

# Promises, Projects, and Power: Italy and Indonesia Elites in the Belt and Road Initiative

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## Abstract

This research examines the political and economic dynamics of Italy and Indonesia in relation to their engagement with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Drawing from the theoretical tradition of state instrumentalism and recent conceptualisations of the "infrastructure state" as an emerging global phenomenon, we argue that initiatives such as the BRI do serve the purposes of political elites in both the developing and developed world. The comparative analysis between the two dissimilar countries, Italy and Indonesia, reveals the existence of a broader global trend. Both experience democratic backsliding while strategically engaging with the BRI to meet their infrastructural needs and political objectives. This study contributes to understanding how domestic political dynamics and external economic opportunities intersect in shaping the developmental trajectories of middle-power states within the global geopolitical landscape.

### Keywords:

BRI; state instrumentalism; democratic backsliding; infrastructure state

## Introduction

In the aftermath of the 2008 global economic crisis, dissatisfaction with neoliberal developmental paradigms has spread across the developing world and parts of the developed world, and states and international organisations have rediscovered infrastructure financing and spatial planning as an alternative to "neo-Keynesian" development (Yifu & Wang, 2013). As an emerging economic superpower, China promotes this new developmental paradigm by launching in 2013 the One Belt, One Road initiative, which was later renamed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The BRI seeks to connect Europe, Asia, Africa, and beyond in a network of infrastructures, with a promise of accelerated development (Economic Times, 2023). Globally, governments of potential recipient countries of the BRI have welcomed the initiative.

In fact, several countries have joined the BRI, regardless of their foreign policy and stage

of development. Among these are Italy and Indonesia, which, albeit dissimilar in context, share a common pattern of development. The former is a European country, signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) (Italian Government, 2019) with China for the BRI was seen by politicians and bureaucrats alike as necessary to address the country's infrastructure deficit, in reaction to years of austerity imposed by the European Union after the 2008 global financial crisis. The latter is a Southeast Asian one, whose central government welcomed the BRI capital as a way to rapidly fill the country's infrastructure gap. Analysing the two countries with their different stages of development will further highlight the global trend associated with state behaviour and the elites' interest in accommodating Chinese capital for domestic legitimation.

Contextually, the availability of capital through the BRI is welcomed by the governments, who promise, envision, urge,

and plan to transform the country through an acceleration of infrastructure development. That said, such engagement with the BRI is not without domestic contestations. As a foreign policy choice, it arguably poses risks of Chinese interference and being entrapped in a spiral of dependency on China, as well as generates concerns over the projects' financial, societal, and environmental sustainability (World Bank, 2019).

In the last decades, there has been a proliferation of infrastructure development projects, and the BRI is arguably the driver of such a trend. Among scholars and institutions, development through infrastructure is seen as a complementary or alternative paradigm to neoliberalism. In their influential article written for the World Bank, Lin and Wang (2013) claim that this new paradigm, which centres urban, environmental, and social development along and around the infrastructure (in their words, "beyond Keynesianism"), may bring positive effects and foster growth both in the global North and South. It seeks to return to rediscovered forms of spatial planning as a base for development, reflecting the reaffirming "neo-Keynesian" afflatus of the post-2008 years (Schindler & Kanai, 2021).

By the mid-2010s, this new conceptualisation of development found its legitimacy among multilateral developmental institutions and fora (to cite the most relevant ones: The World Bank, the G20, the Asian Development Bank and the African Development Bank). This warm welcome to China-led development initiatives and institutions like the BRI and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) eventually led to a "global infrastructure turn" (Dodson, 2017). Some researchers were quick to underline the critical aspects of this "turn". Danyluk (2018) argues that infrastructure-centric development is not a new paradigm, but rather one of the many manifestations of capitalistic space annihilation. Macrorie and

Marvin (2019) observed that the promises of more resource sustainability, urban inclusivity, and interconnectedness may end up creating new divides and new peripheries.

Flyvbjerg (2007) emphasises how projects' materialisation and their potential problems are usually overshadowed by optimism bias and strategic misrepresentation by designers and planners, and how the mismatch between rhetoric and realisation often ends up in cost overruns and scarce benefits. Torrance (2009) attributed this mismatch to the operation of private management funds, which prioritise short-term interests over long-term gains; hence, warranting the intervention of public stakeholders. However, based on a decade of observation, Schindler and Kanai (2019) added that the mismatch may not just be attributed to private consultants. Elites who are proponents of infrastructure development usually espouse the project with a "connectivity" benefit and other promises, regardless of the actual conditions. Their analysis shows that élite optimism in their frantic search for developmental results is usually damped by the actual local needs and conditions.

In the context of the BRI, past research has employed various analytical lenses to observe the implementation, especially the current projects in Southeast Asia. Some studies view the relationship between the BRI and its recipient states as the elites' attempts to maintain authority vis-à-vis China's influence (Kuik, 2021; Yeremia, 2021; Lampton, 2021) or as an economic hedging strategy (Soong, 2020; Mursitama & Ying, 2021; Yan, 2021). Others focused more on the political and institutional characteristics of countries like Malaysia and Indonesia, i.e., the roles of local elites and the military in opposing the project for rent-seeking and due to mistrust towards China (Lim et al., 2021; Camba, 2020; Wang, 2023). Attention has also been given to the modification of space (Lin et. al., 2021) and the opening of "zones", "enclaves" and "corridors" that the BRI envisages.

However, the literature appears to be stuck between a tendency to isolate the BRI from the “global infrastructure turn” and to stress its geopolitical relevance. Attention to host countries has been paid mainly to issues related to the accommodation of Chinese economic statecraft. We argue that less regionalised comparisons are needed to reconcile the BRI with the broad global trend of the “infrastructure turn” and account for its global scale. As both the infrastructure turn and the BRI emerged in a post-2008 financial crisis economy, we also argue that a certain vested interest in alternative sources for infrastructure development has emerged in both the developing and developed world.

With these considerations, this study seeks to address the following question: In what ways have political and economic elites in Italy and Indonesia instrumentalised the BRI to consolidate domestic authority and legitimacy, and to what extent does this process reflect the emergence of the “infrastructure state” across divergent geopolitical and developmental contexts? Italy and Indonesia offer two analytical cases. The former is a developed European democracy grappling with economic stagnation and fragmented populism, and the latter is a Southeast Asian middle-power characterised by entrenched oligarchic control and assertive developmentalism. Despite their stark differences in institutional design and global positioning, both have engaged with the BRI through elite-driven strategies of infrastructure-led development. By comparing the two, this article identifies convergences in how the ruling elites have deployed the discourse and practice of infrastructure to legitimise their authority and pursue strategic developmental goals. The analysis, which is situated within the theoretical frameworks of state instrumentalism and the emerging literature on the infrastructure state, demonstrates how global paradigmatic shifts, triggered by the aftermath of the 2008 crisis, are refracted through domestic elite strategies.

