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**The Engagement of Italy with Indo-Pacific
Security:
A Compass to Navigate Pitfalls and Advance
Interests**

Lorenzo Termine

European University Institute
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Ministry of Foreign Affairs
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Abstract

This report explores the evolving role of Italy in Indo-Pacific security, and highlights its transition from a traditionally Mediterranean-focused power to playing a new role in a region critical for future global alignments. The strategic engagement of Italy is structured around four main pillars: naval diplomacy, defence cooperation, multilateral partnerships and promotion of its defence industry. From deployments of naval assets such as frigates and even its aircraft carrier to enhanced bilateral ties with regional powers, Italy has strategically positioned itself to support regional stability. However, the paper warns of potential risks, including military overstretch and insufficient policy coordination. By recommending the development of a more coherent Indo-Pacific approach, institutional coordination mechanisms and diversified regional partnerships, the article shows how Italy can effectively navigate geopolitical challenges while maximising its diplomatic and security impact. Italy's comprehensive cautious approach will be key to balancing strategic interests and contributing to Indo-Pacific stability.

Keywords

Italy; Indo-Pacific; regional security; military projection; defence cooperation

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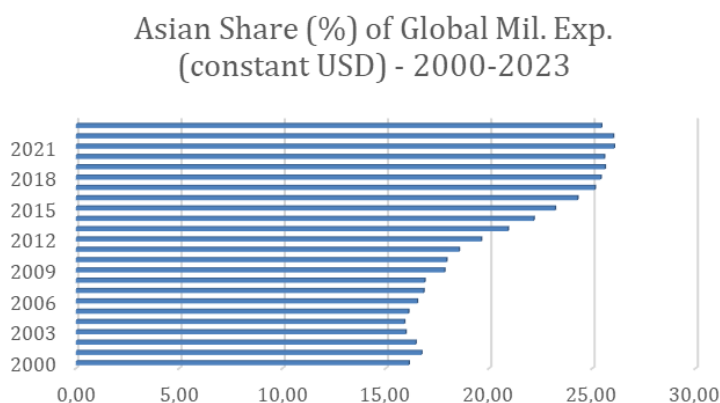
Italy is increasingly active in the Indo-Pacific,¹ a previously distant, if not exotic, destination for Rome's military assets. While allies and partners in and outside the region may welcome this greater involvement, Italy should develop a strategic compass to navigate new waters while dodging pitfalls² and advancing national interests. This paper outlines policy recommendations for Italy to be strategically relevant, reliable, solvent and shrewd in the Indo-Pacific and draws a compass for Italy's growing commitment to the region.

The Strategic Context

In recent years, the Indo-Pacific region has become an area of intense geopolitical competition, with major powers like the United States and China vying for influence.³ While Washington is assembling a counterbalancing coalition to contain the PRC, Beijing is racing towards greater military capacity and is increasingly coercive against weaker neighbours.

As a key European Union and NATO member, Italy must strategically position itself in this evolving landscape. Military spending in the region is bloating (see Figure), its maritime routes are crucial for global trade with over 60% of global shipping passing through the area and the security of these routes is of paramount importance for Italy's economy, which is heavily reliant on international trade (69% of its GDP comes from trade).

Italy must navigate this complex environment by carefully balancing its relations with China, the United States and regional powers like South Korea, Japan, India, Vietnam and Indonesia. Italy's growing emphasis on the Indo-Pacific reflects its acknowledgment of the shifting global balance of power and the critical role the region will play in determining future geopolitical alignments. The engagement of Italy in this region also tests its capacity to exert influence beyond its traditional areas of concern, such as the Mediterranean and North Africa.



Source: SIPRI, 2024. Omitted countries: North Korea, Laos, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan.

Engagement in the Indo-Pacific⁴ has become a significant element in Italy's foreign policy in recent years. While it has traditionally focused on European and Mediterranean affairs,⁵ where the Chinese presence, albeit increasing,⁶ is still marginal, the growing importance of the Indo-Pacific in global

- 1 Termine, Lorenzo, and Antonella Ercolani, eds. 2024. *Driver e ostacoli di un ribilanciamento asiatico dell'Italia*. Rome: UNINT University Press.
- 2 Natalizia, Gabriele, and Matteo Mazziotti di Celso. 2024. "Beyond NATO's 2 Percent Threshold: How Can Italy Meet the Challenge?" *Atlantic Council*. Accessed January 7, 2025. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/beyond-natos-2-percent-threshold-how-can-italy-meet-the-challenge/>.
- 3 Andornino, Giovanni B., and Anna Caffarena. 2024. "From Trust Deficits to Pervasive Mistrust: The Global Impact of US-China Rivalry." *The International Spectator* 59 (4): 1–18.
- 4 Casarini, Nicola. 2023. *Italy's Pivot to the Indo-Pacific – Towards a Value-driven Foreign Policy?* Accessed January 27, 2025. <https://www.iai.it/it/pubblicazioni/italys-pivot-indo-pacific>.
- 5 Diodato, Emidio and Raffaele Marchetti. 2023. *Manuale di politica estera italiana*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- 6 Dossi, Simone. 2020. "Italia-Cina: Le Interazioni in Ambito Navale e la Proiezione Cinese nel Mediterraneo Allargato." *OrizzonteCina* 11 (2): 50–57.

geopolitics has driven Italy to develop new partnerships and strategies in this dynamic region. With the Indo-Pacific playing a critical role in the 21st century political and economic order and with the growing global agency of states such as South Korea, Australia, India and Japan, Italy's efforts to establish itself as a reliable partner in the region must evolve to meet the challenges ahead while eschewing isolationism and overstretch. This policy paper outlines the context of the involvement of Italy, explores its current features and highlights some fundamental cardinal points Rome should constantly stick to.

The rise of the Engagement of Italy with the Indo-Pacific

Italy has made notable strides in expanding its strategic footprint in the Indo-Pacific region in recent years, reflecting a broader ambition to engage more deeply beyond its traditional focus on the western Indo-Pacific. Italian efforts in this area have concentrated on four main themes: enhancing naval diplomacy, strengthening defence cooperation, promoting the national defence industry and fostering multilateral and bilateral partnerships.

