

Geopolitical constraints on China's soft power: A framing analysis of the Belt and Road Initiative coverage in Italian news media

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Abstract

This article examines the framing of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in Italian news media between 2017 and 2023, a period that captures Italy's full trajectory of engagement with the initiative: from early optimism and eventual participation to disillusionment and withdrawal. Italy occupies an exceptional position: it was the first and only G7 country to sign a BRI Memorandum of Understanding in 2019 despite longstanding Western alignments, and the first country to officially terminate its participation. Drawing on a soft-power perspective, the study shows that Italian coverage was initially favourable, presenting the BRI as an economic opportunity. Over time, however, economic coverage receded as the dominant interpretive frame moved toward security, strategic rivalry, and concerns over China's political intentions. While existing research on BRI news coverage has focused largely on Global South contexts, Western cases shaped by entrenched alliance structures remain understudied. The Italian case demonstrates that China's soft-power appeal is conditioned by geopolitical alignments and media discourse: attraction and strategic positioning coexist, and frequently collide, within the communicative environments where narratives are produced and contested.

Keywords

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Italy, framing analysis, content analysis, China, soft power, media and geopolitics, international news

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Introduction

How should we Europeans look at China? Through the eyes of the economy, as we have done over the past decades, or through the eyes of politics? (Taino, 2020).¹

No other initiative captures China's growing ambitions to shape the international order and its increasing economic influence more clearly than the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Launched by President Xi Jinping in 2013, the BRI was presented as a grand vision to strengthen cross-border connectivity across Asia, Africa, and Europe through enhanced infrastructure, policy coordination and trade (Brakman et al., 2019). Over the past decade, it has expanded to encompass roughly 150 countries, evolving into a comprehensive framework that covers large-scale infrastructure financing, digital connectivity, and cultural exchange. Although most BRI financing has been directed toward countries in the Global South, Europe also figures prominently in the initiative, both materially, as a core trading region, and symbolically, given Beijing's narrative linking the BRI to the ancient Silk Road connecting Asia and Europe (Comerma, 2024).

The implementation of the BRI has generated sharply divergent political narratives, with China promoting one vision of the initiative as a win-win cooperation and the US advancing another one as a tool for establishing China's dominance (Bhuiyan and Yi, 2024). In parallel, a growing body of literature has examined elite discourse on the BRI and its journalistic coverage (e.g., Kuteleva and Vasiliev, 2020; Vila-Seoane, 2023; Yang and Van Gorp, 2023). Some studies have focused on the BRI's implications for China's soft power, contributing to broader debates on media representations of China's international image (e.g., Miao, 2021; Turcsanyi and Kachlikova, 2020). This perspective emphasises the *discursive* dimensions of the BRI, viewing it as an integral component of China's image-building efforts (Boni, 2023).

Situated within this academic context, this paper presents the results of a quantitative content analysis examining shifts over time in the framing of China's BRI coverage in Italian news media. The study examines 7 years from 2017 to 2023, capturing both major geopolitical developments and Italy's evolving foreign policy stance (Natalizia and Termine, 2025; Pugliese et al., 2022). In May 2017, the first Belt and Road Forum took place in Beijing, attended by Italy's then-Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni – the only G7 head of government present. This led to heightened attention in the national media. The endpoint, 2023, marks the year Italy notified of its intention to withdraw from the initiative, having formally joined in 2019 through the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU).

This 7-year period, therefore, represents a complete temporal arc, during which Italy underwent the full cycle of engagement, disillusionment, and diplomatic recalibration. As the only member of the G7 to have formally joined the initiative and the first participating country to subsequently withdraw, Italy offers a "deviant case" within the broader population of BRI participants (Seawright and Gerring, 2008) and an ideal context for examining the interplay between soft power and geopolitics as mediated through news coverage.

The next section reviews the literature on China's soft power and BRI media coverage, identifying a conceptual gap between Nye's normative conception of soft power as attraction (Nye, 2004) and the complex dynamics of contemporary geopolitics. This is

followed by a brief contextualisation of the Italian case and the selected news outlets, grounded in the literature on international news coverage. After describing the approach to retrieving the corpus of news articles and the framing scheme, the second part of the paper presents and discusses the empirical results of the content analysis. Echoing the opening quote from one of the news articles in the corpus, it shows how Italian journalists increasingly came to view the BRI through the lens of geopolitics rather than economics over the course of study period.

China's soft power and BRI narratives

China's rise on the world stage and sustained efforts to cultivate its soft power have generated a substantial literature examining how the country's image is portrayed in foreign news media (e.g., [Golan and Lukito, 2015](#); [Peng, 2004](#); [Sparks, 2010](#)). Findings point to the prevalence of a critical framing, particularly in Western and English-language media. Within this literature, the BRI has emerged over the past decade as one of the most frequently examined issue areas (e.g., [Kuteleva and Vasiliev, 2020](#); [Yang and Van Gorp, 2023](#)). Not only does the BRI combine hard resources (finance, technology, logistics) with soft mechanisms (cultural diplomacy, media partnerships). Beyond its economic and infrastructural dimensions, the BRI also functions as a *discursive* project that positions China as the architect of a new, more inclusive model of globalisation. It arguably represents China's most ambitious effort to translate material capabilities into symbolic influence – or, as put in a 2017 Soft Power 30 report, to combine “the hard power of its economic muscle with the soft power of a cooperative, inclusive narrative” (cited in [Miao, 2021](#): 164).