The sections that follow elaborate this argument through (1) a structured analysis of the global conditions underpinning the infrastructure turn, (2) the political economy of infrastructure in Italy and Indonesia, and (3) their respective interactions with Chinese capital under the BRI.

## Theoretical framework

How can we explain the widespread interest that the BRI has attracted across countries, developed and developing alike? Why do governments actively pursue BRI projects, despite the well-documented geopolitical tensions and operational controversies surrounding China’s global infrastructure agenda? As suggested in the introduction, our starting point is that initiatives like the BRI reflect not just developmental aspirations, but also the evolving strategies of ruling elites. They must be understood in the context of what scholars call the “global infrastructure turn” in contemporary capitalism, where the BRI stands out as its conspicuous and ambitious expression. Following Schindler and Kanai (2021), we situate the BRI within a broader shift in development thinking, in which states, international financial institutions, and multilateral actors have coalesced in a renewed faith in infrastructure as a driver of economic growth, territorial integration, and political legitimacy. This “turn” is not neutral nor universally beneficial—it often entails top-down planning that sidelines local communities, democratic processes, and environmental concerns. Expanding on this, Schindler and DiCarlo (2022) introduce the notion of the “infrastructure state”, which grounds its legitimacy less in redistribution or rights and more in the promises of delivering connectivity, mobility, and development.

In this article, we interpret the infrastructure state as a concrete manifestation of state instrumentalism, wherein political and economic elites shape public institutions

to facilitate the entry and circulation of new forms of international capital, most notably, those tied to the BRI. This perspective draws from the tradition of critical political economy, particularly as outlined by Gold et al. (1993) and Miliband (1969), viewing the state as a site where business interests and bureaucratic authority converge to produce policies that reinforce elite dominance. Within this logic, Chinese capital is not just foreign investment, but an organising force in the emerging global order where China increasingly displaces the West as the systemic core (Cox, 1981; Shi & Ye, 2021; Bu, 2021).

Our approach thus requires a broader and more relational understanding of the elites. Rather than limiting the term to formal political actors, we adopt a definition that encompasses the coalitions of officials, technocrats, business groups, and state-linked enterprises that shape national development agendas. Building on classical and critical elite theory (Miliband, 1969; Mills, 1956; Winters, 2011; Robison & Hadiz, 2004), we conceptualise elites as historically embedded and structurally empowered actors whose influence derives from their control over institutions, policy narratives, and resource flows. In Indonesia, this includes the leadership of state-owned enterprises (BUMNs), ministerial technocrats, and politically connected conglomerates. In Italy, elite formations involve populist leaders, pro-China bureaucrats, and stakeholders in the port and logistics sectors. While the contexts differ, these actors share a common logic: they use infrastructure to consolidate authority and project developmental legitimacy. Finally, we pay attention to the symbolic power of infrastructure, which extends from roads and railways to visions of national transformation. As Wetherly (2008) and Miliband (1969) argue, the power of elites lies not only in coercion or institutional control, but also in their promises: narratives of progress and modernity that “resonate” with the people. In this sense, rather

than being merely material, infrastructure is ideological in nature—a tool the elites use to persuade, mobilise, and sustain their power.

Building on this understanding, we identify three core mechanisms through which infrastructure strengthens elite legitimacy. First, it enables the performative projection of the state capacity—a visible demonstration of the ability to act decisively, mobilise resources, and transform space, even in contexts of austerity or institutional weakness. Second, it constructs a developmental narrative of modernity, progress, and international competitiveness—a powerful discourse in regimes that lack ideological cohesion or redistributive legitimacy. Third, it institutionalises elite control by establishing dependency, long-term concession agreements, public-private partnerships, and new forms of territorial governance that solidify elite coalitions. These mechanisms operate both materially and symbolically, sustaining what Weber would call rational-legal legitimacy, and what Gramsci would interpret as hegemonic consent through development-oriented aspiration.

## Method

Methodologically, this article adopts a most-different systems design (MDSD) to examine how structurally divergent regimes converge in their use of infrastructure as a strategy of elite legitimisation. Italy and Indonesia differ in several key dimensions, including regime type, level of economic development, regional context, and institutional architecture, yet both have embraced the BRI and mobilised it for domestic political purposes. By selecting two analytically contrasting cases, the study does not aim to generalise outcomes but to explore how similar patterns of elite behaviour emerge despite the differences. This approach allows us to identify common logics of infrastructural legitimisation and to assess how global structural pressures are refracted through different national formations of power.

In doing so, the comparison offers insight into the adaptive strategies of contemporary elites operating within the broader dynamics of the global infrastructure turn.

This study employs a comparative qualitative approach with MDSD (Gerring, 2008), selecting Italy and Indonesia as two cases that diverge in terms of region, level of economic development, regime type, international alignment, and infrastructure needs, yet unilaterally accept the BRI as a platform for advancing domestic infrastructure agendas and promise “connectivity” to strengthen their respective elite legitimacy.

The aim of this study is not to offer a generalisability, but rather to provide a tentative theoretical generalisation (Gerring, 2004) regarding how ruling coalitions in divergent contexts strategically instrumentalise global infrastructure flows, e.g., the BRI, to consolidate their authority. This design allows us to explore plausibility rather than representativeness, following Levy's (2008) logic of case-based hypothesis testing. We recognise that broader comparative work involving additional cases would be necessary to confirm the existence of a full-fledged global trend. Nonetheless, we contend that Italy and Indonesia offer analytically compelling entry points for examining the logic of elite legitimisation through infrastructure in the contemporary era. The analysis unfolds along three empirical dimensions. The first is the elite configuration. Here, we examine the nature of the ruling coalitions in Italy and Indonesia during the period of BRI engagement, identifying the key actors, politicians, bureaucrats, technocrats, and economic elites who shaped the national developmental agenda. The second is the infrastructural turn, where we trace the narratives and institutional moves that signalled a turn toward infrastructure-led development in both countries, focusing on the discursive and material alignment with BRI principles. The last is the key case episodes,

where we analyse emblematic interactions between domestic elites and the BRI: in the case of Italy, the signing of the 2019 MoU with China; and in Indonesia, the implementation of the Jakarta–Bandung High-Speed Railway. These cases illuminate how state apparatuses were mobilised to attract, negotiate, and implement BRI-related projects, reinforcing their claims to competence, modernity, and international relevance.