The Italian Military Presence and Naval Diplomacy

Italy has steadily increased its naval presence in the Indo-Pacific as part of its broader strategic aims. This began in 2017 with the deployment of the frigate *Carabiniere*, which toured the south Pacific, southeast Asia and the western Indian Ocean. The mission of the *Carabiniere* included stops in Australia, Indonesia, Singapore, Pakistan and Oman, and participating in joint exercises to promote dialogue and cooperation with regional partners.

Building on this, in 2023 Italy dispatched the offshore patrol vessel (PPA) *Morosini*, marking a significant advance in its naval diplomacy. In one year, the *Morosini* visited nineteen ports in eighteen countries, thus extending Italy's reach to northeast Asia, including Japan and South Korea. This mission involved participating in key multinational exercises such as 'Komodo 23' in the South China Sea and the EMASOH-AGENOR operation covering the Strait of Hormuz and the Arabian Sea. These activities are evidence of Italy's commitment to contributing to regional stability and enhancing its strategic profile in the broader Indo-Pacific.

In 2024, Italy made two additional steps of progress in its Indo-Pacific presence. Its aircraft carrier ITS *Cavour* joined France, Germany, Spain and the United Kingdom in Exercise Pitch Black 24 in Australia.⁷ This high-intensity training programme aimed to boost interoperability with its international allies. Following the exercise, the Italian carrier strike group sailed to Guam and Japan, and then for the first time transited through the South China Sea and headed to the Philippines. A similar cruise was conducted by the PPA *Montecuccoli*, which participated in the Rim of the Pacific exercise (RIMPAC), the world's largest maritime warfare exercise, the first time for an Italian vessel.

Again in 2024, Italy joined UN-backed and US-led efforts to monitor the maritime embargo on North Korea. This marked Italy's recognition of the need for collective security efforts after a year of growing tensions in the peninsula.⁸ However, Italy has adopted a cautious approach regarding more sensitive naval operations, such as freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs). This restraint reflects a careful balancing act. Italy is mindful of its alliances and regional dynamics.

Defence Cooperation and Security Partnerships

Italy has also focused on expanding its defence cooperation and security partnerships across the Indo-Pacific. It has progressively strengthened its ties with Japan through agreements and joint initiatives. These began with a security of information agreement in 2016, a memorandum on defence

⁷ Patalano, Alessio. 2024. "What is an Italian Carrier Strike Group Doing in the Indo-Pacific?" *War on the Rocks*. Accessed November 27, 2024. <https://warontherocks.com/2024/08/what-is-an-italian-carrier-strike-group-doing-in-the-indo-pacific/>.

⁸ Milani, Marco and Antonio Fiori. 2023. "Korean Peninsula 2023: A Year of Rising Tensions and Political Polarization." *Asia Maior* 34: 1-15.

cooperation and exchanges in 2017, and an agreement on the transfer of defence equipment and technology. These agreements paved the way for deeper collaboration, including Italy participating in the Global Combat air programme (GCAP)⁹ to develop sixth-generation fighter jets. This collaboration merges Japan's F-X programme with the British Tempest initiative.

In addition, Italy established a defence cooperation agreement with South Korea, which came into force in 2021, to foster cooperation on defence technology and enhance interoperability between the armed forces of the two nations. Joint naval exercises, such as those conducted by the Italian frigate ITS Margottini with Japanese cadets and the Morosini visiting Yokosuka and Busan, further show the active engagement of Italy in military diplomacy.

Beyond bilateral initiatives, Italy's contributions to multinational operations like EUNAVFOR Atalanta in the Gulf of Aden and the Combined Maritime Forces show its commitment to maintaining regional security and counter-piracy efforts. These initiatives reinforce Italy's role as a reliable partner in promoting maritime security in some of the world's most strategically significant waterways.

Promoting the Italian Defence Industry

A key element in Italy's Indo-Pacific strategy is promoting its national defence industry. Italy views its naval deployments as platforms to showcase its military technology and capability in potential regional markets. During the Carabiniere's 2017 mission, for example, Italian defence companies like Fincantieri, Leonardo and MDBA Italia hosted events to demonstrate their advanced systems and weapons technology. Similarly, Morosini's participation in central defence and aerospace exhibitions, such as IMDEX in Singapore and LIMA in Malaysia, is part of Italy's effort to secure new defence contracts and expand its market footprint.

The economic stakes are significant. Between 2010 and 2023, Italy supplied approximately about 1.3% of Asian and Oceanian military imports,¹⁰ with south Asia and southeast Asia emerging as primary markets. Notable deals include Leonardo supplying ATR 72 MPA aircraft to Malaysia, even if the actual contract was signed in 2024, and Fincantieri contracting for two PPA Units worth 1.18 billion euro with the Indonesian Ministry of Defence. Italy's defence sector has substantial growth potential, especially amid regional tensions and economic expansion. In 2017 and 2018 Fincantieri tried to secure a tender for Australia's Future Frigate but lost to British BAE Systems. Between 2023 and 2024, Italy deepened military industry cooperation with India. Extensive interview research, however, has found that foreign policy officials believe that Italy could do much more given its military industrial excellence and regional trends of defence procurement diversification (especially from Russia).

Multilateral Engagement and Capacity Building

Italy has also strengthened Indo-Pacific multilateral relationships and capacity-building initiatives. As a development partner of ASEAN since 2020, Italy has prioritised capacity-building efforts to support regional security and stability. These initiatives have focused on combating cybercrime, enhancing maritime security and building resilience to transnational threats.

These programmes are designed to foster closer ties and trust with emerging security sectors in the region, and position Italy as a proactive contributor to regional stability rather than a passive observer. Italy has supported the ASEAN Regional Mine Action Center (ARMAC) and collaborated with the UNHCR on humanitarian efforts,¹¹ which reflects a broader commitment to peace and

9 Dell'Era, Alice and Matteo Piasentini. 2024. "From Strategic to Tech-Oriented Minilateralism: GCAP as a Platform to Accelerate Military Technology Development." *The International Spectator* 59 (4): 95–115.

10 The actual value is hard to estimate. This is why SIPRI uses the Trend-Indicator Value which is based on the known unit production costs of a core set of weapons and is intended to represent transfer of military resources rather than the financial value of the transfer. Between 2010 and 2023 Italy exported 2.19 billion TIVs in armaments to Asia and Oceania. As per SIPRI, these include all the countries in Central Asia, South-East Asia and Oceania.