Moving beyond Nye's conception of soft power as attraction rooted in culture, values, and foreign policy ([Nye, 2004](#)), this article shifts analytical attention from the sources of attraction themselves to the media framing processes through which legitimacy is either reinforced or contested. Nye's framework tends to presume a relatively open and symmetrical international environment in which attraction can operate and be evaluated on its own terms. It therefore underplays the ways in which soft power is structured by geopolitical alliances, power asymmetries, and media systems. Later critics ([Repnikova, 2022](#); [Thussu, 2024](#); [Xin, 2020](#)) have argued that soft power does not exist in a vacuum; it is mediated and constrained by pre-existing political alignments and interpretive systems. In practice, attraction competes with, rather than replaces, the hard-power logics of security and alliance politics. This limitation in the original conceptualisation of soft power becomes especially salient when assessing China's rise. While China has invested heavily in the cultural and communicative dimensions of soft power, the reception of China's image and intentions is conditioned by strategic rivalries and the interpretive dominance of Western media systems.

This article, therefore, places media narratives at the centre of soft power dynamics, treating journalism as a key mediating mechanism through which soft-power initiatives are framed, interpreted, and either amplified or contested. Journalistic narratives help structure the symbolic environment in which attraction or distrust becomes intelligible, while news production itself is shaped by broader political and ideological forces. This

dual role underpins the paper's analysis of the BRI, a case in which competing narratives collide within highly politicised media environments.

Existing studies show that BRI narratives in Chinese and Western elite and media discourse diverge sharply (Bhuiyan and Yi, 2024; Chan and Song, 2020). China's official framing casts the initiative as a project of "win-win" cooperation and inclusive development, foregrounding infrastructure connectivity, trade, and investment as responses to global development deficits. Dominant Western framings, by contrast, revolve around threat narratives: *economically*, Chinese finance is portrayed as predatory and dependency-inducing; *strategically*, the BRI is treated as a channel for translating economic ties into geopolitical leverage, with implications for sovereignty and security; *normatively*, it is depicted as diffusing authoritarian governance practices and illiberal standards. These competing narratives thus structure the symbolic environment in which the BRI's legitimacy is evaluated.

Existing research on international news coverage of the BRI has focused either on English-speaking countries (e.g., Teo and Xu, 2021; Zhang and Wu, 2017) or on the Global South, particularly Latin America (e.g., Morante and Wu, 2023; Vila Seoane, 2023). By contrast, research on Europe remains limited (Miao, 2021; Turcsanyi and Kachlikova, 2020), and studies specifically on Italy are even scarcer. An exception is Negro (2020), which analyses coverage of Xi Jinping's March 2019 visit to Italy, though only for a single episode (for broader analyses of Italian political discourse, see Boni, 2023; Caterina, 2025). Our study, therefore, addresses this research gap by offering a highly significant national case study of European engagement with the BRI, given Italy's unique position as the only G7 member to have formally joined the initiative.

A particularly relevant precursor to our study is Turcsanyi and Kachlikova's (2020) examination of BRI news framing in the United Kingdom, Spain, and Poland. Covering the first 4 years of the initiative (mid-2013 to mid-2017), the authors conclude that "the media reported about the initiative quite positively", largely following "Chinese narratives of economic opportunities while overlooking geopolitical and security worries" (2020: 58). Building on their study, our Italian case study focusses on BRI's later phase to assess their hypothesis that Europe's increasingly critical stance toward China from mid-2018 onward – reflected in actions such as the April 2018 letter from EU ambassadors criticising the BRI for distorting free trade and the March 2019 EU strategic document identifying China as a "systemic rival" – would result in more critically-framed reporting on the BRI. Thus, our study addresses the following research question.

RQ1: How did Italian news media frame China's BRI between 2017 and 2023, and how did this framing evolve as Italy moved from participation to withdrawal amid a shifting geopolitical context?

The Italian context

During the period examined in this study, Italy experienced five governments with distinct foreign-policy orientations. In the early phase (2017–2018), a centre-left government pursued a policy of rapprochement with China aimed at deepening economic ties (Boni, 2023). Following the 2018 general elections, this trajectory culminated in the signing of

the BRI MoU in March 2019 under the first of two coalition governments led by Giuseppe Conte and supported by the populist and Eurosceptic Five Star Movement (2018–2022) (Pugliese et al., 2022). A marked shift, however, followed the formation of a technocratic coalition government headed by former European Central Bank president Mario Draghi (2021–2022), which steered Italy back toward its traditional Atlanticist stance amid worsening US-China relations. After the 2022 general elections, the new right-wing Meloni government (2022–present) continued along the same path, culminating in the decision not to renew the BRI MoU beyond its expiration in March 2024 (Fasola and Lucarelli, 2024).

A long tradition of journalism studies has shown that news coverage of international affairs tends to reflect a country's foreign policy stance, as journalistic accounts tend to reproduce frames and arguments circulating among governing elites (e.g., Gans, 2004[1979]). However, the Italian news media system is characterised by high political parallelism, with outlets maintaining strong political allegiances that shape their editorial lines (D'Arma, 2015; Hallin and Mancini, 2004). Given that successive governments and rival parties adopted divergent positions toward China during the period under study, these cleavages are likely to have structured how the BRI was framed across ideologically different outlets – even as elite-media alignment may have exerted a countervailing pressure toward convergence. This leads to our second research question.

RQ2: How did the framing of China's BRI vary across ideologically and politically diverse Italian news outlets between 2017 and 2023?

