</sup>

Nenni approved Gaja's suggestion about the French model, but with an important objection that he noted on the same memorandum: Formosa claimed to be the real government of China and not a different state and consequently the choice was between a "two China" policy and a "one China" policy.<sup>47</sup> Given that it would be pointless to ask Beijing to recognize the existence of "two Chinas," he decided to recognize the PRC on the basis of the "one China" principle, fully aware of the consequences that this choice would have had on the representation of Taiwan in Rome and on the Chinese seat at the UN.

The time was ripe. Gaja and Egidio Ortona, the Italian Ambassador in the US, both noted that the climate in the US was changing in favor of a radical revision of US-China policy, especially after Beijing's approval of the negotiations with the North Vietnamese, which seemingly preannounced a solution to the Vietnamese conundrum. The contacts between Americans and Chinese in Warsaw had to be read in the same light.

Ortona and Gaja's appeal for caution did not impede Nenni from taking the initiative without previous consultations with the allies, and on 24 January 1969, he publicly declared in Parliament that he intended to recognize the PRC. Negotiations between the Chinese and Italians started in Paris a few days later.<sup>48</sup>

Washington's reaction was surprisingly positive. While the State Department seemed more hesitant, stressing the problem of Taiwan and the possible repercussions on negotiations with Vietnam, the White House appeared more encouraging towards "those nations, like Italy, that are inaugurating a new policy [towards China]," as Nixon himself stated after Nenni's announcement. "We find ourselves [...] at a historical juncture" as

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<sup>45</sup> ASMAE (December 20, 1968), a. "Chinese Question," Gaja to Nenni.

<sup>46</sup> ASMAE (November 27, 1968), "Italian Policy towards the PRC," Gaja to Nenni.

<sup>47</sup> ASMAE (December 20, 1968), a. "Chinese Question," Gaja to Moro.

<sup>48</sup> Ortona, *Anni d'America*, 138–140.

Ortona noted in his diary, “when the Americans [appear] sincerely perplexed by their messianic conception of a world divided between Good and Evil [and] might be inclined towards new thoughts that could led them to rethink their plans.”<sup>49</sup>

Ortona’s intuition proved to be right: “Our divergences [vis-à-vis the US] run in parallel” he wrote Nenni.<sup>50</sup> The Americans in fact had to carefully manage the relationship with Taipei as it was a symbol of the US commitment against communism both in terms of public opinion and for many American allies. Washington’s public reactions to the Italian initiatives had to be prudent. In private, however, the Americans seemed to approve the logic of Nenni’s proposal as a move that could positively influence the American people and pave the way for a new policy towards Beijing. Again, the problem with Nenni’s initiative was not the timing but the form. Nenni’s determination to recognize the PRC on the basis of the “one China” principle – a position communicated to the Chinese at the beginning of February<sup>51</sup> – had profound consequences. Firstly, it disrupted Gaia’s “two Chinas” or “one China and one Taiwan” options, that were shared in those months by other countries, such as Canada, also waiting for a response from Beijing to their proposals to begin negotiations for mutual recognition.<sup>52</sup> Secondly, it jeopardized the efficacy of concerted action (preferred by Ottawa) in the first and most important stage of the negotiations with Beijing. Thirdly, it entrenched the Chinese position, since Beijing could now hope to extract from the Italians – and consequently from the Canadians as well – what De Gaulle had not conceded to them in 1964: recognition of the PRC as the sole government of China and its rights over Taiwan. This would be a critical precedent for future negotiations with other key countries such as the US and Japan.

The Chinese responded with a rigid formula that suggested the acceptance of three basic “principles” as a prerequisite for establishing diplomatic relations:

- 1) Recognition of the PRC as the sole legal government representing the Chinese people;
- 2) Recognition of the province of Taiwan as an integral part of the Chinese territory, and the dissolution of all relations with Chiang Kai-Shek’s China;
- 3) Support to the PRC in the pursuit of its legitimate rights within the UN and suspension of any support to the “Chiang Kai-shek clique.”<sup>53</sup>

This formula not only affirmed the existence of “one China,” but also untied the knot of Taiwan’s political and legal status by stating that the PRC, as the sole government of all China, had legitimate sovereignty over the “province” of Taiwan. It was a position that nobody was prepared to accept, Nenni included.

Nenni had been hoping for quick negotiations and, comforted by Ortona’s positive

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 139–142.