## Results

This study's comparative analysis of Italy and Indonesia's engagement with the BRI highlights key findings that contribute to a broader understanding of how infrastructure-led development intersects with domestic political dynamics, elite power, and global economic transformations. Despite their distinct geopolitical positions and differing levels of economic development, both countries exhibit remarkable similarities in how their ruling elites have instrumentalised the BRI for political legitimacy and economic capital. These findings not only reflect the global infrastructure turn but also reveal the emergence of what Schindler and DiCarlo (2022) describe as the infrastructure state, wherein state apparatuses are bent toward developmental projects that serve elite interests under the guise of national modernisation. Indeed, one of the most significant findings is the role of democratic backsliding in shaping the BRI's reception in both Italy and Indonesia. While these two countries are often analysed separately in regional contexts—Italy within the framework of European populism and Indonesia as part of Southeast Asia's democratic regression—their ruling classes exhibit strikingly similar patterns of state instrumentalisation. Theoretical insights from Miliband's (1969) conceptualisation of the state as a vehicle for ruling class interests help explain how the elites in both countries co-opted the state apparatus to promote infrastructure development as a “solution” to

broader crises of governance and legitimacy.

In Italy, the populist “yellow-green” coalition led by the Five Star Movement (M5S) and the League positioned the BRI as a potential rupture with the European Union’s austerity-driven economic policies. However, the decision to sign the 2019 MoU with China was ultimately driven not by populist anti-globalisation rhetoric but by long-standing elite interests in infrastructure development. Italian elites, particularly those within the economic bureaucracy and the technocratic European intelligentsia, saw the BRI as an opportunity to address chronic infrastructure deficits, especially in strategic sectors such as port modernisation. While populist leaders framed the MoU as a bold assertion of national sovereignty, it was, in practice, a continuation of pre-existing elite strategies aimed at attracting foreign capital while maintaining alignment with European regulatory frameworks. In contrast, Indonesia’s engagement with the BRI reflects a more overt and centralised exercise of state power. Jokowi’s administration, underpinned by a coalition of oligarchic elites, leveraged the BRI to consolidate its developmental agenda while suppressing opposition forces. The Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway (JBHSR) serves as a paradigmatic example of how Indonesian elites navigated domestic political tensions to secure foreign investment. Building on Winters’ (2013) theory of oligarchic dominance, it becomes clear that Jokowi’s infrastructure push was not simply a response to economic necessity but also a strategy for consolidating elite power in an increasingly contested political landscape.

Nevertheless, we suggest that a key finding in both cases is the strategic use of what can be termed the connectivity promise, a discursive construct that frames infrastructure as a pathway to national modernisation, economic revitalisation, and global integration. This narrative plays a crucial role in legitimising

elite-driven policy decisions, particularly in contexts of economic stagnation and political fragmentation. This concept draws from Schindler and Kanai’s (2021) notion of infrastructure-led development as a spatial planning strategy that is often divorced from local needs and realities.

In Italy, this rhetoric was deployed to justify the MoU as a necessary step to reinvigorate the country’s economy through connectivity with global trade networks. The ports of Genoa and Trieste were positioned as key nodes in the BRI’s maritime corridor, with promises of increased trade and economic growth. More often than not, these promises lacked detailed implementation strategies, reflecting what Flyvbjerg (2007) describes as optimism bias and strategic misrepresentation in large-scale infrastructure planning.

In Indonesia, the connectivity promise was even bolder through Jokowi’s vision of the country as a Global Maritime Fulcrum. It was not merely a rhetorical flourish but a central component of the administration’s developmental strategy. By framing Indonesia as a critical hub in the global economy, Jokowi justified the acceleration of infrastructure projects such as the JBHSR, despite facing opposition from environmental groups, local communities, and political rivals. The JBHSR became a symbol of Indonesia’s aspirations for modernisation, although its implementation was marred by procedural irregularities and rule-bending.

Therefore, while both countries exhibited a high degree of elite coordination in their engagement with the BRI, the mechanisms and outcomes of this coordination reveal stark differences in state capacity and governance practices. In Italy, the process was institutionalised within the broader framework of European regulations, reflecting a cautious and highly coordinated approach to Chinese capital. The MoU was the product of months of negotiation involving multiple levels of

government and European oversight, ensuring that the agreement aligned with EU standards for transparency and sustainability.

In Indonesia, however, the engagement with the BRI was far more fluid and adaptive. The rapid awarding of the JBHSR contract to a Chinese-Indonesian consortium, bypassing established regulatory frameworks, highlights the flexibility and vulnerability of Indonesia's governance structures. Tritto's (2020) concept of "contentious embeddedness" provides a useful lens for understanding how Indonesian elites navigated competing pressures from domestic stakeholders and Chinese investors. By bending procedural rules and centralising decision-making, Jokowi's administration effectively neutralised opposition while accelerating project implementation. This strategy, while effective in the short term, raises serious concerns about long-term sustainability and democratic accountability.

These findings add to the understanding of the BRI within the context of the global infrastructure turn. Rather than viewing it as an isolated geopolitical initiative, this study highlights its role in the rapid infrastructure-led development worldwide that emerged in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis. The appeal lies not only in the promises of capital inflows but also in its alignment with the evolving interests of ruling classes in both developed and developing countries.

Italy and Indonesia's engagement with the BRI exemplifies how infrastructure development can be co-opted by domestic elites to advance their own agendas, often at the expense of broader public interests. Theoretically, this reinforces Cox's (1981) notion of international capital as a tool for maintaining regional elite dominance, while also extending the applicability of Schindler and DiCarlo's (2022) infrastructure state theory in heterogeneous geopolitical settings. Ultimately, this paper highlights the BRI as a double-edged sword: an opportunity for

genuine development and a mechanism of elite consolidation. The comparative perspective offered by Italy and Indonesia adds to the understanding of the interaction between the global infrastructure turn and local political dynamics, revealing the complex and often contested nature of contemporary development practices.

## Discussion

## Italian elites and the political system

Over the last three decades, the Italian political system has suffered the effects of several shocks. From the “Clean Hands” (Mani Pulite) scandal in 1992, the old party system dominated by the Christian Democracy, and the collapse of the Socialist and the Communist Parties (Vannucci, 2016). These “old” post-WWII parties have been replaced by new parties and leaders: the billionaire Silvio Berlusconi brought a reshuffle in the Italian party system, and his figure as a pragmatic businessman in power brought personalism and divisions in Italy’s politics (Pasquino, 2007). Together with his new political party, Forza Italia, Berlusconi was able to form a coalition with the neofascist National Alliance (Alleanza Nazionale), as well as the pro-North, secessionist party Northern League (Lega Nord).

Riding over a structural economic decline of the peninsula, this populist coalition managed to win several elections in the 1990s and 2000s, leveraging the rhetoric of “crisis” and “change” (Bobba & McDonnell, 2015) against the remnants of the pre-1992 elites, who were still inhabiting the left and other institutions, like the magistrates and the bureaucrats. Populism has always been present in Italian politics. According to some scholars (Bobba & McDonnell, 2015; Mosca, 2014), the Berlusconi-led coalition’s mismanagement of the 2008 global financial crisis triggered a major political shift. This opened the way for the rise of the Five-Star Movement (Movimento 5 Stelle), a new populist and pro-justice

movement. The movement accused the entire political establishment, both left and right, of being responsible for Italy's economic decline due to their subservience to EU technocrats. It has been argued (Verzichelli et. al., 2022) that the "Five Stars," which went from nearly zero to 25% of the votes in the 2013 parliamentary elections, and up to 32% in the 2018 election, has shifted the composition of the Italian political elites.