11 Dell'Era, Alice, and Giulio Pugliese. 2024. "Il ribilanciamento asiatico dell'Italia: driver e prospettive della cooperazione securitaria

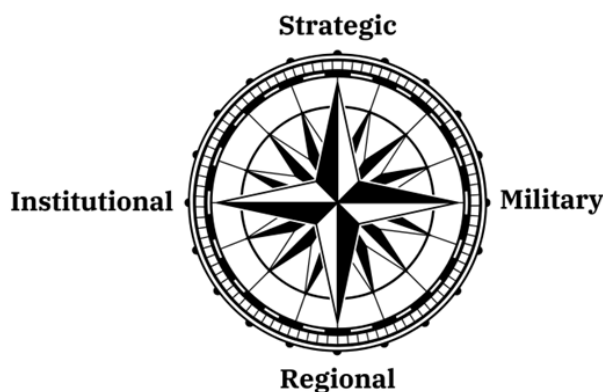
stability.

Italy's involvement in capacity-building extends beyond security and encompasses environmental protection, cultural heritage conservation and judicial cooperation. Italy has distinctively specialised in stability policing and training, activities designed to address areas where the so-called 'security gap' emerges. These initiatives aim to enhance Italy's diplomatic and cultural influence while contributing to the sustainable development of Indo-Pacific nations.

Italy has been a partner of the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) since 2019 with relations that keep deepening and a dialogue partner of the Pacific Islands Forum since 2007 with relations continuing to this day.

A Compass for Italy in the Indo-Pacific

In its growing security engagement with the Indo-Pacific, Italy's approach can use a simple hands-on compass to dodge pitfalls and risks and advance national interests. Four cardinal points (strategic, military, regional and institutional) point to twelve important routes Rome should consider and take (when it has not yet done so).



Strategic

Grand Strategic, Not Tactical. An Italian commitment to Indo-Pacific security should not be confused with tactics. In fact, it is not about China; it is about Italy's future role in the world. As a result, in an increasingly Indo-Pacific-focused world, Italy's approach to the region should reflect a comprehensive strategic evaluation and not be solely influenced by one or two factors, such as persistent Mediterranean instability or US pressure. Devoting more attention to the region has grand strategic implications as severe structural pressures are impacting the Indo-Pacific (rising powers, shifting military alliances, security dilemmas, military technological distribution, legacy patterns of hostility, etc.). Navigating these waters requires medium-to-long-term planning, strategic vision and caution.

NATO and EU Coordination. Italy can potentially play a relevant role in shaping European policy on the Indo-Pacific,¹² yet it has not fully capitalised on this opportunity. While France, being a Pacific country, has been more proactive in developing its Indo-Pacific approach, since 2021 Italy has largely aligned itself with the EU's broader approach.¹³ Italy should take a more active role in voicing NATO European member states' positions on the Indo-Pacific and in shaping EU policy on the region.¹⁴

nell'Indo-Pacifico." In *Driver e ostacoli di un ribilanciamento asiatico dell'Italia*, edited by Lorenzo Termine and Antonella Ercolani, 28-45. Roma: UNINT University Press.

12 Pugliese, Giulio. 2024. "The European Union and an 'Indo-Pacific' Alignment." *Asia-Pacific Review* 31 (1): 17-44.

13 Abbondanza, Gabriele and Tim Wilkins. 2024. "Europe in the Indo-Pacific: Economic, Security, and Normative Engagement." *International Political Science Review* 45 (5): 640-646.

14 Politi, Alice. 2024. "Multilateralism and Potential European Union Intervention in the Indo-Pacific: Coordination of Geopolitical and Commercial Interests." *EUI RSC Policy Brief 2024/21*, Global Governance Programme, [Europe in the World].

Close monitoring of what is happening in NATO is needed, especially because the alliance is gradually turning its attention to China and the Indo-Pacific¹⁵ and neglecting its southern neighbourhood. This is sparking a lively debate on the necessity¹⁶ and potential¹⁷ of NATO committing to the region. By positioning itself as a leader within the EU or at least a promoter of European dialogue on the Indo-Pacific, one including smaller powers¹⁸ and southern European states, Italy can strengthen its voice on the global stage and contribute to a more cohesive European approach to the Indo-Pacific.¹⁹

A Strategic Document. A pending issue for Italy is whether it should publish a National Security Strategy²⁰ or, even more specifically, a strategic document on the Indo-Pacific. Strategic documents can be helpful for several reasons but do not come without issues. Formalising a national security strategy – or an Indo-Pacific strategy – could enhance Italian standing, mainly if it contains a global outlook and promotes greater executive coordination. It can also raise the costs of swift foreign policy change by putting priorities down in black and white. Alternatively, not adopting one could be a strategic choice to retain greater freedom of manoeuvre and adaptability in a volatile security environment and also limit Italy's future role on the global stage for two reasons.

Military

Overstretch. Italy's increased military involvement in the Indo-Pacific reflects its broader historical alignment with US and NATO security priorities. The country has been one of the most active contributors to Western-led military initiatives globally, seeing this as a way to enhance its global standing and secure a reputation as a reliable international peacekeeper. Recent efforts to expand Italy's military presence in the Indo-Pacific further solidify this role. However, this shift has occurred with minimal public debate, and Italy's strategic decision to focus resources on this faraway region has sparked concerns about potential negative repercussions. Italy's military, one of NATO's most heavily deployed forces, is already stretched thin.²¹ Despite these vast commitments, Italy lags behind in defence spending, particularly in essential areas like training and maintenance. Most of its defence budget is allocated to personnel, leaving its forces slowly deteriorating in operational capacity. By spreading its military resources across multiple regions, Italy risks further weakening its readiness, especially as the Mediterranean region, a key area of interest for Italy, faces growing instability. Italy's commitment to maintaining an active military presence abroad has bolstered its international credibility, given its current defence spending. Italy's growing engagement with Indo-Pacific security necessarily reflects a careful effort to ensure it does not come at the expense of Mediterranean security.²² With NATO's focus on the eastern European front and expanding attention to China, and diminishing attention on the southern flank, Italy's role in Mediterranean security becomes increasingly vital, raising questions about whether its stretched military can effectively meet regional and global demands. It is not just Italy. Other European powers are debating whether and how to engage with Indo-Pacific security.²³

15 Novotna, Tereza, Youngjun Kim and Silvia Menegazzi. 2024. "NATO's New Mission: Keep America In, Russia Down, and China Out." *China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe*, August 8, 2024. <https://chinaobservers.eu/natos-new-mission-keep-america-in-russia-down-and-china-out/>.