Italian newspapers were selected to represent a broad spectrum of political orientations and institutional perspectives within the national press. The sample comprises five prominent outlets: *Corriere della Sera* (moderate centrist), *La Repubblica* (centre-left), *Il Sole 24 Ore* (Italy's leading financial newspaper, owned by the main industry association and reflecting Italy's industrial interests), *Il Fatto Quotidiano* (an anti-establishment newspaper often associated with the Five Star Movement, under whose government Italy joined the BRI), and *Il Giornale* (right-wing and strongly supportive of Italy's transatlantic alignment).

Methods

Sample retrieval

Articles were retrieved from Factiva using the following keyword string: “(Cina OR Cinese OR Cinesi OR Pechino) AND (BRI OR “Belt and Road” OR “Via della Seta” OR “Vie della Seta”)”. The BRI is commonly referred to in Italian as “Iniziativa Belt and Road” or “Iniziativa della Nuova Via della Seta,” and occasionally in its plural form or through its English acronym BRI. The second string of keywords was therefore designed to capture all possible references to the initiative.²

The initial search returned 2463 articles, from which a final sample of 888 articles was selected, including news reports (51.4% of the sample), analyses/commentaries (28.6%), interviews (10.1%), long features (9.0%), and a small number of book reviews (0.9%).

Articles shorter than 200 words were excluded, as were those that mentioned the BRI only in passing, without providing a substantive discussion of its projects, official events related to the initiative, or its wider economic and strategic implications.

Coding

Working with Robert Entman's widely cited definition of news framing as the journalistic practice of "selecting and highlighting some facets of events or issues, and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation and/or solution" (Entman, 1993: 52), the analysis focused on the *textual* elements of news articles. A mixed deductive–inductive approach was employed to develop an original framing scheme. An initial set of frames, based on review of the literature on BRI narratives, was refined through a pilot test and iterative revision of the codebook. The final scheme consists of eight frames – four critical and four favourable – organised as opposite pairs. Table 1 below provides a description of each frame. The first three pairs were derived from the literature. The framing pair "BRI Setbacks, Challenges and Unmet

Table 1. Framing scheme.

Frame	Description
Critical frames	
1a: BRI as a strategic threat	Frames the BRI as a tool of Chinese geopolitical influence, undermining national sovereignty, western alliances, or global stability
2a: BRI as an economic threat	Frames the BRI as potentially damaging to other countries' economy, market competition, or financial sovereignty
3a: Value-based objections to BRI	Focuses on the ethical implications of engaging with the BRI, especially regarding human rights abuses in China, its authoritarian governance, and impact on western values
4a: BRI setbacks, challenges and unmet expectations	Frames the BRI as facing obstacles in implementation, or failing to deliver expected benefits, including failed infrastructure projects and disappointing trade results
Favourable frames	
1b: BRI as a strategic opportunity	Frames engagement with BRI as supporting long-term positioning and geopolitical advantages for China and/or BRI partners
2b: BRI as an economic opportunity	Frames engagement with the BRI as offering economic growth, investment, or infrastructure benefits to other countries or regions
3b: Cooperation and inclusive development through BRI	Frames engagement with BRI as desirable, emphasising China's role in providing infrastructure to developing countries, promoting south-south cooperation, or offering an alternative to western dominance
4b: BRI achievements, progress and milestones	Emphasises key diplomatic, economic or infrastructural developments associated with the BRI, presented as steps forward, successes, or notable progress

Expectations” versus “BRI Achievements, Progress and Milestones” was added to capture news reporting and commentary that, while not framing China’s BRI as a strategic, economic, or ideological threat/opportunity, nonetheless either problematised it by highlighting challenges or presented it positively by emphasising accomplishments. Articles using ostensibly neutral/descriptive language to report on BRI-related diplomatic or business milestones were coded under the “BRI Achievements...” frame, as such coverage tended to reinforce a broader narrative of progress. For each identified frame, the primary “actor” to which the frame applied was also coded: either Italy, China, the European Union (EU), the US/Western countries, other BRI-participating countries, or “All.” The actor coding identified who was portrayed as benefiting from opportunities or, conversely, exposed to threats.

The unit of analysis was the entire article, with particular attention to the headline, lead and closing paragraphs as key indicators for identifying salient frames. Because news reporting rarely operates within a single frame, the coding protocol allowed up to two frames to be assigned to each article when they were similarly prominent. This approach enabled the analysis to capture nuance in coverage more effectively, including instances of overlapping economic and strategic frames and of both critical and favourable frames coexisting within the same article. Given that it was often difficult to determine a dominant frame, an equal-weight approach was adopted, assigning each article a total weight of 2 for the frame dimension. If two frames were identified, each was assigned a weight of 1; if only one was applicable, it was assigned a weight of 2. This approach ensured that articles with only one code (a dominant frame) were not under-represented in the analysis and allowed for greater analytical nuance without requiring subjective judgments about primacy.

Articles were also coded for two additional dimensions: (1) whether coverage centred on domestic political contestation, and (2) whether it situated the BRI within a wider geopolitical context. For the latter, the main categories included US–China rivalry, EU–China rivalry, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the war in Ukraine. These two additional dimensions provided contextual support for interpreting the main framing analysis.

For the same purpose, topic domains and cited sources were also coded. Topic domains included: “Economy, Finance, Business & Trade,” “Infrastructure & Logistics,” “Geopolitics/International Relations,” “Security & Strategic Concerns,” and “Sino-Italian bilateral relations.” Since articles often span multiple issues, topic domains were coded using the same multi-code and weighting procedure applied in the framing analysis. Up to three sources were coded per article. Since most articles cited three or fewer sources, this threshold provided a practical limit. Where more than three sources appeared, priority was given to: (1) sources directly addressing the BRI; (2) those cited most prominently; and (3) ensuring representation across different source types. Sources were classified by both type (political, business, expert, media, or other) and origin (Chinese, Italian, Western, or other).