<sup>50</sup> ASMAE (January 28, 1969), Personal Letter (PL) n. 825, Ortona to Nenni

<sup>51</sup> ASMAE (February 8, 1969), Nenni’s handnote (no title). See also ASMAE (no date, probably May 5, 1970), “Sino-Italian negotiations for the mutual recognition,” a. Gabinetto to Moro.

<sup>52</sup> ASMAE (January 31, 1969), a. no name.

<sup>53</sup> ASMAE (no date, probably May 5, 1970), “Sino-Italian negotiations for the mutual recognition,” a. Gabinetto to Moro.



feedback on the American side, had hoped to strike an agreement with Beijing before Nixon's visit to Italy in March to show the Americans – and the Italian electorate – that he had been the first one after De Gaulle to cross the line.<sup>54</sup> The form of the Chinese position, however, appeared as an unacceptable provocation both to him and to Washington. The US could not accept a move from the Italians that might facilitate the expulsion of Taiwan from the UN.

Nenni's position on the recognition of the PRC, in fact, had a fourth and more sensitive consequence for Washington, as it risked weakening the American position on the Chinese seat at the UN. There were two different competing motions at the UN on the issue of the Chinese seat. One was a US procedural motion that treated it as an "important question" and asked for two thirds of the Assembly votes to approve it. The other was an Albanian motion that called for a simple majority in order to give the PRC the seat occupied by the ROC. Italy had opposed the Albanian motion up to that point and co-sponsored the American one so as to support its main ally and confirm its belief in the relevance of the issue. The extent of the American irritation with any change of this Italian position was to become clear to Nenni during his trip to Washington for the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of NATO in April 1969.<sup>55</sup> William P. Rogers, the Secretary of State, bluntly told Nenni that an Italian vote for the Albanian motion could lead other countries to follow suit, jeopardizing the American position in support of Taiwan, and weakening US authority in the organization. This would pose a threat to the solidity of the UN, the US being the main moral and financial supporter of the organization. "If you spit us in the eye," Rogers angrily added, "then please do not call it rain."<sup>56</sup> The US reaction and Chinese rigidity persuaded Nenni to change course and be stricter in carrying out the negotiations with Beijing.

The Chinese and the Italians had two secret channels of communication: an informal channel in Rome through the Chinese Commercial Office, and a formal one in Paris. Ever since Chinese Ambassador Huang Zhen had been recalled to China during the Cultural Revolution, the negotiations in Paris were held by the Italian economic attaché Walter Gardini – under the supervision of Ambassador Malfatti – and his Chinese counterpart, Yi Suchi. At first, in February 1969, Nenni instructed the diplomats in Paris to agree on the first and third points of the Chinese communiqué, but not on the second one – that Taiwan should be defined as a part of China –, on the basis that the Italian government should not be asked to pronounce itself on matters of sovereignty over contested territories. What Rome could do, as Gardini put it, was to "refer to what the Chinese side said."<sup>57</sup> This approach did not endure, however: in April, Nenni reversed his course and suggested that the Italian negotiators go back to the French formula. The

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<sup>54</sup> Nenni, *I conti con la storia*, 273.

<sup>55</sup> The Italians had already received a previous warning on this point by the American Embassy in Rome a few months earlier. ASMAE (February 11, 1969), a. Vice-General Director of the Office for Political Affairs to Nenni.

<sup>56</sup> Ortona, *Anni d'America*, 171–172.

<sup>57</sup> In reality, as remarked months later by Gaja in a memorandum, it was possible for Italy to recognize the legitimacy of the territorial claim of another country, but not in the context of diplomatic recognition: Rome had recognized the Indian Union and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan without mentioning the contested area of Kashmir. ASMAE (November 15, 1969), "Conversations in Paris for the establishment of normal diplomatic relations with the PRC" (no name).

Chinese “principles” should not be considered as the premises of recognition, but rather as an implicit consequence of it.