Concurrently, the fall of Berlusconi's leadership and the old guard of his allies in the Lega Nord and Alleanza Nazionale led these two to regroup and find new leaders. Particularly, in the 2010s, Lega Nord was rebranded as a national right-wing populist (Mudde, 2017) movement under the guidance of Matteo Salvini, progressively abandoning the regionalist heritage of the old Lega Nord, and assuming a more personalistic, ethno-nationalistic, Eurosceptic and revisionist stance (Albertazzi et. al., 2018). The "new wave" of Italian populism converged after the 2018 general elections, where Five Stars and Lega Nord formed an unlikely government coalition (also called the "yellow-green" coalition from the colours symbol of Five Stars and Lega Nord, respectively), as a result of a compromise between the conservative and reformist populism, who appointed a supposedly a-political prime minister, Giuseppe Conte (a civil law professor).

Apart from a vague promise of bringing radical change (Pedrazzani, 2018), the two populist parties hardly had any common political ground: Five Stars was pro-justice, Lega Nord was in favour of judicial immunity for politicians while in office; Five Stars was pro-immigration, Lega Nord was xenophobic and anti-refugees. The only similarity was their despise for globalisation. Lega Nord never gave up its localist rhetoric of protecting the northern businesses from the forces of globalisation (Passarelli & Tuorto, 2022). Five Stars displayed its dissatisfaction and scepticism toward

European and Western economic governance, but without positioning itself as leftists (Mosca & Tronconi, 2021).

The yellow-green's despise for globalisation is arguably the result of a growing Euroscepticism in certain parts of the Italian electorate and civil society—a political sentiment representing dissatisfaction and disillusionment with the European integration process (Szczerbiak & Taggart, 2024). Such a despise, however, cannot be said for the ruling class's attitudes towards the EU. A study conducted by Roux and Verzichelli (2010), which separated the ruling class between political and economic elites, shows that, historically, the Italian political elites from both the left and the right were among the most pro-EU of the continent, but there emerged some important trends. First, the centre-left political elites have demonstrated a somewhat stronger alignment with the EU rather than the centre-right elites (where other factors such as local identities and regionalism mitigated this general favourable attitude). Second, and more crucially, the Italian economic elites were more favourable to the EU than their political counterparts. The distancing from the ECU intensified in the following years only in some political parties (Conti et al., 2016), like the Lega Nord and Five Stars, but not enough to cause a rupture. Indeed, at the time of the yellow-green coalition, Euroscepticism did not appear to have affected the pro-EU stance of the elites once they took office (Conti, 2018).

There may be growing anti-EU sentiments among the population and a tendency by certain parties to include such Euroscepticism in their populist ideational framework (Chryssogelos, 2017), but as the elites are in duty to perform public office, interacting with the EU institutions and regulations, they maintained an overall pro-EU stance (Conti et. Al, 2016). Such a Pro-ECU stance is even more overt among the economic elites.

In other words, these findings show inconsistencies between the Euroscepticism of

some Italian political parties and the pro-EU stance once they assume power. This appears to confirm that, seen from an instrumentalist perspective, even populist parties tend to flirt with traditional capitalist institutions. Moreover, as it will be demonstrated in the next sections, a certain interest in the BRI was also shown by some EU technocrats. It can be inferred that, at the time of the yellow-green coalition, no élite signalled distancing from the neoliberal capitalistic economic model that, despite having caused a crisis and favoured populisms, remains dominant.

## *The Italian infrastructure decline and the promises of a new era of connectivity*

Contextually, Italy has suffered an economic decline in the post-1990s era, due to the combination of several factors, such as the failure of large-scale industry, the inability to scale up in the global supply chains, the competition in manufacturing from Asian competitors, and the Euro's constraint in exports through inflation (De Cecco, 2013). On top of these pre-existing dysfunctionalities, it has been argued (Di Quirico, 2010) that the coalitions guided by Berlusconi aligned in great parts (albeit covertly) with the demands from the EU to cut public expenditure and undergo institutional reforms in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. Post-2008, Italy progressively reduced universal welfare services in an attempt to retrench its expenditure (Léon et al., 2015) within the parameters imposed by the EU and other financial institutions (the group formed by the IMF, the EU Commission, and the EU Central Bank, also known as Troika). Austerity measures seemed to have failed in mitigating the effects of the financial crisis in Italy and other southern European countries, amplifying its effects instead (Engler & Klein, 2017) by exacerbating inequalities and creating more unemployment in already economically strained areas of the country (Serapioni & Hespanha, 2019). This contributed to creating the fertile ground of middle-class

impoverishment and discontent that fostered the mentioned “new” populist movements.

Austerity and a sense of decline fuelled debate over whether Italy should prioritise repairing its crumbling infrastructure or investing in new projects to revive its stagnant economy (Lenti, 2016). Historically, great infrastructure projects in Italy have been perceived as an occasion for the ruling elites (local and central) to gain personal benefits through corruption and rigged bids (Golden & Picci, 2005). Moreover, studies on the Turin-Lyon railway project, which connects the Italian city of Turin with the French city of Lyon, reveal an ongoing conflict between local citizens and the elites. In that instance, governmental and regional elites framed the project as a chance to redesign space and time in the area (Laszczkowski, 2022). In other words, Italy's perceived need to modernise its deteriorating infrastructure network faced significant local opposition. This conflict became highly politicised, driven by the NIMBY (Not in My Backyard) initiative among affected communities (Geopop, 2021).

Despite several ongoing projects, declarations, and legislative decrees for deregulation, Italy's infrastructure spending kept contracting between 2008 and 2019 (SACE, 2021), highlighting a discrepancy between the discourse of infrastructure development as a pressing issue and the policy practice. Nonetheless, a jargon "infrastructure as the backbone of development" (free translation of Bassanini in Masera, 2017) remains in the Italian mainstream political discourse, regardless of which coalition is in power.

In fact, the notion of the public necessity to revamp infrastructure as a driver for the economy gained traction in Italy over the 2000s (at the time of Berlusconi's government), accelerating in the aftermath of the 2008 crisis (Addessi, 2020) and in the years of austerity that followed. In this context, the surging populist movements of Five Stars and Lega Nord have

utilised infrastructure for political rhetoric. Five Stars had an initial critical discourse on infrastructure, connected to their relationship with social environmentalist movements (Mosca, 2015), while Lega Nord remained pro-infrastructure development, especially the pivotal ones, portraying it as drivers to sustain local construction companies (Marciano et. al., 2022).