A pilot coding phase involving the two authors was conducted on a subset of 50 randomly selected news articles to refine the codebook and establish consistent coding rules (the second author worked with verified English translations). After finalising the scheme, the first author coded the full dataset. While recommended in content analysis, multi-coder designs with formal intercoder reliability testing are not always feasible.

Careful codebook development and transparent reporting of coding procedures are essential components of rigour, particularly when full dual coding of the entire dataset is not undertaken (Neuendorf, 2017). As with any single-coder approach, this design prioritises coding consistency over formal intercoder reliability, which should be considered when interpreting the findings.

Results

Overview of BRI coverage

The volume of BRI-related coverage over the 7-year study period was uneven. Annual output ranged from 71 articles in 2018 to a peak of 282 articles in 2019 (across the five outlets). Coverage was especially concentrated in March 2019, the month Italy signed the BRI MoU, when 139 articles were published – more than 15% of the full sample (Figure 1) (Figure 1).

La Repubblica and *Il Sole 24 Ore* published almost identical numbers of articles on the BRI over the 7 years (241 and 240, respectively). However, their output followed different patterns (Figure 2): *Il Sole 24 Ore* produced more coverage in the first 4 years, whereas *La Repubblica* increased its output from 2021 onward, becoming the most prolific outlet in the later years. By contrast, both *Il Giornale* (131 articles) and, especially, *Il Fatto Quotidiano* (71) published significantly fewer pieces, with minimal coverage in the first 2 years.

Across the 7-year period, critical frames prevailed over favourable ones, accounting for 64.1% of all identified frames. “Strategic Threat” was the most frequent frame (37.8%),

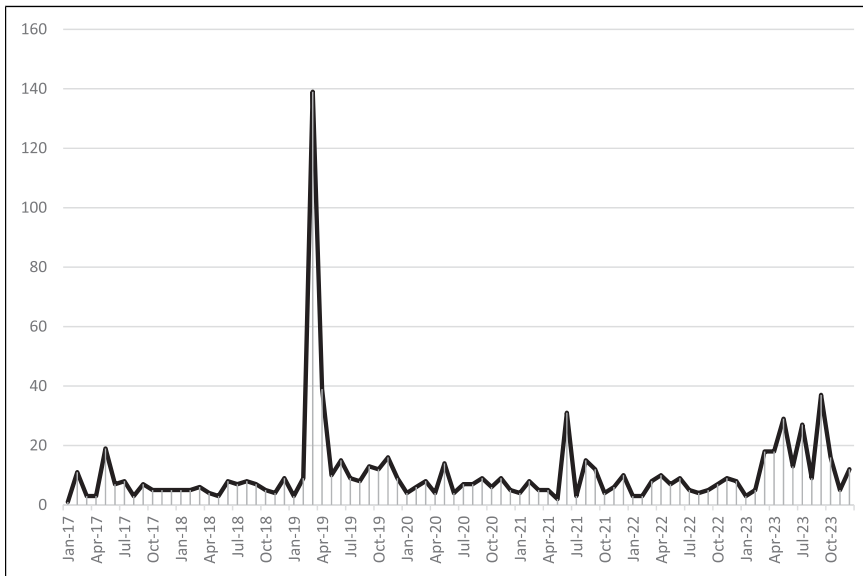


Figure 1. Monthly number of BRI-related articles in selected news outlets, 2017–2023.

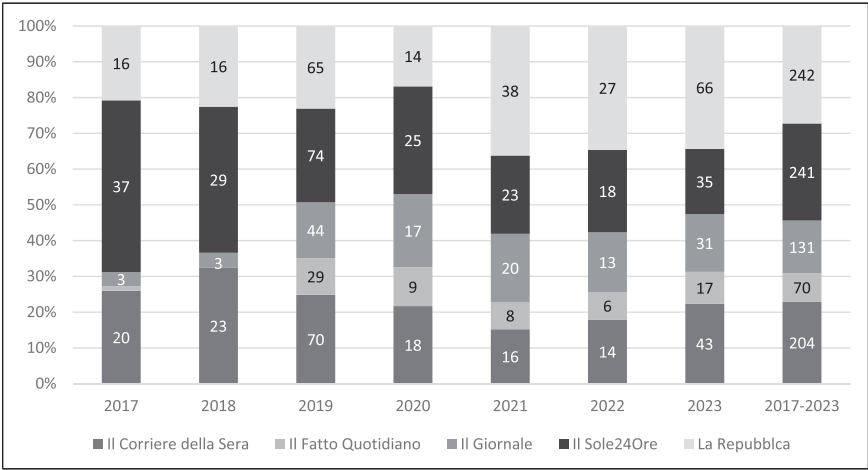


Figure 2. Yearly breakdown of BRI-related articles published in selected news outlets.
Note. $\chi^2(24) = 75.34, p < .001; N = 888$. In the column chart, data labels represent the absolute number of articles rather than percentages.

followed by “Economic Opportunity” (20.6%) and “BRI Setbacks, Challenges, and Unmet Expectations,” (14.6%). Framing patterns varied substantially across the five outlets (Table 2).

Il Giornale and *La Repubblica*, despite occupying opposite ends of the political spectrum (but sharing a pro-Atlanticist stance), offered the most critically framed BRI coverage. Critical frames accounted for 87.8% of all frames in *Il Giornale* and 77.3% in *La Repubblica*, with the “Strategic Threat” frame alone representing roughly half of all

Table 2. BRI frames by news outlet, 2017–2023 (%).