With this, the negotiations reached a sort of “productive stalemate.” The Sino-Soviet rift was quickly degenerating and the PRC’s foreign policy was rapidly shifting direction, something Mario Crema, the Italian delegate in Beijing, was well aware of. Sharing his thoughts with Nenni in June 1969, Crema wrote that Beijing seemed willing to curb the Cultural Revolution and join the international community – especially Europe – as proven by the return of such a key diplomat as Huang Zhen to Paris.<sup>58</sup>

Nenni could not take advantage of these new events: the fall of the Italian government in July forced him to step down. A new government headed by Mariano Rumor was formed a few weeks later, and Nenni’s position at the helm of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was taken by Aldo Moro, a prominent leader of the Christian Democrats. Moro’s personality was quite different from Nenni’s: he too believed that the recognition of the PRC was a “natural” choice for the government,<sup>59</sup> but was much more diplomatic than his predecessor and more concerned about Washington’s reactions to Italian initiatives. Thus, in order to grant greater traction to the Italian position vis-à-vis the Chinese and Washington, Moro preferred to conduct the negotiations through a concerted action with Ottawa.<sup>60</sup> In the fall of 1969, the degeneration of the Sino-Soviet conflict, coupled with this change in the Italian diplomatic position, reversed the dynamics of the negotiations, making the Chinese more anxious to reach a conclusion, while the Italians were biding for more time. As Gaja wrote to Moro, the Sino-Soviet conflict was at its apex and China needed to reinforce its strategic position.<sup>61</sup> The conversation held in September between Ambassadors Huang Zhen and Malfatti in Paris seemed to confirm this sensation. First Huang strongly attacked the Soviet Union as the “most conservative” of world powers, and then showed a positive and flexible attitude towards the negotiations.<sup>62</sup> Beijing wanted to normalize relations with Italy before the UN session in November to create a momentum in favor of the Albanian motion that could accelerate the admission of the PRC and the expulsion of the ROC.<sup>63</sup>

Fully aware of Beijing’s intentions and in accordance with the Canadians<sup>64</sup> Moro decided to slow down the negotiations and avoid “spitting the Americans in the eye.” That way Italy could free the negotiations with Beijing from the burden of the impending vote at

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<sup>58</sup> ASMAE (June 26, 1969), Letter, Crema to Nenni. On this point see also Pini, *Italia e Cina*, 121, note 34. Due to his prestige Huang Zhen had recently been appointed to the Central Committee of the CCP by the IX CCP Congress.

<sup>59</sup> ASMAE (September 30, 1969), Malfatti Letter to Moro n.429, note by Moro.

<sup>60</sup> ASMAE (October 16, 1969), “Draft of the Memorandum of Conversation between the Minister Moro and Canada’s foreign Minister Sharp,” attached to Letter Farace di Villaforesta to Gaja. See also Ortona, *Anni d’America*, 184; Olla Brundu, “Pietro Nenni, Aldo Moro e Il Riconoscimento Della Cina Comunista,” 41.

<sup>61</sup> ASMAE (September 25, 1969), “Cina,” Gaja to Moro n. 061/352.

<sup>62</sup> ASMAE (September 30, 1969), Letter n. 428 and n. 429, Malfatti to Moro.

<sup>63</sup> ASMAE (September 25, 1969), “Cina,” Gaja to Moro n. 061/352.

<sup>64</sup> ASMAE (October 16, 1969), “Draft of the Memorandum of Conversation between the Minister Moro and Canada’s foreign Minister Sharp,” attached to Letter Farace di Villaforesta to Gaja; see also ASMAE (October 24, 1969), Letter 061/397, Moro to Malfatti; ASMAE (October 31, 1969), a. Vice-Director General of Political Affairs Office (no name).

the UN, accept the Americans' requests by voting in favour of their motion and show respect towards the ongoing conversations with Beijing by abstaining on the Albanian motion.<sup>65</sup> Nenni did not approve of Moro's actions. Ever since his last days as Minister of Foreign Affairs, Nenni had been asking for a vote in favor of both motions.<sup>66</sup> He did not appreciate his successor's ability to rebalance the Italian negotiating position, which "had been giving the Chinese everything they were asking for," as Moro wrote to Gaja.<sup>67</sup>

Right after the vote at the UN, negotiations started afresh. As seen before, in September the Marshals suggested "playing the American card," and between December 1969 and February 1970 the Warsaw channel was reactivated. The Chinese agreed to high-level meetings with the Americans and did not make such talks conditional on settling the Taiwan issue.<sup>68</sup> Contextually, at the negotiating table with the Italians, the Chinese dropped an important part of their demands, essentially de-linking progress in the talks from the issue of Italy's relations with the ROC and Italian support of the PRC at the UN.<sup>69</sup> Moro was now willing to accelerate the negotiations, but he was also determined to do so jointly with the Canadians.<sup>70</sup> He believed that it was necessary to finalize the recognition together with them, or maybe right after them, but not before them.<sup>71</sup> It was a strategy based on simple but astute considerations. As Huang Zhen had plainly admitted to Malfatti in September, the Chinese were trying to use Ottawa and Rome as "test cases" to create a precedent that could be used with other major powers like the US or Japan.<sup>72</sup> Italy was in a slightly weaker position than Canada, however, as it did not have the same international status or leverage on the Americans as Ottawa did.<sup>73</sup> Furthermore, the Canadian government was much more stable than the Italian one, and could afford to accept a lighter compromise with Beijing than the executive in Rome.

