

## Versione Italiana

Chinese President Xi Jinping is returning to Europe after a five-years absence. The last time, in 2019, Xi came to Italy. This time he will stop in France, Serbia and Hungary. It is unlikely that he will obtain results as brilliant as those of his visit to the Bel Paese, where the first government led by Giuseppe Conte decided to join the Silk Road, the project launched by Xi himself with the aim of significantly strengthening China's ties with Europe. Membership in the Chinese project - which was not supported by any other European country - was later withdrawn by Giorgia Meloni's government.

Paris is certainly the most important stage of Xi's trip. French President Emmanuel Macron is considered by the Chinese to be the most "pragmatic" of the European leaders, the one with whom he can address the issue of trade relations, now that the European Union has launched a barrage of controls against a series of Chinese companies operating in its territory. The suspicion is that these companies secretly receive state subsidies that can tilt balances in the market. For some years now the European Union has been asking China, with ever greater insistence, to open up its market to European companies to the same extent that the European market is open to Chinese ones. In recent months, numerous Chinese companies have been put on the "blacklist" of those who are economically helping Russia in its aggression against Ukraine, a country whose entry into the European Union has already been decided upon.

In the first quarter of 2024 the Chinese economy grew by 5.3 percent, a slightly higher pace than expected, but not enough to look with any optimism at the problems that have been created by the current crisis in the real estate sector - one of the engines of China's growth in the first decades of the century - as well as by the long-term problem heralded by the decline of the population, which shrank by 850 thousand in 2022 and two million in 2023. Beijing needs to keep European investments in China, and possibly expand.



The reception in Paris: "Dictator Xi Jinping, your time is up"

It is unlikely that decisive progress will be made on this point, given that there is no way around talking about the ongoing wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, regarding which positions in the EU and China are different and difficult to reconcile. In fact, Macron will ask Xi to stop aiding Russia in its war against Ukraine, albeit with little hope that this will actually happen. Witness the fact that China has asked that Russia also be invited to the international conference on peace in Ukraine, which Switzerland is organizing at Kyiv's request and which will be held in June. On the other hand, in the recent past, the French president has made statements that are certainly not displeasing in Beijing, saying that Europe must not "let itself be dragged into crises that do not belong to us and which risk preventing us from building our strategic autonomy". The reference to the situation in Taiwan and the United States' stance of "confrontation" with China in the Pacific also on a military level is clear.

In recent months, a series of diplomatic initiatives have been undertaken - first of all the mission of US Secretary of State Antony Blinken to Beijing - to try to prevent the "divergences" between the two powers from leading to a war that would have tragic consequences.

It certainly cannot be said that squaring the circle - rebalancing commercial and economic

relations while avoiding a drastic political break - will be easier with the European Union than with the United States.

For now, it seems that there is a will to try on both sides, even if for the moment it is not clear how it can be translated into concrete initiatives.

The distance between China and the European Union can also be measured by looking at the other stops Xi has chosen for his trip. The choice of Belgrade - a country of second-tier importance in Europe - can be read in an anti-American key, recalling the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade by NATO in 1999 in which three Chinese journalists lost their lives. The American President at the time, Bill Clinton, apologized to Beijing, saying it had been a mistake. The choice of Viktor Orbán's Hungary, whose government is a constant thorn in the side of the European Union, speaks for itself.

For Beijing, both have a meaning that goes beyond "provocation", and that is the effort to relaunch the Silk Road project dear to Xi Jinping, which after Italy's withdrawal and the European Union's recent harsh initiatives, he is struggling to restart.

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Translation by Paul Rosenberg

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