Frame	CdS	FQ	Gior	S24O	Rep	All
Strategic threat	36.3	26.4	56.5	25.5	44.8	37.9
Economic threat	6.9	6.4	6.1	6.6	8.1	7.0
Value-based objections	4.2	4.3	12.2	0.2	5.8	4.7
Setbacks, challenges...	14.5	9.3	13.0	12.9	18.6	14.5
Total critical frames	61.8	46.4	87.8	45.2	77.3	64.1
Strategic opportunity	4.4	8.6	1.1	4.8	4.8	4.4
Economic opportunity	22.8	34.3	8.0	29.7	12.6	20.6
Inclusive development...	2.9	4.3	0.0	2.3	1.0	1.9
Achievements, progress...	8.1	6.4	3.1	18.0	4.3	8.9
Total favourable frames	38.2	53.6	12.2	54.8	22.7	35.9
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Note. $\chi^2(4) = 237.04, p < .001. N = 888$.
CdS: *Corriere della Sera*; FQ: *Il Fatto Quotidiano*; Gior: *Il Giornale*; S24O: *Il Sole24Ore*; Rep: *La Repubblica*.

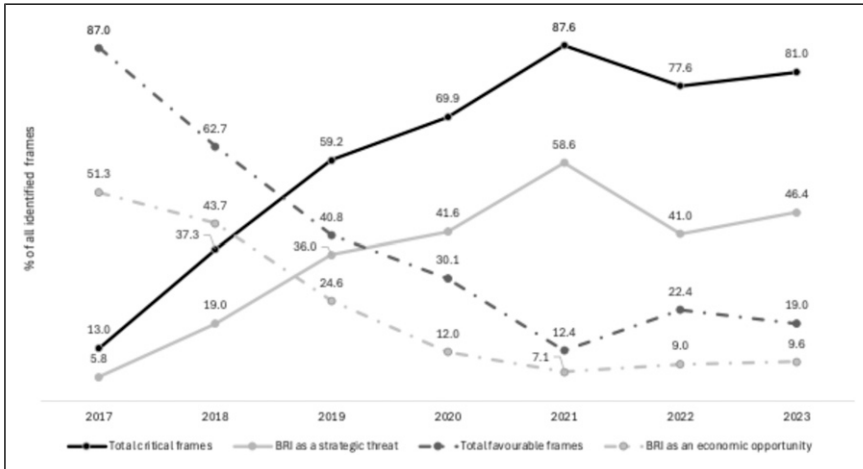


Figure 3. Trends in the framing of BRI-related news coverage, 2017–2023 (%).

frames. Coverage in *Il Corriere della Sera* was also predominantly critical (61.8%), though less so than in *Il Giornale* and *La Repubblica*. By contrast, the most favourable coverage appeared in *Il Sole 24 Ore* and *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, where positive frames marginally outnumbered negative ones, accounting respectively for 54.8% and 53.6% of all identified frames.

More striking than the aggregate patterns were the pronounced temporal shifts in how the BRI was framed, with coverage becoming progressively more critical over time (Figure 3).

Table 3. BRI frames by period (%).

Frame	2017–18 (n = 148)	2019 (n = 282)	2020–22 (n = 262)	2023 (n = 192)	All
Strategic threat	12.2	36.0	48.1	46.4	37.9
Economic threat	6.4	8.0	5.5	8.1	7.0
Value-based objections	1.4	5.3	6.0	4.7	4.7
Setbacks, challenges...	4.7	9.9	19.5	21.9	14.5
Total critical frames	24.7	59.2	79.1	81.0	64.1
Strategic opportunity	12.2	2.8	3.6	2.1	4.4
Economic opportunity	47.6	24.6	9.2	9.6	20.6
Inclusive development...	0.3	1.8	3.0	1.8	1.9
Achievements, progress...	15.2	11.5	5.1	5.5	8.9
Total favourable frames	75.3	40.8	20.9	19.0	35.9
Total	100	100	100	100	100

Note. $\chi^2(3) = 305.88$, $p < .001$. $N = 888$.

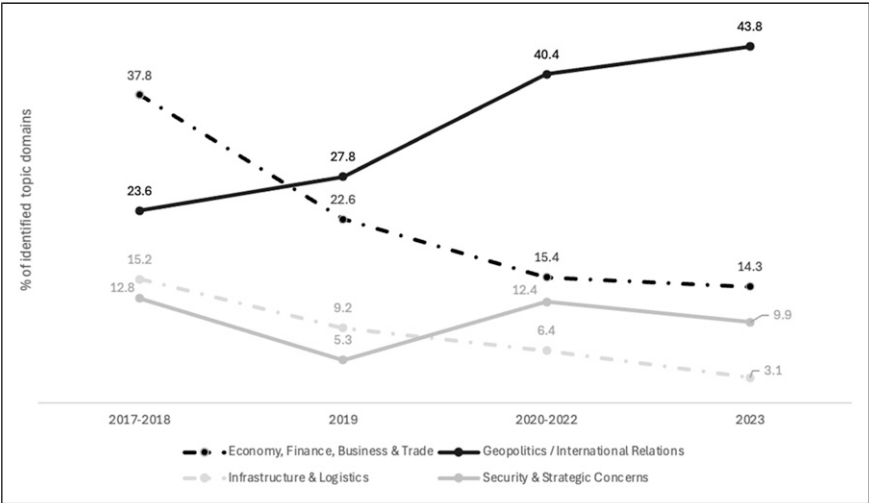


Figure 4. Selected topic domains by period (%).