In order to see what the Canadians could get from Beijing, Moro wanted to negotiate in

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<sup>65</sup> ASMAE (September 27, 1969), note by Moro attached at ASMAE (September 25, 1969), "Cina" Gaja to Moro. See also ASMAE (October 1, 1969), Letter n. 061/360, Moro to Malfatti. The Italian declaration on its vote at the UN can be found in ASMAE (November 6, 1969), "Declaration of vote on the Albanian project of resolution regarding the 'Chinese seat'" (no name), n. 063.

<sup>66</sup> Nenni was deeply critical of Moro's approach to the issue. See Personal Letter in Pietro Nenni, *Pietro Nenni – Aldo Moro. Carteggio 1960-1978 (Pietro Nenni – Aldo Moro. Exchanges 1960-1978)* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1998), 122. In his last days as Foreign Minister he had proposed to vote in favour of both the Albanian and the American motions: see ASMAE (July 14, 1969), Telegram, DGAP to Italian Embassy at the UN.

<sup>67</sup> Moro wrote that Nenni gave the Chinese everything they asked for without specifying who "should state what and how it should be stated [...] This is the core of the dispute. We have to figure out whether we should formally declare or carry out in practice what Nenni had already promised [i.e. discontinuing relations with Formosa and vote for the Albanian motion]," ASMAE (November 8, 1969), Moro's note on a. n. 061/429, Gaja to Moro.

<sup>68</sup> Kissinger, *On China*, 223; Chen, *Mao's China and the Cold War*, 251.

<sup>69</sup> ASMAE (November 28, 1970), "Establishment of the diplomatic relations between the Italian Republic and the PRC," DGAP (no name). See also Pini, *Italia e Cina*, 119.

<sup>70</sup> ASMAE (January 7, 1970), a. (no name) n. 061/3.

<sup>71</sup> ASMAE (March 13, 1970), Personal Letter, Gaja to Malfatti; ASMAE (March 20, 1970), Telegram n. 061.309, Ducci to Malfatti; ASMAE (April 21, 1970), Telegram n. 061/173, Moro to Ortona.

<sup>72</sup> ASMAE (September 30, 1969), Letter n. 429, Malfatti to Moro.

<sup>73</sup> ASMAE (August 28, 1970), a. n. 061/356, Ducci.

concert with them and let them be the first to cross the line with Beijing. The Italians had to follow the negotiations between Ottawa and Beijing very closely, as a result, especially in the last stages. Due to Canada's status and its closeness to Washington, the PRC viewed negotiations with Canada as a more useful test case than that with Rome. By finalizing right after the Canadians, it then seemed possible for the Italians to reach a better compromise than Ottawa on the specific terms of the agreement. Moreover, the Italian government could then argue that Italy had taken a longer time because it was firmer than the Canadians about the terms of the agreement.<sup>74</sup>

The strategy was, by all means, an astute one, but events between February and September 1970 partly deprived it of its efficacy. At the international level, Mao's wavering policies (due to the Cambodian crisis first, and the conflict with Lin Biao later) caused a stalemate on the Chinese side.<sup>75</sup> At the same time, Italian political instability – which led to the collapse of two consecutive governments between February and July, and to the formation of a third executive headed by the Christian Democrat Emilio Colombo – showed Beijing that Italy was neither a valid nor a “reliable interlocutor”. The situation persuaded the Chinese to focus their efforts on Canada, trying once again to conclude the negotiations with Ottawa before the UN session in November.<sup>76</sup> The Chinese dropped their request for an explicit reference by Canada regarding Beijing's sovereignty over Taiwan<sup>77</sup>, and on 13 October Canada and the PRC established diplomatic relations. Canada recognized the PRC as the sole legal government of China and “took note” of Beijing's “position” over Taiwan. The form of the agreement was a perfect synthesis of the interests of the two governments. The Chinese wanted to reach recognition before the UN session on the basis of the “one China” formula with some reference to the Taiwan issue. Hence, according to the Marshals' suggestion, they decided to compromise on the wording by dropping their request of “recognition” by Ottawa of their rights over Taiwan. The Canadians, in turn, strengthened their relations with Beijing – an important economic partner for Canada's grain exports<sup>78</sup> – with a

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<sup>74</sup> ASMAE (April 25, 1970), Letter n. 62, Malfatti to Ducci; ASMAE (August 5, 1970), Letter n. 73, Gardini to Ducci; ASMAE (October 5, 1970), a. (no name).