16 Ellison, Davis and Paul van Hooft. 2024. "NATO Should Not Go to the Indo-Pacific: Drawing Away European Military Capabilities Is Risky, Organizational Demands Are Excessive and the Alliance's Track Record on Democracy Promotion Is Poor." *Atlantisch Perspectief* 48 (2): 30-35.

17 Simón, Luis. 2024. "NATO Should Think Big About the Indo-Pacific." *War on the Rocks*, July 1, 2024. <https://warontherocks.com/2024/07/nato-should-think-big-about-the-indo-pacific/>.

18 Figiaconi, Fabio. 2024. "Punching above their weight: EU small powers and the Indo-Pacific." *9DASHLINE*, June 3, 2024. <https://www.9dashline.com/article/punching-above-their-weight-eu-small-powers-and-the-indo-pacific>.

19 Grgić, Gorana and Giulia Tercovich. 2024. "Shifting Narratives? The EU's Approach to the Indo-Pacific after the War in Ukraine." *Journal of European Integration* 47 (1): 63-83.

20 Termine, Lorenzo and Gabriele Natalizia. 2024. "Italy's Middle Power Dilemma." *The National Interest*, August 24, 2024. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/italy%E2%80%99s-middle-power-dilemma-212427>.

21 Mazziotti di Celso, Matteo. 2024. "Is Italy Needed in the Indo-Pacific?" *War on the Rocks*, February 19, 2024. <https://warontherocks.com/2024/02/is-italy-needed-in-the-indo-pacific/>.

22 Coticchia, Fabrizio and Matteo Mazziotti di Celso. 2024. "Still on the Same Path? Italian Foreign and Defence Policy in the Enlarged Mediterranean." *Mediterranean Politics*: 1-10.

23 House of Commons Defence Committee. 2024. *Ready for War? First Report of Session 2023-24*, HC 26. Published on 4 February 2024. <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm5804/cmselect/>

Navy-Centrism. Italy's approach to the Indo-Pacific has focused heavily on the navy, and to a lesser extent the air force. While maintaining a naval presence in the region is essential, Italy's Indo-Pacific engagement cannot be defined solely by its naval contributions. Other services can fulfil different and even more politically beneficial functions, sometimes at a smaller cost. Italy's excellent track record in capacity building with the Carabinieri, the Coast Guard, the Postal Police (for cybercrime) and the Guardia di Finanza (financial crime and smuggling) must be noted. By diversifying its engagement, Italy can position itself as a multifaceted partner in the Indo-Pacific rather than being seen purely as a military actor.

Capacity Building. Italy must consider that the Indo-Pacific is increasingly polarised and securitised, subject to structural pressures and a growing security dilemma. In this context, military capabilities aim to dissuade adversaries from taking hostile actions – at best – or compelling weaker actors to comply with demands – at worst. Coercion is increasingly a feature of interstate relations in the region. In this context, Italy should not forget that FONOPs – like many other shows of force – are signalling but also – or at least are easily interpretable as – coercive efforts.²⁴ Capacity building vis-à-vis Italy's security partners in the Indo-Pacific can be a less provoking commitment to regional security while deepening political and security relations, as in the aforementioned policy priorities, thus feeding into a virtuous cycle.

Regional

Defining the Indo-Pacific. The Indo-Pacific has become a central concept in political jargon and academia. However, it is still somewhat fuzzy.²⁵ If all agree that it contains east and south Asia, it is not so clear what its boundaries are beyond them. For instance, how far westwards or eastwards it stretches. Fixing this in an official document or in policymaker discussions and institutions will be crucial for Italy's engagement and its relations with regional and offshore actors. One could approximately define a western Indo-Pacific as the region spanning from western India to the Gulf until the Horn of Africa; a central Indo-Pacific as the area comprised between India and the South China Sea; an eastern Indo-Pacific as including all territories east of Vietnam; and a southern Indo-Pacific south of Indonesia. Which one is Italy interested in? This is even more urgent as the Italian debate is being stuffed with new geographical notions, the latest being the 'Global Mediterranean' in the words of President Meloni. Fuzzy concepts do not serve Italian interests as they blur national political rhetoric and generate confusion.

Diversification of Partner States. Italy's Indo-Pacific engagement is mainly centred on a consolidated partner, Japan. This essential partnership sets the general framework and perimeter of Italy's Indo-Pacific policy. At the same time, Italy should diversify its regional relationships. Deepening security relations with established powers like South Korea and India and engaging with emerging powers such as Indonesia, Vietnam and Malaysia would expand Italy's influence and reduce its dependence on a few key partners. Relations with South Korea are an example. In October 2018, during then-South Korean President Moon Jae-in's visit to Italy, the two nations elevated their relationship to a strategic partnership, aiming to enhance cooperation in the political, security, economic and cultural spheres. A vice-ministerial diplomatic dialogue was established to strengthen political and security ties, and three agreements on defence, air services and trade were signed. The two nations share a valuable platform to enhance their commitment to mutual security. Italy's relationship with India²⁶ is another area of growing importance. India's status as a rising global power and its strategic position in the Indian Ocean makes it a crucial partner for Italy's Indo-Pacific policy, even more in its western Indo-Pacific sense. The two countries have strengthened their bilateral relations in recent years,

cmdfence/26/report.html.

24 Cho, H.-B. and B. C. Chao. 2024. "Muddied Waters: Freedom-of-Navigation Operations as Signals in the South China Sea." *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*.

25 Termine, Lorenzo, and Stefano Pelaggi. 2023. "Understanding Indo-Pacific in Geopolitical Context." In *Handbook of Indo-Pacific Studies*, edited by Barbara Kratiuk, Jeroen Van den Bosch, Aleksandra Jaskólska and Yoichiro Sato, 29-48. New Delhi: Routledge.