This led to identifying four distinct phases in BRI coverage: (1) Italy’s early engagement with BRI (2017–2018); (2) Italy’s accession to the BRI (2019); (3) BRI coverage amid heightened geopolitical rivalries (2020–2022); and (4) Italy’s withdrawal from the BRI (2023). The sections that follow discuss each phase in turn, referring to data presented in Table 3 (frames), Figure 4 (topic domains) and Figure 5 (sources) below.

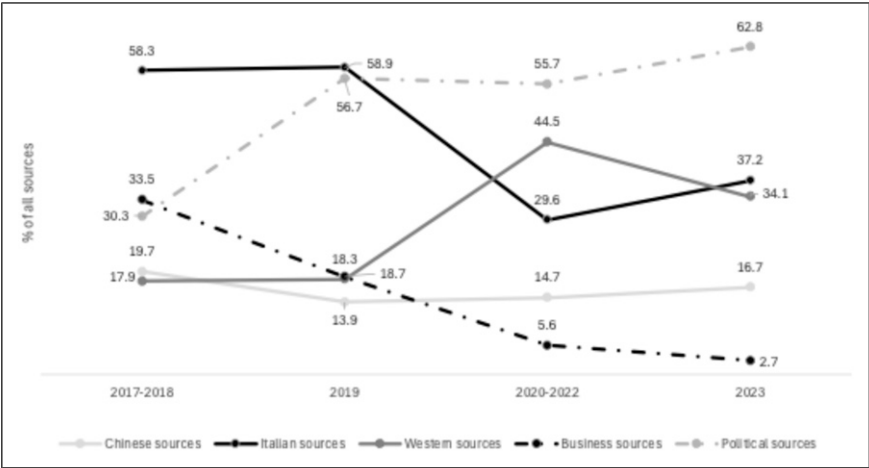


Figure 5. Selected source types by period (%).

Italy's early engagement with the BRI (2017–2018)

News coverage of the BRI in 2017 and for much of 2018 – during Italy's initial engagement under a centre-left government – was overwhelmingly positive. 75.3% of all identified frames in these first 2 years of coverage were favourable, with nearly half (47.6%) portraying the BRI as an economic opportunity (mostly with Italy depicted as the beneficiary).

In 2017, several high-level events strengthened Sino-Italian diplomatic relations. These included President Sergio Mattarella's state visit to China in February, the inaugural Belt and Road Forum in Beijing in May – attended by Italian Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni, the only G7 head of government present – and the Italy–China Business Forum held in Milan in December. Italian news media coverage during this period largely reflected the government's stance, contributing to a narrative of progress and economic opportunities. One particularly enthusiastic endorsement, for instance, described the BRI as “a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for Italians” (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 21.6.2017). Other representative headlines included “Italy on the ‘train of the future’ led by China” (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 21.2.2017) and “A Silk Road riding the wave” (*Il Sole 24 Ore*, 12.6.2017).

Reflecting the prominence of the “Economic Opportunity” frame, coverage during this initial period focused primarily on economic and infrastructure-related issues, which together accounted for over half of all reporting. Business voices featured prominently, representing one third of all coded sources – the largest single group. Italian business leaders were often cited urging the Italian government to create an enabling framework for Italy to serve as a Mediterranean-European hub, and portraying the BRI as an “one of the most ambitious infrastructure programs of all time and a unique opportunity for Italian businesses” (Licia Mattioli, Vice-President of Confindustria, *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 25.6.2018).

During this early phase, the “Strategic Opportunity” frame appeared as frequently as the “Strategic threat” frame (12.2%), which in later years would become the dominant frame, often casting the BRI as a central pillar in China's blueprint for a new global order and a counterbalance to US protectionism under President Donald Trump (2017–2021).

Other notable features of the early BRI coverage in Italian news media – in contrast to subsequent years' reporting – included the near-total absence of references to the domestic political debate surrounding the initiative (only 2 out of 148 articles) and the predominance of articles lacking explicit geopolitical framing (65.5%).

Italy's accession to the BRI (2019)

2019 marked the peak of BRI-related coverage and was also the first year in which critical frames outnumbered favourable ones, making up 59.2% of all frames. The most prominent among these was the “Strategic Threat” frame, which accounted for 36.0% of the total. This frame highlighted concerns that the MoU could undermine Italy's traditional transatlantic and EU alliances. It also portrayed China as seeking to exploit EU divisions to expand its political influence. By March 2019, as the MoU was signed, narratives of unmet expectations began to emerge, contrasting Italy's BRI agreements unfavourably with those secured by France outside the MoU framework. In the second half of the year, reporting increasingly emphasised the lack of concrete progress since the MoU's signing.

Despite the rise in problematising coverage, media portrayals of the BRI remained relatively balanced. Favourable and critical perspectives coexisted, with the framing of the BRI as an economic opportunity still comprising 24.6% of all frames. This reflects the continued belief in the BRI's potential to deliver tangible economic benefits for Italy.

As the BRI became a central and contested political issue in Italy, its coverage increasingly followed partisan lines: *Il Giornale* (a right-wing, pro-US outlet) featured the highest proportion of critical frames (77.3%), particularly emphasising the strategic threat frame, which alone accounted for 42.0% of its coverage. In contrast, *Il Fatto Quotidiano* – aligned with the Five Star Movement, the leading coalition partner in the Conte government that signed the MoU – showed the highest proportion of favourable framing (55.2%).