In sum, the attitude toward infrastructure development in Italy can be framed at a twofold level. The surface-level attitude is about the capitalisation of infrastructure discourse in politics, which has been viewed both negatively and positively. The second-level attitude is about the interests shown by government agencies, economists, companies, and political elites, once in power. So far, there are no extensive studies on the overall attitude of the ruling class toward infrastructure in Italy. However, it can be inferred that infrastructures are extensively designed and planned by elites at all levels (in the case of Italy, local, central, and EU elites were all involved), despite the short-term use of infrastructure development as a tool of propaganda and political discourse.

### **Italy and the BRI: The case of the 2019 MoU**

In order to sustain this claim, the case of Italy signing the Memorandum of Understanding of the BRI with China during the yellow-green administration is analysed for evidence. First, the persisting interest of the Italian ruling class in attracting capital for infrastructure, and not the desire to change international alignments, was the primary driver for the MoU signing. Second, the way the yellow-green coalition framed the MoU as a "rupture" in foreign policy was the necessary rhetoric to legitimise such a move. Furthermore, this case must be seen in the context of a country governed by populist political elites, trapped in an unstable coalition, and facing economic decline. Disillusioned with neoliberal development models and weary from years of

austerity, it was searching for alternative paths to growth. It can be argued that the choice of China as a source of development financing was the qualifier for the ruling coalition at that time, unlocking the chance to capitalise on the connectivity promises.

Indeed, Italy's interest in alternative sources for development pre-existed the yellow-green coalition. Paolo Gentiloni, for example, the Prime Minister before the yellow-green coalition, attended the BRI forum in 2017 in China, signalling the interest in joining the initiative (Fardella & Prodi, 2017). In justifying Gentiloni's attendance at the forum, Fardella and Prodi hint at the opportunity that a huge inflow of Chinese capital could fund the development of Italy's connectivity infrastructures, especially those related to global trade networks. In fact, the inflow of Chinese capital to the ports of Trieste and Venice could prevent the risk for Italy to be outcompeted by the Greek port, Piraeus, as a hub for trade between Europe and Asia.

A similar approach in describing Italy's urge to enter the initiative has been observed by Ghiretti (2021). The study argues that the steps taken by the port authorities of Genoa and Trieste to cooperate with Chinese companies (while remaining consistent with the EU standards for sustainable development) show that Italy was already exploring and designing the connectivity infrastructures in question. Similarly, Lucchesi (2018) shows that the attitude of Italian elites was generally favourable to the BRI and to the possibility for the Peninsula to become a trade hub (Crocenzi, 2009). This was an aspiration embraced horizontally by both political and economic elites. In other words, regardless of the form of government, certain outcomes persist beyond political orientation. Even before the yellow-green coalition, Italian economic and political elites had embraced the "infrastructure turn," viewing the potential inflow of Chinese capital as an opportunity to consolidate their

power and advance their interests through the promise of infrastructure and connectivity as tools to revive the country's struggling economy.

It is within this context that the yellow-green coalition signed the BRI MoU in 2019. It has been observed (Prodi, 2019) that such a move has been interpreted as a sign of foreign policy rupture, or even as an attempt by the newly formed populist coalition to recalibrate its alignment with the European Union and the West in favour of a more transactional and independent foreign policy, despite the risks of overdependence, international isolation, and growing Chinese influence. Additionally, the MoU, however vague, was signed “quietly” between the Chinese and the Italian apparatuses, in an alleged attempt to hide the move from the democratic debate on such a choice (Amighini, 2019).

However, the signing of the MoU was arguably proven to be in continuity with the previous administrations' plans on exploring avenues for infrastructure development (Ghiretti, 2021; Pugliese et. al., 2022). In addition, Italy's interest in enhancing its infrastructure through a deepened cooperation with China was indeed an agreed move between the state apparatuses, business leaders, and some parts of the EU bureaucracy (Pugliese, 2020). It is less likely to be a mere shift in development policies unilaterally operated by the yellow-green government. Despite the politicisation and the issues raised by commentators on the risks of subservience to China (Poggetti, 2019), the perceived infrastructure deficit of Italy has been in debate among Italian elites, companies, and policymakers. When examined from the content of the MoU, past studies (Pugliese, 2020; Ghiretti, 2021; Pugliese et. al., 2022) found evidence that, although the MoU was aimed at accommodating Chinese capitals in the country, it is under the "watchful eye" (Pugliese, 2020) of the state apparatuses and made compliant with the EU standards and

regulations on capital access (Ghiretti, 2021). In sum, the cited sources broadly agree in characterising the MoU as an act of political marketing, a symbolic gesture within a populist foreign policy framework (Destradi et al., 2021). Moreover, neither the MoU nor the BRI generated tangible benefits for the Italian economy. In practice, the agreement soon fell dormant, halted by the COVID pandemic first and abandoned due to protests by the United States after (Pugliese et. al., 2022).

The move carried out by the yellow-green, however, cannot be simply conceived as political marketing. In this, the move can be understood from the perspective of the emergence of Italian populism and the decades-long interest of the Italian governmental apparatuses and businesses in infrastructure provides a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. In fact, it remains unclear whether populism alone can explain the “yellow-green” haste in signing the MoU. Such actions are typically understood as part of a populist performance (Destradi et al., 2021), often carried out without coordination with—or even in defiance of—state apparatuses, which are perceived as the very elites that populist movements seek to challenge.

As such, the MoU can be best understood as the culmination of more than a decade of efforts by the Italian ruling class (formed by economic actors, the intelligentsia and the political coalitions) to place the “connectivity promise” in a context of economic decline. In this, the extensive resources that state apparatuses used to coordinate the MoU negotiations and the subsequent marketisation of the move can be seen as a legitimisation for the policy of importing capital from China, which is considered the new centre of global capital flows, rather than “an alternative model” of development.

The gap between the BRI's rhetoric of connectivity and Italy's pre-existing, quietly coordinated bureaucratic and political

infrastructure planning suggests that viewing this case solely through a populist lens overlooks the broader, whole-of-state coordination behind the project. Hence, it is possible to conclude that, by entering the BRI MoU with China, the Italian ruling class effectively co-opted the yellow-green coalition to rebrand and capitalise on the connectivity promise amid the political fragmentation, economic decline, and discontent among the population and voters. Finally, political marketing can be read as an epiphenomenon of the Italian elites'—and, to a lesser extent, EU technocrats'—desire to engage with a new form of Chinese-led capitalist expansion through infrastructure, presented under the guise of a foreign policy rupture.