26 Gabusi, Giuseppe, ed. 2024. *Il nuovo ruolo dell'India nel sistema internazionale e le implicazioni per l'Italia*, Torino: T.wai – Torino World Affairs Institute.

focusing on defence cooperation, economic partnerships and counter-terrorism efforts but much can still be done. Resolution of past disagreements can lead to greater cooperation and coordination. Ramping economic relations with Vietnam may pave the way for deeper security collaboration as Vietnam plays a greater role in the region in the renewed Italy-Vietnam strategic partnership signed in 2013. Italy must also work to develop stronger relationships with smaller but strategically significant countries in the Indo-Pacific such as Malaysia and Singapore. These countries play essential roles in regional trade networks and could serve as gateways for Italy to expand its economic influence in Southeast Asia. In particular, Italy should explore opportunities for collaboration in areas such as technology and infrastructure, in which Italian expertise could significantly benefit these countries. By developing a more balanced approach to its Indo-Pacific relationships, Italy can ensure that its foreign policy remains flexible and adaptable to changing geopolitical dynamics.

Diversification of Organisations and Fora. Beyond state-level engagement, Italy's focus on regional organisations and fora in the Indo-Pacific can diversify further. This is an area where Italy can significantly enhance its soft power and diplomatic influence. This is particularly relevant given the proliferation of minilateral arrangements in the Indo-Pacific. To this day, France remains the most engaged European power²⁷ in the region in terms of both the number of its partnerships and the level of its commitment with organisations. Diversifying collaboration with regional organisations and fora could serve Italy's regional interests. Examples are the ADMM Plus, which European actors are increasingly pushing to join,²⁸ the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, a useful framework Italy could join as an observer in the light of improving relations with India, the East Asia Summit and fora such as the Western Pacific Naval Symposium and the Shangri-La Dialogue.

Institutional

Policy Coordination. Italy's internal governmental coordination on Indo-Pacific policy could be streamlined. Establishing a regular consultation and coordination mechanism for the Indo-Pacific across the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defence and the Armed Forces may serve this purpose. A joint task force would enable national coordination and eschew (or at least contain) factionalism, inter-service/institution competition, adventurism, information asymmetry and lack of specific expertise. In addition, information is key, but it does not flow automatically across institutions. A shared repository of reports, memos and documents on the Indo-Pacific could facilitate coordination between institutions and among offices. This is partly happening, for instance, with economic and trade country reports and documents from the former Istituto Commercio Estero, now under Farnesina control.

Contingency Planning. US pressures on allies and partners are mainly motivated by the China factor. China is Washington's paramount strategic competitor or, as the 2022 US NSS labels it, its pacing challenge. This has shaped a much more polarised region than in the past. As a result, deeper security involvement in the Indo-Pacific will eventually face a Chinese reaction, whether positive or negative. Creativity is required. In worst-case scenarios, diplomatic tit-for-tats, crises, reprisals and dangerously close encounters at sea may occur. A thorough cross-institutional scenario-making activity will make Italy's Indo-Pacific activism sounder.

Public Engagement. Rome could easily involve external non-governmental expertise drawing from academia, think tanks, journalists, NGOs and businesses, especially if a streamlined and regular consultation mechanism has been already established. A noteworthy example of public outreach on the Indo-Pacific is the Chamber of Deputies' Permanent Sub-Committee on Foreign Policy for the Indo-Pacific, which has conducted a long series of hearings on the topic. A similar framework was experimented for the 2015 White Paper on Defence. Cross-institutional interactions with civil society

27 Odgaard, Liselotte. 2024. "European Security and Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific." *Australian Journal of International Affairs* 78 (6): 911-28.

28 Nikkei Asia. 2024. "ASEAN Considers Including Europe in Defense Talks to Enhance Ties." *Nikkei Asia*, March 5, 2024. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Myanmar-Crisis/ASEAN-considers-including-Europe-in-defense-talks-to-enhance-ties>.

could inform the decision-making process and shape better policies.

Conclusion

Italy's growing involvement in the Indo-Pacific represents a strategic shift that extends its reach beyond traditional European and Mediterranean focuses. The region's geopolitical landscape, increasingly defined by strategic competition between the United States and China, presents both opportunities and challenges for Italy. Italy has sought to assert its presence and align with its allies through naval deployments, capacity building, defence cooperation and efforts to promote its defence industry. However, this evolving engagement requires a comprehensive nuanced approach to navigate the complexities of the Indo-Pacific effectively. Italy risks overextending and underutilising its diplomatic and military potential without a more complete approach.



Rome's engagement in the Indo-Pacific should not be reactive or solely focused on responding to US pressure to counterbalance China, just as it should not be the mere result of defence industry interests. Instead, it must be framed within a larger outlook recognising the region's significance in shaping future global power dynamics. While ongoing debate is taking place about whether Italy should formalise its strategic objectives in a national security strategy or specific Indo-Pacific policy, clarity is essential for Italy's international standing. This clarity will support coordination within the government and enhance Rome's credibility on the global stage. However, adopting such a strategy should not compromise Italy's flexibility; an adaptable and responsive approach is crucial given the region's fluid political and security environment.

To navigate the Indo-Pacific effectively, Italy needs to define its focus within this vast region. The boundaries of the Indo-Pacific concept remain ambiguous, but clarity is necessary to direct diplomatic and military efforts. Italy must identify which areas within the western, central and eastern Indo-Pacific are most relevant to its interests. This definition will also shape Italy's relations with regional and offshore actors, aligning its efforts with national priorities. A clear delineation will further assist Italy in coordinating its involvement with European Union policies and NATO's growing interest in the region. Italy's participation in the European framework offers an opportunity to shape European policy on the Indo-Pacific, thus strengthening its influence in regional security discussions.

While demonstrating a commitment to international security, Italy's military engagement must be approached with caution to avoid overstretching its capabilities, especially under the severe structural stresses posed by the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East. The increased naval presence and participation in multinational exercises have enhanced Italy's strategic profile but also put additional strain on an already heavily deployed military. Italy's armed forces operate in multiple regions, including Africa, the Middle East, Eastern Europe and the Arctic, and are already stretched thin. Defence spending is misaligned with these extensive commitments, particularly in areas like training and maintenance. By redirecting limited resources to the Indo-Pacific, Italy risks undermining its ability to address security challenges in its immediate neighbourhood, especially as instability

grows in the Mediterranean region. Italy's engagement should thus prioritise a strategic allocation of resources, ensuring that its military remains effective in regional and global contexts.