Reflecting greater attention to domestic politics and Sino-Italian relations, 2019 saw political sources rise to over half of all sources, while business sources fell by nearly half proportionally compared to 2017–18. For the first time, over half of BRI-related articles framed the initiative geopolitically, with one-third referencing US–China rivalry. Finally, one in five articles published over the year addressed domestic political divisions over the initiative, notably in the period leading up to the signing of the MoU.

BRI coverage amid great power rivalry (2020–2022)

The third phase of BRI coverage was shaped by major geopolitical crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic (2020), the Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022), and economic instability and social unrest in key BRI partner countries. Most consequentially, this period witnessed the deterioration of US–China relations. The BRI also featured prominently in reporting on major diplomatic summits, such as the G7 in Cornwall (June 2021) and the G20 in Indonesia (October 2022). Italian media coverage during these years reflected these shifting geopolitical realities: reporting on the BRI's economic and infrastructural dimensions declined, while business sources all but disappeared from news accounts, accounting for only 5.6% of all sources. The BRI was increasingly framed as an international and geopolitical issue, rather than through the lens of business, domestic politics, or Sino-Italian relations. This shift is evident in the fact that four in five articles were situated within a broader geopolitical context, whereas only around one in ten covered it through the lens of Italy's domestic politics.

Coverage became markedly more critical. The “Economic Opportunity” frame fell from 24.6% in 2019 to just 9.2% in 2020–2022. Critical frames dominated, accounting for 79.1% of all identified frames, with the “Strategic Threat” frame appearing in nearly half (48.1%). The BRI was increasingly portrayed as an instrument of Chinese geopolitical and ideological influence, conveyed in an often strongly critical tone, as illustrated in the following quotes:

It is now all too evident that China's strategic objectives are [...] part of a hegemonic project aimed at reshaping current geopolitical structures [...] (*Il Corriere della Sera*, 21.3.2021)

After having turned much of sub-Saharan Africa into a fief, Xi Jinping now seeks to transform Europe into the drawing room of his house, with a room overlooking the Port of Piraeus. (*Il Giornale*, 6.9.2021)

A notable shift in coverage during this period was in the targeted actor of the “Strategic Threat” frame: over half of these frames positioned the US, the EU and Western democracies as the actors facing the threat, in contrast with 2019, when the frame was applied primarily to Italy.

“BRI Setbacks, Challenges, and Unmet Expectations” was the second-most-common frame during 2020–2022, accounting for 19.5% of all identified frames. It was predominantly applied to China, highlighting the security risks and economic uncertainties associated with Beijing’s expanding involvement under the BRI in politically unstable countries such as Afghanistan, Pakistan and Myanmar. This frame also emphasised the initiative’s slowdown amid the COVID-19 pandemic and China’s economic deceleration.

The remaining two critical frames were less prominent, particularly the economic threat frame, which accounted for just 5.5% of all identified frames. Even when economic issues were raised – such as the heavy indebtedness of BRI-participating countries – they were typically subordinated to the strategic threat frame. Similarly, the “Value-Based Objections to BRI” frame rarely emerged as a prominent frame. While reports often mentioned human rights concerns – such as abuses in Xinjiang, forced labour, and corruption – these were typically incidental and subordinated to the dominant geopolitical threat framing.

Italy’s withdrawal from the BRI (2023)

Coverage in 2023, the last year analysed in the study, focused primarily on Italy’s decision to exit the BRI. The Italian right-wing government led by Giorgia Meloni began publicly discussing Italy’s withdrawal in early 2023. The issue featured prominently in coverage of the G7 Summit in Hiroshima in May, Meloni’s visit to the US in July, and the G20 Summit in New Delhi in September.

In covering these events, Italian news outlets continued to predominantly employ the “Strategic Threat” frame, which accounted for 46.4% of all identified frames. Compared with the international focus of the coverage in the previous 3 years, however, 2023 saw a renewed emphasis on Italy as the primary referent of critical framing. The signing of the MoU was portrayed as a costly political misstep by the first Conte government (2018–19) and highlighted the geopolitical risks associated with Italy’s participation in the BRI, the mounting pressure from Washington and the risk of potential retaliation from China. Reflecting this prevalent focus, political sources accounted for nearly two-thirds of all sources, while business sources accounted for less than 3%.

The next most common frame, “BRI Challenges, Setbacks, and Unmet Expectations” (21.9%), was also primarily directed at Italy. This perspective, often coexisting with the “Strategic Threat” frame within the same article, emphasised that the signing of the MoU had failed to deliver the anticipated economic benefits, as reflected in headlines such as “Money doesn’t flow along the Belt and Road” (*Il Corriere della Sera*, 11.05.2023) and “Farewell to the Belt and Road: it brought no money, only problems” (*Il Giornale*, 7.12.2023).

Only *Il Fatto Quotidiano* offered a contrasting perspective, criticising the government for subservience to US interests and arguing that the decision not to renew the MoU ran counter to Italy’s national interest. This stance was reflected in headlines such as “Cancelling the agreement is a loss of sovereignty. Renewing it is in our interest” (*Il Fatto*

Quotidiano, 16.5.2023) and “The Belt and Road pays off: Meloni wants a halfway exit” (*Il Fatto Quotidiano*, 28.7.2023).