### Indonesian Politics and Oligarchies

As per the role of political elites in Indonesia, their agency has affected the country's political life since the beginning of its post-colonial history, where the incompatibility of the party system in forming a stable government prompted Soekarno to advocate for "Guided Democracy" from 1957 to 1960. Yet, the inefficacy of Soekarno's economic policies and the emergence of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI) led to a coup d'état by General Soeharto on September 30, 1965 (Roosa, 2006; Eickhoff et al, 2017) and the establishment of the authoritarian military regime known as the New Order (Orde Baru). This period saw the military play a dual role in the country's politics (*dwifungsi*).

It has been claimed (Fakih, 2020) that the *priyayi* (aristocrat) bureaucratic elites played a prominent role in shaping the political history of modern Indonesia. As observed by Mackie (1983), a coalition between bureaucratic experts and the military constituted the elite backbone of Suharto's New Order, opposed to Sukarno's Guided Democracy during the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The continuous strength of the Indonesian elites allowed the formation of clusters of bureaucratic, political, and military

power that survived the fall of Suharto's regime in 1998 and the start of Reformasi.

In fact, as observed by some commentators (Winters, 2013), the fall of the Suharto regime was an effect of the loss of backing by these aristocrats: Suharto had to step aside amidst the approaching economic collapse of the country following the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997 and 1998. In his account, Winters (2013) conceives these elites as oligarchs, groups able to wield both economic and political power to orchestrate the country's political climate. Oligarchs have influenced the emerging new Indonesian democratic life since then. As shown by Taufik et. al. (2023), it is possible to observe how the class of oligarchs established during Suharto's regime successfully managed to adjust their role during the reformasi period through dynamic adaptation and reaction to the emerging democratic regime.

The Indonesian capitalist economic system operates as a hybrid model, combining a regulated free market with state intervention that primarily benefits elite families (oligarchs) accumulating disproportionate profits (Rosser, 2013). This economic-oligarchic structure, which emerged during Soeharto's regime, became more entrenched than ever after the regime's collapse, establishing an enduring oligarchic order (Ford & Pepinsky, 2013).

In the post-Reformasi era, oligarchic elites further consolidated their influence by weaponising identity politics and leveraging repressive measures by the ostensibly democratic governments. These actions initiated a gradual incorporation of authoritarian innovations (Mietzner, 2020), marked by illiberal policies and executive overreach. Such trends persisted across successive administrations, including those of Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) and Joko Widodo, reflecting continuity in oligarchic power dynamics despite Indonesia's democratic transition.

After several transitions during which Indonesia saw the governments of B.J.

Habibie, Abdurrahman Wahid, and Megawati Soekarnoputri, SBY became President of Indonesia from 2004 to 2014. In 2014, "the man of the people," Joko Widodo, a.k.a. Jokowi, won the elections. This significant event marks a decisive change in Indonesia's political hierarchical structure. Indonesia's democratic trajectory came under heightened scrutiny during SBY's second term. By this period, the post-1998 democratic transition appeared to stagnate, with scholars arguing that it had shifted toward a form of technocratic authoritarianism. This phenomenon, termed as illiberal democracy under Jokowi (Diprose et al., 2019), was characterised by state-driven reforms that weakened democratic institutions under the guise of economic or administrative efficiency. Notably, during the Jokowi period, controversial reforms such Job Creation Law (UU Cipta Kerja) under the Omnibus Law reform. In addition, the revisions to the penal code were framed as technocratic measures, which were criticised for centralising executive power, curtailing public participation, and eroding checks and balances. These policies epitomised a broader trend of democratic backsliding, where procedural democracy coexisted with illiberal governance practices.

The narrative of Jokowi as an outsider to the country's oligarchic and dynastic politics was only "delivered" during the early days of his administration in 2014, as the government progressively adopted a more authoritarian perspective over time. Particularly since 2014, when he left the Jakarta government to Ahok, a politician of Chinese ethnicity and Christian religion, the earlier pluralistic and religiously tolerant governance unravelled amid a wave of Islamic populism, giving way to majoritarian religious nationalism. The most significant events demonstrating the deterioration of democracy under Jokowi include massive protests against Ahok, the rise of the 212 movements, and the predominance of national religiosity in Indonesian politics. The evidence

is even clearer in the choice of Ma'ruf Amin, former president of the Islamic Ulama Council (MUI) and a central figure in the case against Ahok, as Jokowi's vice-presidential candidate in 2019.

According to Warburton (2020), these events, which have damaged democracy in Indonesia, are a consequence of Jokowi's actions, as he attempted to defuse polarisation but ultimately undermined the institutions and fundamental norms of democracy. By criminalising proponents of religious extremism, such as those of the Islamic Defenders Front (Front Pembela Islam), through legislation and legal apparatus, he facilitated the creation of a religious and political identity. Indeed, following Islamic protests against Ahok, Jokowi enacted a law to ban radical Islamists because they conflicted with the 1945 Constitution and the principles of Pancasila (Aspinall & Mietzner, 2019)

The dynamic of oligarchic illiberalism and the governmental response to it has further exacerbated during Jokowi's presidency. Challenged in both electoral rounds by the former general (son-in-law of Suharto and under investigation for several human rights violations), Prabowo Subianto, Jokowi responded to Prabowo's anti-establishment and anti-elite populist propaganda with stricter and more authoritarian policies (Warburton & Aspinall, 2019). The effect of these policies brought Indonesia's democracy from stagnation (in the years of SBY) to effectively backsliding (Warburton & Aspinall, 2019). Other commentators (Power, 2019) argue that, in light of the 2019 elections, Jokowi embarked on an authoritarian turn by legitimising radical Islamism, repressing political opposition, and crucially, manipulating the central state institutions.

Jokowi's presidency has been marked by significant manipulation of state institutions, with critics arguing that such actions have altered Indonesia's constitutional architecture

(Satrio, 2018). This trend aligns with broader scholarly observations that Jokowi increasingly adopted illiberal and authoritarian measures to counter populist challenges, including the rise of Islamic fundamentalist movements and the electoral resurgence of Prabowo Subianto during the 2019 elections (Warburton & Aspinall, 2019; Mietzner, 2020; Taufik et al., 2023). Rather than dismantling entrenched power structures, Jokowi's governance strategies functioned to sustain the oligarchic elite system that has dominated Indonesia since the New Order era.

Notably, Jokowi's political trajectory reflects a paradoxical alignment with these oligarchic forces. Despite his initial portrayal as a political outsider and a reformist figure bolstered by his entrepreneurial background and rhetoric of transformative change (Tapsell, 2015), his administration ultimately entrenched existing power dynamics. Indeed, this alliance underscores the adaptability of Indonesia's oligarchic elites, who co-opted Jokowi's populist appeal to maintain their dominance, even as he publicly distanced himself from the old political guard.