Italy's approach in the Indo-Pacific has mainly been naval-centric, a reflection of its maritime focus. While maintaining a naval presence is crucial, the scope of Italy's involvement must extend beyond its naval capabilities. Italy possesses diverse capacity-building expertise through institutions like the Carabinieri, Coast Guard and Postal Police, which can contribute significantly to regional stability in non-military areas such as law enforcement, cybercrime prevention and financial security. A more diversified engagement strategy will position Italy as a multifaceted partner rather than in the narrow sense. In addition, prioritising capacity-building initiatives with regional partners can support security in the Indo-Pacific without resorting to provocative military posturing. As the region becomes more polarised, Italy's efforts to foster capacity building could serve as a stabilising influence amid escalating tensions.

Italy must also address its regional partnerships in the Indo-Pacific. While existing ties with traditional partners like the United States and Japan are valuable, diversification is key to expanding Italy's influence. Engaging with countries such as South Korea, India, Indonesia and Vietnam will reduce Italy's dependence on a narrow set of allies and open up new avenues for cooperation. Italy's relationship with South Korea has grown in recent years. It is marked by strategic partnerships and diplomatic dialogue that provide a platform for mutual security commitments. Similarly, strengthening ties with India is crucial, given its strategic position and growing global significance. Italy should also seek to establish stronger relations with smaller but strategically significant countries, leveraging its expertise in technology and infrastructure to contribute to their development. A more balanced approach to regional partnerships will allow Italy to remain adaptable to changing geopolitical dynamics and reduce the risks associated with overreliance on specific states.

Beyond state-level engagement, Italy can enhance its influence through partnerships with regional organisations and multilateral forums. Currently, Italy's involvement with non-governmental and regional institutions remains limited. Increasing participation in initiatives like the Western Pacific Naval Symposium and the ASEAN Regional Forum would diversify Italy's engagement strategy and strengthen its soft power. This approach would align with the region's evolving security architecture, which increasingly values intergovernmental arrangements and collaborative security efforts. Enhancing Italy's presence in such organisations would contribute to regional stability and reinforce its reputation as a proactive and reliable partner in addressing Indo-Pacific challenges.

Internally, Italy must enhance its policy coordination mechanisms to support its Indo-Pacific engagement. Establishing a consultation body to coordinate crucial government ministries and the armed forces will streamline decision-making and ensure a cohesive policy approach. This body should also engage external expertise from academia, think tanks, businesses and non-governmental organisations, thus providing a well-rounded perspective on regional developments. In addition, Italy must invest in thorough contingency planning to prepare for complexities and potential crises inherent in Indo-Pacific dynamics. Public engagement may be equally significant. Involving scholars and professionals with Indo-Pacific expertise could really benefit and correctly inform policies.

In conclusion, Italy's growing engagement in the Indo-Pacific reflects its ambition to play a more active role in global geopolitics. However, for this engagement to be effective, it must be guided by a clear comprehensive strategy that balances military commitments, diversifies partnerships and streamlines internal coordination. By adopting a thoughtful proactive approach, Italy can navigate the challenges of the Indo-Pacific, solidify its role as a reliable partner and contribute to regional stability. The Indo-Pacific is not merely a distant frontier but a crucial space that will define Italy's future role in world affairs. Italy must approach it with caution and ambition, and ensure national interests and global realities inform its actions.

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POLICY PAPER

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Asia: Drivers and Outlook**

Giulio Pugliese & Alice Dell'Era

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Ministry of Foreign Affairs
and International Cooperation

Abstract

The sustained security engagement of Italy in the Indo-Pacific appears to serve two main objectives. First, the Italian government is signalling political alignment with its allies and strategic partners in both its words and deeds. Second, techno-economic and mercantile objectives constitute significant drivers of Italy's Indo-Pacific engagement. As a result, Italy is party to a U.S.-led political concert of 'like-minded countries' across the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theatres, a process which took shape under the Biden administration.

The dispatch of military assets to the region is sustained by the above two factors. Military exercises in the region constitute signals and a new operational testbed for Italy's capabilities and assets. The Italian Navy is already involved in multi-country military operations in the Western Indian Ocean and 'Enlarged Mediterranean', where Italy's immediate interests lie. Defence diplomacy further east may foster interoperability with traditional allies and new partners and enhance military capabilities through exercises, as per the Italian Navy's official framing and narrative. In fact, the strategic merits of deploying important assets in the eastern quadrant of the Indo-Pacific need to be questioned, especially when the deployment diverts a substantial amount of human, economic and physical resources away from Italy's neighbourhood.

The situation is in flux. The likelihood of a more decisive U.S. rebalancing towards Asia, hence of a progressive disengagement from Europe and the Middle East, will inform Italy's Indo-Pacific defence diplomacy from 2026 onwards. As the U.S. shifts its focus eastward, Washington may expect Italy and Europe to take on a larger share of the military burden in the Euro-Atlantic theatre. On the other hand, Italy's industrial cooperation with local Indo-Pacific players aims at next-generation technologies, military or otherwise. This, along with potentially lucrative military procurement contracts, will sustain Italy's security and political intervention. Here too, however, the arrival of the Trump administration may throw some of these cooperative and mercantile goals into question.

Keywords

Europe in the World; Italy; Indo-Pacific; Northeast Asia; defence cooperation; defence diplomacy

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Introduction

Over the past decade, the Indo-Pacific region has emerged as a key theatre of global economic, military and geopolitical dynamics, prompting many actors, including European ones, to adjust their strategic posture to reflect the growing significance of this macro-region.¹ Although a latecomer to this arena, at least in terms of sustained security projection, Italy has recently sought to display its military presence, and thus deepen its defence ties with key regional actors. While Rome has not articulated a comprehensive Indo-Pacific strategy, it has highlighted its contribution to the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific and it has taken notable steps by deploying assets to the region and by enhancing defence industrial cooperation with regional partners. Rome has been coordinating with the United States to establish joint priorities and ensure seamless regional cooperation.² In fact, Italy-U.S. coordination has arguably been one of the main drivers behind Italy's growing security footprint in the Pacific. Significantly, the security engagement of Italy with the Indo-Pacific has evolved beyond its traditional focus on the western Indian Ocean, and in recent years it has extended to the Pacific quadrant of this macro-region.