Discussion

The findings presented above indicate a marked shift in Italian news coverage of the BRI over the 7-year period (RQ1). Initially (2017–2018), BRI was framed primarily as an economic opportunity for Italy. Over time, however, reporting on economic and infrastructural aspects declined. Supporting predictions advanced in previous research (Turcsanyi and Kachlikova, 2020), as geopolitical tensions between Europe and China intensified, the BRI was increasingly interpreted through a geopolitical lens, with the ideologically charged “Strategic Threat” frame becoming dominant. In the years when reporting centred on Sino-Italian relations (2019, when Italy joined the BRI, and 2023, when it withdrew), the strategic threat framing was deployed with Italy as the primary referent. The BRI was depicted as a vehicle of Chinese geopolitical expansionism, with Italy’s participation portrayed as jeopardising national security and the country’s EU and transatlantic alliances. By contrast, in 2020–2022, when coverage focused on BRI’s international dimension, the same frame was mobilised at a systemic level, positioning the initiative within a broader confrontation between China and a Western-led geopolitical order. The other critical frames – especially the “Economic Threat” and “Value-based Objections” frames – tended to be embedded within the dominant “Strategic Threat” frame, emerging only rarely as stand-alone framing devices.

This trajectory highlights what is at stake in debates over the BRI’s soft-power claims. Much of the literature has examined contexts in the Global South, where the initiative is typically interpreted through development cooperation, infrastructure provision, and material benefits (Thussu, 2024). Our findings suggest that in a Western European setting, the evaluative conditions differ: reception is filtered through dense alliance commitments and normative standards, and media narratives are more likely to be structured by strategic competition than by developmental promise. In Italy, the progressive displacement of opportunity-oriented coverage by a dominant strategic-threat frame indicates that “attraction” is not simply generated by communicative effort or economic inducements; it is contingent on the geopolitical and interpretive environment in which the initiative is made meaningful. Italy thus offers a revealing case for examining the limits of China’s “win–win” narrative, showing how transatlantic and EU alignments (together with the wider circulation of Western policy frames) constrain the communicative reach and domestic acceptability of BRI-related soft-power messaging.

The analysis also revealed significant variations in how the five news outlets in our sample framed the BRI across the 7-year period, reflecting their distinct political stances and institutional perspectives (RQ2). The financial daily *Il Sole 24 Ore* was the most prolific outlet in the first 2 years of coverage (2017–2018), when framing was overwhelmingly favourable and focused on Italy’s economic opportunities, reflecting and giving voice to the country’s business interests. As the BRI became a more salient and contested political issue, other outlets expanded coverage and framing increasingly mapped onto partisan alignments. From opposite sides of the political spectrum yet converging around a pro-Atlanticist posture, *Il Giornale* (right-wing) and *La Repubblica*

(centre-left) produced the most consistently critical coverage. By contrast, *Il Fatto Quotidiano* – often associated with the Five Star Movement, the leading coalition partner in the Conte government that signed the MoU – showed the highest proportion of favourable frames, alongside the more economic-focussed coverage provided, especially in the first 2 years, by *Il Sole 24 Ore*.

At the same time, these differences unfolded within an overarching trajectory that mirrored Italy's shifting foreign-policy orientations. Across outlets, the gradual consolidation of more critical BRI framing reflected the hardening of elite discourse and the reassertion of EU and transatlantic alliances in a changing geopolitical environment (Andornino et al., 2025; Fasola and Lucarelli, 2024; Natalizia and Termine, 2025). In this sense, outlet-level political parallelism shaped the distribution of frames, but it did not fundamentally affect the broader direction of coverage – supporting long-standing arguments in journalism studies that foreign-policy agendas and alliance commitments exert strong effects on news narratives, even in pluralistic and highly politicised media systems such as Italy's.

Conclusion

This study analysed BRI coverage in five ideologically diverse Italian newspapers between 2017 and 2023, a period spanning Italy's initial engagement with the initiative, the signing of the MoU, and the subsequent move toward disengagement. Using a soft-power lens that treats news framing as a mediating mechanism through which BRI-related legitimacy claims are interpreted, the analysis shows a clear narrative reorientation. Early coverage (2017–2018) was largely opportunity-oriented, resonating with domestic economic concerns and foregrounding market access and investment prospects. Over time, however, the BRI increasingly came to be narrated through a security-centric geopolitical lens, with “Strategic Threat” becoming the dominant frame. Italy's BRI narrative thus shifted from pragmatic engagement to geopolitical risk.

Theoretically, this study invites a reconceptualisation of soft power. It shows that, far from attraction being exercised in a vacuum, soft power is channelled through journalistic narratives that structure how claims are interpreted, evaluated, and rendered credible. Soft-power efforts travel through media and alliance landscapes that shape which interpretations become plausible and which are discounted. In this sense, soft power is better understood as a relational process: an outcome of ongoing negotiation among competing claims to legitimacy, filtered through the interpretive dominance of particular geopolitical and informational systems.

The study points to the need for continued research on European media representations of China amid geopolitical volatility, as shifting alliance politics and crises may reshape the narrative environment in which China – and initiatives such as the BRI – are interpreted. More broadly, the framing-centred approach adopted here can be applied beyond China to other initiatives that combine material inducements with reputational claims – such as development finance or strategic infrastructure. Comparative designs could test how such projects are framed as they move across alliance boundaries and political cleavages, and identify the conditions under which opportunity frames persist, threat frames dominate, or hybrid framings emerge. In doing so, the approach connects

soft-power theory to how interpretation operates, revealing how persuasion is constrained by geopolitical alignments and media narratives.

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Data Availability Statement

The coding dataset is available from the corresponding author upon request.

Notes

1. All Italian headlines and excerpts cited in this paper were translated into English using Google Translate and verified by the first author.
2. “One Belt One Road” and “OBOR” were excluded as keywords because the initiative was officially renamed BRI in 2016, prior to our study period. An ex-post verification check showed that this exclusion resulted in only a negligible number of omitted articles.

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