<sup>75</sup> “It is clear – wrote Malfatti – that in the midst of the heated anti-American polemics over this issue [Indochina] that Mao started after April 30, parallel specific activism by Beijing to establish diplomatic relations with countries considered very close to the US would look inappropriate,” ASMAE (June 19, 1970), Letter n. 68, Malfatti a Moro.

<sup>76</sup> ASMAE (February 12, 1970), Letter n. 26, Malfatti to Moro; ASMAE (March 13, 1970) Letter n. 46, Malfatti to Moro.

<sup>77</sup> “The Canadian High Commission here told us that at the Stockholm meeting on March 19 (the thirteenth in the series) the Chinese had advanced a new wording for a Joint Communiqué, which appeared to mark a considerable shift in the Chinese position. In particular, it dropped the explicit reference to Canadian respect for Peking's sovereignty over Taiwan. [...] the crucial part of the new draft communiqué had the Chinese side reiterating their stand that Taiwan was an inalienable part of China and the Canadian side ‘taking note’ of the Chinese position [...]” Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) (June 3, 1970), “Sino-Canadian Relations,” Mr Wilford-Sir S. Tomlinson in Folder n. 21/666 (1970), “Relations between China and Canada.”

<sup>78</sup> National Archives, RG 59, Central Files 1970-73, POL CHINAT-US. (October 25, 1970) Memorandum of Conversation, President Richard Nixon, C.K. Yen, Vice-President of the ROC, Henry Kissinger, Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, quoted in *Foreign Relations of the United States 1969-1976, Volume XVII: China 1969-1972*, Washington: Department of State, 237.

formula that did not expose them on the political and legal status of Taiwan and became a model for all the other countries in the following years, including the US.

In the last stage of the negotiations, however, Ottawa – probably sharing the same diffidence that the Chinese had towards the Italians<sup>79</sup> – disengaged itself from a concerted action with Rome with the result of isolating them, slowing down their action and jeopardizing Moro's strategy. "I don't know why they did it," Moro wrote to Giuseppe Saragat, the then President of the Italian Republic, "but as a matter of fact they left us exposed (*scoperti*) without much room for maneuver on the timing and forms for the recognition."<sup>80</sup> In fact, before the Canadians shut down communication with them, the Italians had already obtained a compromise without the "take note" formula. When Ottawa accepted it, however, Rome had no choice but to follow.<sup>81</sup>

Washington also played its part. Right after Canadian recognition of the PRC, the Americans tried to push hard to persuade the Italians to slow down the negotiations, firm up their position with Beijing and once again push forward the 'two China' theory. Italy, they said, could be a "bridge" for all the other countries that were to recognize the PRC, including the US. Their actions were mostly directed towards Colombo, who seemed quite sensitive to American suggestions.<sup>82</sup> The Americans, as Ortona put it, "were now jumping on us with extreme violence."<sup>83</sup>

Nevertheless, Moro did not bow before American pressures, but persevered, with the

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<sup>79</sup> British Diplomat J. D. I. Boyd from the UK Embassy in Washington wrote in a memorandum that Molgat, of the Canadian embassy, had informed him of their exchange of notes with the Italians on tactics to be employed in the negotiations with the Chinese. "The Canadians see this as the best way of avoiding pre-emption by the Italians. [...] However the arrangement has its risks [...]. He said that the Canadians had no reason to doubt Italian discretion, but they had some doubts about their technical competence in security matters." Boyd added that it seemed that the Italians were willing to accept what the Canadians had refused to accept – i.e. to "respect" (尊重, *zunzhong*) the Chinese stand on Taiwan and hence "sell the Canadians down the river." FCO (March 5, 1970), "China/Italy/Canada," J. D. I. Boyd to L. V. Appleyard, Folder n. 21/666 (1970), "Relations between China and Canada."