The overall growing security engagement of Italy in the Indo-Pacific appears to serve two main objectives. First, and most importantly, the Italian government – starting with the Mario Draghi administration – has aimed to chiefly signal political alignment with its allies and strategic partners in both its words and deeds. Under Draghi, early consultations with the then Minister of Foreign Affairs Luigi Di Maio on not renewing the 2019 Italy-China Belt and Road Initiative framework memorandum of understanding, no matter how tame and pragmatic in spirit,³ went hand in hand with decisions to send military assets to the region and to bolster and use the central government's foreign investment screening prerogatives. The G7plus witnessed a notable alignment among the 'Enlarged West,' with a new-found synergy between the 'geopolitical' European Commission led by Ursula Von Der Leyen and Washington. This tendency was reinforced by the advent of the Biden administration in January 2021 and, along with the imprint of Draghi, reinforced the return of Italy to its foreign and security policy lodestars: Atlanticism and Europeanism.

The Biden National Security Council's preference for leveraging allies in the context of strategic competition, Russia's war in Ukraine, the renewed importance of NATO (and of US security guarantees) and China's worsening reputation as a systemic rival in European capitals facilitated this alignment.⁴ From a political and strategic standpoint, Italy's presence in this region thus serves to demonstrate alignment with the commitments of like-minded parties to Indo-Pacific security and the protection of critical sea lines of communication.⁵ Politically, it contributes to the perception that Italy is a net security provider, in part compensating for its defence spending of 1.54 percent of GDP, still far from the 2 percent of GDP benchmark advocated by NATO.

This is particularly evident in Italy's use of naval diplomacy. Such engagements have been justified not merely as 'showing the flag' but they serve as an operational testbed for Italy's capabilities and assets. At the same time, these deployments risk clashing with Rome's constrained resources and its already overextended operational reach.⁶

Second, defence industrial cooperation and mercantile objectives are also significant drivers of Italy's Indo-Pacific engagement. They constitute additional vectors behind alignment. Italy continues to navigate its approach in the Indo-Pacific by balancing national priorities with pragmatic decision-

1 Lorenzo Termine and Antonella Ercolani, eds., *Driver e ostacoli di un ribilanciamento asiatico dell'Italia* (Drivers and obstacles in Italy's rebalancing towards Asia), Rome: UNINT University Press, 2024.

2 U.S. Department of State, "United States – Italy Consultation on the Indo-Pacific," 21 May 2024, <https://web.archive.org/web/20240522125250/https://www.state.gov/united-states-italy-consultation-on-the-indo-pacific/>.

3 Giulio Pugliese, Francesca Ghiretti and Aurelio Insisa, "Italy's BRI Embrace: Populist Foreign Policy and Political Marketing," *International Affairs*, Vol. 98, No.3 (2022), pp. 1033-51.

4 Giulio Pugliese, "The European Union and an 'Indo-Pacific' Alignment," *Asia-Pacific Review*, Vol. 31, No.4 (2024), pp. 17-44.

5 Interview with Italian diplomat (a), (A. Dell'Era, Interviewer). (30 January 2024).

6 Matteo Mazziotti di Celso, "Is Italy Needed in the Indo-Pacific?" *War on the Rocks*, 19 February 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/02/is-italy-needed-in-the-indo-pacific/>.

making. In fact, not all segments of the Italian state apparatus have equally embraced this pivot. Circumstantial evidence suggests that the process was kickstarted by the Draghi government and it is now driven by the Meloni government and Italy's military and defence apparatus.⁷ Despite its military dispatches, Italy's strategic focus remains firmly centred on its immediate neighbourhood, a trend that is likely to persist and deepen given the persistent instability and negative security externalities in the 'Enlarged Mediterranean' (recently reconceptualised as the 'Global Mediterranean'), a strategic space which transcends that body of water to include the western shores of Africa up to the Gulf of Guinea, the Black Sea, Ukraine and large chunks of the Western Indian Ocean. Apart from free trade, imports of energy and the protection of sea lanes and sea infrastructure, the fight against illegal migration – one of the key drivers of the political agenda of Italy and much of Europe – further exerts a gravitational pull closer to home. Unexpected developments brought by the second Trump presidency will further compound these dynamics.

The Power Projection of Italy in Northeastern Asia

Due to its geographical location in the Mediterranean Sea and its strategic focus on the 'Enlarged Mediterranean,' Rome is well positioned to serve as a bridge between the Indo-Pacific and its traditional area of focus.⁸ Italian activism in the western Indo-Pacific, an area that overlaps the eastern end of the 'Enlarged Mediterranean', is therefore not surprising. This sub-region has long been a focal point for Rome, particularly through its involvement in a variety of multinational, especially US- and EU-led naval operations in the Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden. For example, Italy is a member of the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), a U.S.-led multinational naval partnership established in 2002 to enhance maritime security in the area of the western Indo-Pacific. Since joining the CMF, Rome has assumed command of a CMF task force three times, most recently that of CMF 153 in 2024, which focuses on securing maritime operations in the Red Sea, Bab al-Mandeb and the western Gulf of Aden.⁹ In addition, the Italian Navy has been among the main contributors to EUNAVFOR Atalanta, the counter-piracy mandate of which was recently amended to cover the entire northwestern Indian Ocean.¹⁰ Italy has also played a leading role in the EMASOH-AGENOR mission in the Strait of Hormuz, assuming command twice,¹¹ and it participates in the recently launched Operation Aspides.¹²

While the western Indo-Pacific is therefore an area where Italy has experience of deploying and operating military assets, the northeastern side of the Indo-Pacific has traditionally fallen outside the scope of the defence diplomacy of the Italian government. For example, in 2017 when Rome first deployed its frigate *Carabinere* in the Indo-Pacific, the ship ventured as far as the South Pacific with a port call in Australia but bypassed Northeast Asia entirely, stopping instead in Indonesia, Singapore, Pakistan and Oman.¹³ Italy's 2017 defence diplomacy, which was chiefly aimed at the failed (and controversial) bid for Australia's Hunter class frigate procurement,¹⁴ avoided transiting across the South China Sea, and aptly symbolised the economics-centred logic of prioritising relations with China in the (previously called) Asia-Pacific region.

7 Ministero della Difesa, "Chief of Defence Strategic Concept 2022," 1 January 2022, p. 5, https://www.difesa.it/assets/allegati/27703/chief_of_defence_strategic_concept_2022_.pdf; "Comitato Permanente sulla Politica Estera per l'Indo-Pacifico: Audizione del Capo di Stato Maggiore della Marina Militare" (Audition of the Chief of the Italian Navy), *III Commissione – Camera dei Deputati*, 12 December 2024, https://documenti.camera.it/leg19/resoconti/commissioni/stenografici/html/03/indag/c03_indo_pacifico/2024/12/12/indice_stenografico.0035.html.