These findings suggest that Jokowi played a role in maintaining and consolidating such an oligarchic-based system of power, amidst the emergence of both populism and societal claims for further democratic reforms. Finally, it is possible to infer that at the time of Indonesia actively engaging with the BRI (roughly from 2015 onwards), the Indonesian ruling class, seen as the oligarchs and Jokowi, could have intercepted the Chinese capitals coming from the BRI and politicized the possibility for development to strengthen their domestic legitimization, as opposed to the mentioned populistic and societal threats to their power (Yeremia, 2021). In addition, as outlined above, the Indonesian elites' tendency to manipulate state rules and apparatuses to extract benefits was already an established practice. It contributed to the democratic

stagnation before, then tipped the balance and turned stagnation into actual backsliding.

### **The Indonesian infrastructure deficit and the promises of a new era of connectivity**

Indonesia's underdeveloped infrastructure stemmed from severe fiscal constraints following the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. The crisis forced the government to cancel or suspend infrastructure projects, drastically reducing public investment (Aswicahyono & Friawan, 2007; Pisu, 2010; Negara, 2016). Even after the fall of Suharto and during SBY's presidency (2004–2014), Indonesia lagged behind peer nations in infrastructure development. Aswicahyono and Friawan (2007) note that the country faced a chronic infrastructure deficit, exacerbated by post-crisis austerity measures and competing fiscal priorities. Scholars highlight how addressing this deficit became a cornerstone of SBY's administration, which sought to revive infrastructure spending despite persistent budgetary limitations (Negara, 2016).

The issues faced by SBY in rebooting the infrastructure spanned from the lack of administrative coordination and incomplete decentralisation (Aswicahyono & Friawan, 2008) to the lack of a robust regulatory framework for infrastructure development, which, according to some (Pisu, 2010), deterred foreign investors from investing in the country, in fear of government intervention and expropriation. Nonetheless, as reported by Negara (2016), SBY's administration tried with some mixed success to fill the infrastructural gap previously accumulated, also through some important reforms aimed at centralising the process of land acquisition (Wahanisa et. al., 2021) and to strengthen the role of public-private partnerships (PPPs) in financing and building infrastructure.

As emphasised by several commentators (Negara, 2016; Negara & Suryadinata, 2019), the trend in developmentalism initiated by

SBY has continued and accelerated in 2014 under his successor, Jokowi. Indeed, Jokowi launched a “nine priority programs” to boost infrastructure and connectivity in Indonesia and close the gaps between the archipelago and other countries in the region (Kompas, 2014). On this note, Salim and Negara (2016) observe that Jokowi’s initial vision for infrastructure was more ambitious than his predecessor. He stressed on multiple occasions (Salim & Negara, 2016) the necessity to interconnect the archipelago’s islands and link the country’s economic hubs with the global supply and value chains, effectively accelerating and giving a more grandiose dimension to the infrastructural revamp initiated by SBY.

Jokowi actively put infrastructure not only at the centre of his development agenda, by stressing the necessity of strengthening agricultural and telecommunication infrastructure, but also linked it to a foreign policy dimension, by launching the vision of Indonesia as a Global Maritime Fulcrum (Negara, 2016; Aufiya, 2017). As observed by some commentators (Aufiya, 2017; Sriyanto, 2018), Jokowi's narrative over the fulcrum intended to project and transform Indonesia as a link between oceans and territories, exploiting the maritime dimension for power and economic connectivity. In other words, while infrastructure development was also a pressing issue in the previous administration, during his first term in office, Jokowi doubled down on the narrative of infrastructure and connectivity beyond what can be considered a normal necessity to fill infrastructural gaps.

In this context, it has been claimed (Damuri et. al., 2019) that the urge to provide Indonesia with a web of infrastructures apt at sustaining its economic growth came with the possibility of some of these infrastructures being financed through the BRI. As such, it is possible to infer that for Jokowi's administration, infrastructure projects like the JBHSR represented an opportunity to seize the moment and access

new forms of development financing and assistance (Salim and Negara, 2016), thanks to the BRI, in a global context of renewed attention for infrastructure development.

## Indonesia and the BRI: The case of the JBHSR

By launching the “fulcrum” and actively inviting China and Japan to invest in the country, Jokowi’s administration involved state apparatuses in the attempt to broker investment deals. In this context, it has also been observed in other studies on infrastructure (Colven, 2019) that Indonesia’s ruling elites, especially during the time of Jokowi, appear to converge in a technocratic and political network pushing the rhetoric of infrastructure grandiosity. Notably, it is possible to interpret the “maritime fulcrum” and other large infrastructure projects as part of a broader phenomenon that fuses enduring oligarchic interests, rhetoric of national greatness, and a rush to “seize the opportunity” within the emerging global infrastructure market.

The mentioned acceleration happened during the years in which the “infrastructural turn” started to emerge in the international political economic system. On this last note, this phenomenon has been analysed by the neoclassical realist scholarship in international relations (Kuik, 2021; Lampton et. al., 2021), postulating that rushing to enter into Chinese-sponsored megaprojects was a way for Jokowi’s administration and the Indonesian oligarchs to accommodate Chinese economic statecraft on the one hand, and, on the other hand, to legitimize their rule through fanfare and promises of development. However, such rhetoric of grandiose envisioning, promises of development, and the like may also have served the function of sustaining and legitimising the ruling class for increasing their economic wealth through megaprojects financing, while selling to the public such rhetorical narratives for legitimization purposes. On this note, the case of the JBHSR project may serve as an example

of the agency of the ruling class in effectively pushing narratives and overcoming societal and political barriers in order to attract capital from abroad.

The case of the JBHSR is also relevant in highlighting how the agency of the ruling classes bent the state rules and procedures. As it has been observed by Tritto (2020), the Jokowi administration had to navigate a complicated environment and overcome several forms of opposition, such as anti-Chinese sentiments in the population, environmental concerns, and pre-existing Japanese investments (called by the author “elements of contentious embeddedness”). These dynamics were strategically leveraged to secure more favorable financing terms from Chinese investors for the construction of the railway, effectively “beating” the Japanese bid.. Similarly, other researchers (Negara & Suryadinata, 2019) emphasise how the specific bidding procedure of the JBHSR held in 2015 saw the Indonesian government reaping particularly favourable financing conditions for the project, as well as the implementation of a faster procedure to “rush to award” the project to a Chinese-Indonesian consortium, called KCIC (Kereta Cepat Indonesia China).

The reason for Jokowi’s administration’s rush in awarding this specific railway project has been the object of several debates in international relations and foreign policy literature (Kuik, 2021; Yeremia, 2021; Lampton et. al., 2021; Soong, 2020), highlighting the dimension of élite legitimacy to accommodate the BRI-Flagship project as a response to the pressure exerted by China in establishing a “footprint” in Indonesia (seen as a form of China’s economic statecraft). However, as hinted by Tritto’s (2020) conceptualisation of local opposition, it appears that Chinese power alone could not fully account for the phenomenon. In fact, as observed by Camba (2020), Chinese capitals were accommodated through the formation of a financing coalition

formed by Chinese capital and investors and local stakeholders (in this case, the KCIC). The governmental elites of the host country were eager to push the realisation of the project for political legitimization.