<sup>80</sup> ASMAE (November 2, 1970), Letter, Moro to Saragat. Further confirmation comes from the documents of the FCO: Gardini told Palliser in Paris that the Italian government had originally wished to avoid the "take note" formula accepted by Ottawa and have a relatively short communiqué about the establishment of diplomatic relations and leave it to the Chinese, if they wished, to make a long statement about Formosa etc. to which the Italians would not have objected. But as the Canadians had already accepted the "take note" formula, if the Chinese insisted, the Italian government was going to accept it too. FCO (October 13, 1970), "Morgan's letter to Palliser" FEC3/311/1 of July 3: "Sino-Italian relations", Telegram n. 984, Palliser (UK Embassy in Paris) to FCO in FCO 21/665 (1970), "Relations between China and Italy."

<sup>81</sup> ASMAE (November 28, 1970), "Establishment of diplomatic relations between the Italian Republic and the PRC," DGAP (no name).

<sup>82</sup> For the same reason, he had already contributed to weakening Moro's plan by postponing the approval of his final draft of the communiqué with Beijing until the day after Ottawa officially recognized the PRC. Moro wanted to convey his final proposal to the Chinese at the end of September – ASMAE (September 26, 1970), Letter n. 061/395, Gaja to Catalano di Melilo; – but Colombo's approval took much longer than expected. Cf. ASMAE (October 14, 1970), Letter n. 061/425.

<sup>83</sup> Ortona, *Anni d'America*, 258.

approval of the executive.<sup>84</sup> On 5 November, Italy and the PRC reached a final agreement, which was made public one day later. The formula of the communiqué was almost identical to the Canadian one with the difference that Italy “took note” of the Chinese “declaration” – instead of “position” as in the Canadian communiqué – about the PRC’s rights over Taiwan. It was probably a meager consolation, but sufficient to demonstrate Italy’s desire to obtain a more advanced compromise than Ottawa. “We ignore the problem of Beijing’s territorial competence,” Ortona wrote to the Italian desk of the U.S. State Department, “and simply declare that China depends on Beijing’s government and nothing else. Consequently, nothing is compromised as for possible developments towards Taiwan.”<sup>85</sup>

At the following session of the UN, Italy took a more balanced position. Moro believed that the issue of the Chinese seat was a matter of extreme importance and in part out of respect for Washington’s wishes, decided to vote in favor of both the Albanian and the American motions at the UN. Although each of them was approved, the former did not reach the “quorum” and thus did not pass. China had to wait one more year to enter the UN, but the course of history had already changed and Italy was certainly one of its protagonists.

## Conclusions

When newly-elected American President Richard Nixon visited Rome at the end of February 1969 he met with Rumor. In a private meeting, Rumor told him about Italy’s intention to recognize the PRC and Nixon seemed quite surprised: “It is your fault, you should have followed the British line,” Rumor said. “What was not done yesterday, can always be done tomorrow” the US President replied.<sup>86</sup> These words epitomize almost 20 years of Sino-Italian relations.

From the establishment of the PRC until 1964, Italian governments repeatedly tried to initiate diplomatic relations with the PRC, but the Cold War system and the PRC’s inflexibility regarding the terms of recognition limited their margins of action. Italy did not have any special interests in Asia like the UK or France and was more dependent on Washington and its containment policies against China than either of those European powers.

Nevertheless, in 1964, three new factors emerged to facilitate Sino-Italian engagement: the Sino-Soviet split; De Gaulle’s courageous initiative towards Beijing; and the beginning of the center-left season in Italy, with the socialists playing a key role in the rapprochement with Beijing. These factors sufficed to open a commercial office that

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Olla Brundu correctly noted that the Chinese were probably willing to concede more to the Italians in order to send Washington a message of flexibility on the formula of recognition. Olla Brundu, “Pietro Nenni, Aldo Moro e il riconoscimento della Cina comunista,” 44. See also Ortona, *Anni d’America*, 259.

