
II. U.S.-Chinese Partnership for Peace

INTERVIEW

President of Italian OBOR Institute: Belt and Road Is a Strategically Stabilizing Factor

June 4—Michele de Gasperis is the President and initiator of the Italian One Belt One Road Research Institute (OBOR Institute) and is also the Chairman of the Italy-Mongolia Chamber of Commerce. He organized a very successful, three-day OBOR-Expo at the Fiera di Roma trade fair, the first B2B (business-to-business) event after the Italian and the Chinese governments signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) on the Belt and Road Initiative.

In this exclusive interview with *EIR*'s Claudio Celani, Mr. De Gasperis speaks about his initiative, as well as the new opportunities opened by the BRI (Belt and Road Initiative) with Italy being the first G7 member to sign to it, and about other topics related to the “New Paradigm” of win-win strategic cooperation.

EIR: The OBOR Exhibition took place in Rome, May 15-17. You were the main organizer of it. Can you tell us what you hoped to accomplish, and how it went?

De Gasperis: The OBOR Exhibition was the first event that allowed all of the main players in China-Italy relations to gather under one banner. The response from all sectors was beyond our expectations: Institutions and trade associations, but above all firms and stakeholders, participated in the OBOR Exhibition with great enthusiasm and involvement. They all expressed a great desire to know more about both the BRI and China, to know more in depth and in a more nuanced way.



Italian President Sergio Mattarella (left) and Chinese President Xi Jinping are shown on the One Belt One Road Research Institute website.

The Belt and Road, in fact, even with the great notoriety attached to it in the recent months, is still currently unknown to the public at large, as well as its relation to third countries—an area in which Italy and China have the potential for large-scale cooperation. In this sense, the three days at the Rome Fair have provided a solid contribution to spreading knowledge about the Chinese program and were an excellent window for fruitful B2B meetings among Chinese and Italian firms. We can confirm this year’s success and want to increase such activities in the near future.

Business and Government Collaboration

EIR: Do B2B initiatives such as the one you promoted, need government support? If so, in what form?

De Gasperis: In principle, such B2B meetings can have a relevance and a profile that is good enough to be self-sustaining. However, this implies a “discrimination” which is social in the first place but also towards the Italian productive system. Let me explain the concept: If you want to create a self-sustaining or self-fueled B2B platform, you have to be operating at the level of enterprises that can sustain participation in the initiative. Government support would be welcome in helping to expand access to the numerous Italian SMEs (small and medium enterprises), which are a pivot of our productive system and it would produce positive economic spinoffs.



MoviSol/Flavio Tabanelli

Michele Geraci, Undersecretary of State in the Italian Ministry of Economic Development, and head of the government's Task Force China (left); and Claudio Celani, Director of the EIR Strategic Alert, at a MoviSol conference, “Italy on the New Silk Road,” in Milan, Italy on March 14, 2019.

EIR: Are the fruits of Italy’s participation in the BRI, with the signing of the MOU, government promotional activity, and the creation of Task Force China already visible?

De Gasperis: We are harvesting the benefits of governmental activity and in particular the work of undersecretary Michele Geraci, whose merit in bringing an otherwise semi-unknown program to those in the Italian productive system should be acknowledged.

The various activities initiated recently by the Italian government are a welcome acceleration of communication. However, as I said, many particulars of the program, and especially the best modalities of interest for Italian firms, are still to be fully explored. We are facing a set of requirements that represent, at the same time, a big opportunity: aiding stakeholders and professionals in meeting the requirements to operate in the Italo-Chinese trade sector. In fact, by qualifying those who promote trade among the two countries—and consequently, among BRI countries—we can better steer investments by Italian companies, presenting to the Chinese market a more compact and organized idea of our national system, with a more integrated supply chain, thus greatly increasing the possibility to make deals.

Looking to the Future

EIR: How will your initiative proceed in the future? Will it expand to other countries?