These claims appear to be confirmed by how the JBHSR have been the object of responsive politicisation in the 2019 elections (Wang, 2023). By bringing the example of the JBHSR, Wang (2023) claims that societal pushbacks, despite being ridden by opposing political forces like Prabowo Subianto during the 2019 elections, have been overcome by Jokowi’s administration, proceeding with the implementation of the project transparently and an institutionalised decision-making process. However, Wang’s account presents some issues: he dismisses public fears over Chinese influence and the project’s environmental risks as overstated, yet provides little empirical evidence to substantiate this claim. Contrarily to Wang (2023), Negara and Suryadinata (2019) argue that these efforts—particularly Jokowi’s issuance of special decrees to expedite railway construction, along with documented abuses by local authorities during land acquisition (Paendong, 2020)—illustrate how central elites circumvented procedural safeguards and further centralised decision-making to ensure the project’s completion.

Against this backdrop, it is possible to infer that, even though China’s economic statecraft played a role in securing the award and construction of the JBHSR, the insistence of Jokowi’s administration in portraying the project as a grandiose infrastructure for connectivity provides direct and case-specific evidence of the presence of a certain “connectivity promise” in Indonesia. The specific case of the JBHSR provides evidence on an active use of central state apparatuses to coordinate efforts of attracting Chinese BRI capital for political marketing and legitimization, like in the case of Italy. Additionally, due to strong opposition to China in Indonesia (Tritto,

2020; Camba, 2020, Wang, 2023), the agency of the central elites extended to overcome such forms of opposition to see the project complete, as a failure of this project after years of fanfare and build-up of expectations would have compromised the image of Jokowi and his administration. All these moves, which in Indonesia extended their effects also in the implementation phase of the JBHSR, can be conceived as a manifestation of the Indonesian elites to intercept and use Chinese capital for their emerging infrastructure state.

Thus far, it becomes evident that both Italy and Indonesia, despite diverging sharply in their regime type, developmental status, and geopolitical orientation, display a structurally analogous pattern in the elite-driven appropriation of infrastructure for political legitimisation. In both cases, the ruling coalitions strategically deployed what we conceptualise as the connectivity promise—a discursive and policy-oriented construct linking infrastructure to narratives of national revival, economic modernisation, and international visibility. This promise served as a legitimating framework to address crises of political credibility, whether emerging from institutional fragmentation and populist volatility in Italy or from oligarchic entrenchment and democratic backsliding in Indonesia.

However, the institutional modalities through which this promise was enacted reveal key divergences. In Italy, infrastructural ambitions were filtered through technocratic mediation, bureaucratic negotiation, and compliance with EU regulatory frameworks, producing a logic of symbolic alignment with global capital without departing from formal institutional constraints. In contrast, Indonesia's engagement was characterised by a greater degree of executive centralisation, legal exceptionalism, and active suppression of societal dissent—indicating a more interventionist and coercive deployment of infrastructure as a mechanism of elite consolidation. These patterns suggest that

while the BRI offers a transnational template for development-oriented legitimization, its operationalisation remains deeply embedded in the historical configurations of state power, elite formation, and political economy in each national context. Accordingly, the comparative analysis foregrounds the double edges of infrastructure as both a global instrument of capital circulation and a locally embedded technology of rule.

## Conclusion

From the discussion on how Italy and Indonesia entered and interacted with the BRI, the similarities and differences overall confirm how the global phenomenon of the infrastructure turn made these countries' ruling classes proactively seek the new opportunities of capitalist development represented by the initiative.

First, as seen in the discussion on the ruling classes and governmental elites in both countries, it is possible to infer that over the last decade, both Italy and Indonesia were undergoing a process of democratic backslide. In Italy, populist parties orchestrated the state agenda through several narratives, but far from being impactful, they tended to conform to the status quo apparatuses once in power. In Indonesia, the merger between Jokowi and the oligarchs, forming a status quo coalition, employed several illiberal tactics in order to respond to populism, societal demands for change, and Islamism. In both cases, regardless of their populistic or anti-populistic manifestation, it is evident how the agency of the ruling class (represented by bureaucrats, private interests and, in case of Italy, EU intelligentsia) tamed the forces in government and coordinated their policies toward status-quo preservation of the social and economic order that led to the crisis, impeding the possibilities for the “promised” real change.

In terms of development, both countries faced tangible infrastructure deficits and viewed

infrastructure as a key driver of economic progress. In both instances, infrastructure development was designed, envisioned and implemented by the ruling class, and often at the detriment (due to lack of coordination and consultation) with civil society. In this, the rhetoric of connectivity and infrastructure, however, was more evident in Indonesia under Jokowi and accelerated in the 2010s. This finding is compatible with the global trend of the infrastructure turn in global economics, and shows how the BRI encountered a fertile narrative ground prepared by these countries' ruling classes, ready to accommodate big infrastructures at all costs. In both cases, numerous studies highlight how narratives of connectivity and the urgency to strengthen participation in global trade networks were used to justify ambitious foreign economic policies. Promises of economic revival provided the discursive foundation for such moves, serving as tools of legitimization for ruling elites seeking to preserve their power amid contentious foreign policy and governance decisions.

Taken together, the Italian and Indonesian cases demonstrate how infrastructure-led development has been strategically appropriated by ruling elites to reinforce domestic legitimacy in times of political volatility and economic uncertainty. Despite significant differences in regime type, economic structure, and institutional configuration, both cases reveal a convergent logic of elite action: the deployment of large-scale infrastructure projects, under the discursive banner of connectivity, to signal state competence, construct developmental legitimacy, and neutralise opposition.

Nonetheless, the mechanisms through which this logic was operationalised differ sharply; Italy relied on technocratic coordination and regulatory compatibility within EU frameworks, while Indonesia resorted to executive centralisation, legal

exceptionalism, and the containment of dissent. This comparison thus underscores the BRI's flexibility as a transnational infrastructure regime, one that is not externally imposed uniformly, but rather embedded and adapted within domestic configurations of elite power.

The analytical value of this comparison lies not in identifying symmetrical outcomes but in tracing how a shared global logic, the infrastructure turn, manifests differently across contrasting national contexts. By situating the BRI within the broader transformations of post-2008 capitalism and state restructuring, this study contributes to the theorisation of the infrastructure state as a mode of elite legitimization in both developed and developing countries. In doing so, it highlights how infrastructure serves not only as a material vector of capital accumulation, but also as a political technology through which dominant coalitions seek to reproduce their authority under the guise of development. The findings point to the need for further comparative inquiry across regime types and world regions to better understand how global flows of capital, discourse, and infrastructure are appropriated by national elites in response to their own crises of rule.

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