<sup>86</sup> Sergio Romano, “Italia e Cina, la lunga marcia del riconoscimento,” (Italy and China, the long march for recognition) *Aspenia* 50 (2010): 28, <http://www.aspeninstitute.it/en/system/files/inline/026-033%20Romano%2050.pdf>, accessed January 2, 2013.

functioned as a *de facto* embassy, but were not enough to achieve proper normalization. China's role in Indochina obstructed that possibility. The window of opportunity for normalization came in 1968 due to the degeneration of the Sino-Soviet conflict, which led to a profound revision of Beijing's foreign policy towards Vietnam and the West, the US included. In previous years, Mao had tried to use the economic leverage on European capitalist forces to weaken the US-led front of non-recognition, increase the contradictions within the imperialist front and isolate the ROC. When the Soviet "social-imperialist" threat became imminent, however, Mao tamed the ideological tension of the Cultural Revolution and progressively softened China's foreign policy in Indochina and Europe as a step to appease Washington. Mao believed that since the main danger for China came from Soviet social-imperialism, it was necessary for Beijing to engage with the West and form a united front against Moscow. The strategic imperative also imposed more flexibility on the Taiwan issue. When China started negotiations with Italy in February 1969, the Sino-Soviet conflict had not yet reached its highest point and Beijing, stimulated by Nenni's eagerness to achieve normalization, kept a maximalist approach with the Italians. The conflict with the Soviets progressively degenerated and, by autumn 1969, the Americans had secretly sided with Beijing and avoided a Soviet strike. As a result, the Chinese accepted the Americans' offer for high-level dialogue without preconditions over Taiwan. At the same time, the Chinese dropped some of the most radical requests for normalization that they had made to Italy. The same thing happened again, one year later, right after the end of the US operation in Cambodia, when the Chinese renounced their prerequisite that Italy should "recognize" China's rights over Taiwan.

The combined effect of these events, and Nixon's willingness to change the course of US China policy, led to a drastic change in the US attitude towards Beijing. Before 1969, Washington and Rome had diverged on their China policy; after 1969, as Ortona said, they had "parallel divergences." The Nixon administration approved the logic of the Italian initiative, but kept a low profile, as it had to deal with the sensitivity of the domestic public opinion regarding the Taiwan issue.

At the end of 1968, the Italians appeared to have more room for action and Nenni was the right person at the right place to take advantage of it. He broke the stalemate and paved the way for negotiations with Beijing. In so doing, however, he was driven more by his own political agenda than by the logic of diplomacy. By pursuing an ambitious course of action without sufficient attention paid to the form of the agreement being discussed, he ended up alienating Washington. When Moro took his place as Foreign Minister he realized that on this matter form was as important as substance. "To be honest," he noted at the margin of a memo drafted by Gaja, "the gravest implications of the break with Formosa and its exclusion from the UN derive from the recognition [of the PRC], even if they will not be explicitly stated. The difference between good or bad negotiation simply lies in the fact that we affirm or not some specific things." On December 1969 he made this clear to Canadian Foreign Minister Mitchell Sharp. The negotiations, Moro said, were "just a matter of words" and it was "unavoidable that after that there would be a *de facto* acceptance of what Beijing asked. The ideal solution would be keeping Taiwan at the UN, as a non-Chinese state, but this is not a real possibility."<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> ASMAE, (December 5, 1969), "Note on the conversations between Minister Moro and the Canadian Foreign Minister Sharp at NATO, Brussels, 5 December 1969 at 9.30 a.m.," (no

A few days earlier, Moro had complained to Gaja about Nenni's position because, he said, "it gave the Chinese everything they asked for." The essence of Nenni's position, however, was the same as Moro's: they both recognized the PRC as the sole government of China and neither of them formally acknowledged the PRC's rights over Taiwan. The difference was in the "form" of the recognition, a very important element indeed for Washington. The US, in fact, aimed to preserve as much ambiguity as possible on both the political and legal status of Taiwan in order to keep as much room for maneuver as possible in future negotiations with Beijing. Italy and Canada were two test cases for both Beijing and Washington that had to prove the margins of flexibility on the terms of recognition.

Moro was much more concerned than Nenni about Washington's sensitivity, making him more cautious about the form of the compromise to be reached with Beijing. As a matter of fact, the Chinese were the ones who bent their position more in the course of the negotiations, as they were moved by greater imperatives, such as the imminence of the Soviet threat and the necessity to start a meaningful dialogue with Washington. This environmental condition was a critical asset for Moro.

Nonetheless, Moro had the merit of taking maximum advantage of the situation and turning Beijing's willingness to reach a compromise into an advantage for Italy. Italian political instability, the about-face of the Canadians, and last-minute American pressures did not prevent him from accomplishing his goal. In the final stages of the negotiations, he proved to understand the limits of achievable convergence between Italian and American national interests and stood firm in his pursuit to serve the former without compromising the latter.



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