De Gasperis: Next year will be the fiftieth anniversary of diplomatic relations between Italy and the Peo-

ple’s Republic of China. The year 2020 has also been declared the “Year of Italo-Chinese Culture and Tourism.” Tourism and culture will certainly be among the hot issues at OBOR Exhibition 2020, along with other topics that we are now determining in collaboration with Chinese and Italian authorities. Furthermore, during the twelve months from now to May 2020, we will organize in Italy and China a series of periodic, theme-based workshops which will be feeders to OBOR Exhibition 2020. Participation is certainly being extended to all BRI countries; indeed, I am happy to take advantage of the platform offered by your prominent magazine to launch this invitation.

EIR: You founded the Italian OBOR Institute in 2018. Can you tell us what the mission is?

De Gasperis: The Institute was founded in 2017 and became fully operational in 2018. Our organization has a widespread presence on the territory of China and Italy, with headquarters in Rome and Beijing and about 30 staff members in major Italian and Chinese cities.

Our mission is to build a system based on the experiences and contributions of all Italian players concerned with, or involved in the One Belt One Road/Belt and Road Initiative economic development plan, with the aim of representing Italy’s role within the program and highlighting the opportunities of commercial cooperation that can be developed in this important framework.

Our network is mainly composed of institutions, universities, and research agencies. This network is the de-

facto think-tank of our institute, through which we interface with private firms. We provide the latter with assistance in locating opportunities for cooperation with our Chinese counterparts in the framework of OBOR, in organizing missions to China and in receiving Chinese delegations in Italy, as well as in collecting statistical data and information on regulations in Italo-Chinese business. What we do is training our Italian members so that they have a conscious approach to the One Belt One Road opportunities, assessing benefits and risks. The same goes for our Chinese counterparts, to whom we offer a better knowledge of the Italian market, guiding them towards business modalities that are most fitted and advantageous for them.



Courtesy of Michele de Gasperis

Michele de Gasperis, President of the Italian One Belt One Road Research Institute, with a delegate from Shanghai, China, at an OBOR-Expo in Rome on February 25, 2019.

Countering Lying Propaganda

EIR: We have seen much hostile propaganda against the BRI and China in Europe, with China being accused of expansionist aims, of “debt diplomacy” and so on. How do you answer those allegations?

De Gasperis: The concept of “debt diplomacy” is generally presented in a fully distorted way, or better said, it is an argument promoted by incompetent elites that underwrite debt, often beyond any real capacity of repayment, leaving the burden to the next government. In this scenario, I hardly see fault on the creditor side, but I see instead, as I said, the incompetent management of those who have underwritten the debt. Therefore, we insist on knowledge: Our institute has an active think-tank aimed at giving tools to small and medium-sized firms, and is also available to concerned institutions.

EIR: One hundred-thirty countries have already joined the BRI. Schiller Institute president Helga Zepp-LaRouche has highlighted the politically stabilizing aspect of the BRI, characterizing it as “a new Paradigm” in international relations, based on cooperation without political interference. Do you agree?

De Gasperis: I agree, because in my view, the BRI is

a system of economic cooperation, which is, however, primarily a system of cultural and peace-bringing cooperation among the peoples. I have personally participated in many meetings with colleagues from other countries involved in the program and I can confirm that eliminating cultural barriers and favoring mutual knowledge have been a major facilitator to business activities. As always, peoples anticipate government choices, and independent from any momentary political convenience, people, culture, and the economy have already moved forward. Many things between Italy and China had already started—in a not consciously

planned-out way. The notoriety acquired recently by the program in Italy, is further evidence of the need to promote and better know the project.

Italy and the Rest of Europe

EIR: Do you think it will be opportune for the Italian OBOR Institute to connect with similar initiatives, such as the just-born BVDSI in Germany?

De Gasperis: I consider this to be necessary, not merely useful. Our name is our mission and the exchange of knowledge with groups similar to ours means an acceleration of opportunities for firms. Sharing knowledge is one of the main aspects of our mission as an Institute, and we are firmly convinced that aggregating the Italian system and continuity of action with China—but also with the other BRI countries—will be one factor of success for the program.

On the Italian side, it is clear that our mission is to support and defend the Italian national productive system, but we also know that only by joining forces with other countries can we have positive spinoffs in general terms. Therefore I think it is necessary to adopt a common line at European level. On the other side, we are working to find a balance, the right position in defense of our SMEs in the globalized industrial system. Conversely, a lack of knowledge of those dynamics would find our system defenseless in the face of supra-national strategies.