8 Lorenzo Termine and Alice Dell'Era, eds., "Strategie di collegamento dell'Indo-Pacifico al Mediterraneo allargato. La prospettiva dell'Italia oltre il corridoio IMEC," Osservatorio di Politica internazionale: Parlamento italiano, 2023, pp. 1-68.

9 Combined Maritime Forces, "Italy Takes Command of International Red Sea Task Force," 3 April 2024, <https://combinedmaritimeforces.com/2024/04/03/italy-takes-command-of-international-red-sea-task-force/>.

10 EU Naval Force Operation Atalanta, "Mission," EUNAVFOR, 2024, <https://eunavfor.eu/index.php/mission>.

11 European Maritime Awareness Strait of Hormuz, EMASOH/AGENOR, 2024, <https://www.emasoh-agenor.org/about-4>.

12 Luca Peruzzi, "Italy's contribution to the nascent EU Operation Aspides," Naval News, 8 February 2024, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2024/02/italys-contribution-to-the-nascent-eu-operation-aspides/>.

13 Consolato Generale d'Italia Melbourne, "La Fregata Europea Multi Missione Carabiniere approda in Australia," 25 January 2017, https://consolmelbourne.esteri.it/it/news/dal_consolato/2017/01/la-fregata-europea-multi-missione/.

14 Andrew Greene, "Previously secret report raises fresh doubts on British warship selection for \$45 billion future frigate program," ABC News, 4 December, 2023, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-12-05/previously-secret-report-raises-doubts-future-frigates-program/103184822>.

However, along with embracing the Indo-Pacific construct – which is code for fostering relations with economies and states other than China – the Italian government deployed its newest offshore patrol vessel, PPA-class *Morosini*, to 18 states across the mega-region, including northeast Asian partners Japan and South Korea, but not China. This deployment marked a pivotal step in Italy's efforts to signal political alignment and to present itself as a security provider committed to contributing to international security, regional stability and the international rule of law.¹⁵ While the mission deliberately avoided contested waters and refrained from conducting Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), it was designed to achieve multiple objectives. These included showcasing the presence of Italy, signalling its commitment to freedom of navigation, safeguarding the security of sea lines of communication and upholding the international rule of law, alongside various techno-economic aims, which are outlined in the following section of this brief.¹⁶

The stop by the *Morosini* in Japan and South Korea reflected a growing pattern of economic, security and normative interactions with several Indo-Pacific actors.¹⁷ These engagements have matured at varying speeds. For example, relations with South Korea have progressed but remain less developed compared to the dynamic partnership with Japan. Seoul and Rome have been strategic partners since 2018 when the *Italy-ROK Strategic Dialogue* was launched.¹⁸ The port call by the *Morosini* in Busan served primarily as an opportunity for naval diplomacy. In fact, during the visit, the Italian Navy crew visited the *United Nations Memorial Cemetery in Korea* but did not engage in any bilateral joint military drills.¹⁹

In contrast, cooperation with Japan encompasses both diplomatic and operational objectives, with an eye on techno-industrial goals. Tokyo and Rome took steps to build a close security partnership in the second half of the 2010s and signed an Agreement on Information Security in 2016, followed by a Memorandum on Defence Cooperation and Exchanges and a subsequent agreement concerning the transfer of defence equipment and technology in 2017.²⁰ The year 2018 marked a turning point for strategic convergence between the two countries, particularly on issues cutting across the Enlarged Mediterranean and the Asia-Pacific region.²¹ By January 2023, cooperation with Japan was elevated to a Strategic Partnership, with the two countries agreeing to launch 2+2 consultations, a mechanism that Tokyo already maintains with other European partners such as the United Kingdom, France and Germany.²²

Since then, Italian cooperation with Japan on defence and security has progressively deepened as is evidenced by Rome's initiatives in the Indo-Pacific. For example, the *Morosini*'s port call in Yokosuka marked the first visit by an Italian Navy ship in 25 years. On this occasion, the Italian frigate participated in bilateral joint exercises with the JS *Hamana*. These drills were intended to improve the tactical capabilities of both parties and consolidate bilateral cooperation.²³ Following the naval drills, Italy also deployed four F-35A fighter jets to Komatsu, Japan, in its first bilateral aerial joint exercise with the Japan Air Self-Defence Force (JASDF). This mission aimed to test the long-distance

15 Interview with Italian diplomat (a), (A. Dell'Era, Interviewer). (30 January 2024).

16 *Ibid.*

17 Gabriele Abbondanza, "Italy's quiet pivot to the Indo-Pacific: Towards an Italian Indo-Pacific strategy," *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 45 (2023), pp. 669-679.

18 Governo Italiano, "Italian Republic-Republic of Korea Summit Joint Press Statement," 17 October 2018, https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/JointPressStatemen_20181017.pdf.

19 Ministero della Difesa, "L'equipaggio di Nave Morosini in visita allo United Nations Memorial Cemetery in Korea," 4 July 2023, https://www.marina.difesa.it/media-cultura/Notiziario-online/Pagine/20230704_equipaggio_Morosini_visita_United_Nations_Memorial_Cemetery_Korea.aspx.

20 Alice Dell'Era and Matteo Piasentini, "From Strategic to Tech-oriented Minilateralism: GCAP as a Platform to Accelerate Military Technology Development," *The International Spectator*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (2024), pp. 95-115.

21 Marco Zappa, "From Mutual Fascination to Strategic Cooperation: Italy and Japan in the Face of the 21st Century's Global Transformations," in Andreea Brinza and Andrei Lungu, eds., *Developing the EU-Japan Strategic Partnership. An analysis of European Union member states' relations with Japan*, Romanian Institute for the Study of the Asia-Pacific (2023), <https://iris.unive.it/handle/10278/5014611>.

22 Dario Cristiani, "Why and How Italy and Japan Are Upgrading Their Partnership," *The Diplomat*, 13 January, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/01/why-and-how-italy-and-japan-are-upgrading-their-partnership/>.

23 Ministry of Defence of Japan, "JS HAMANA conducted a bilateral exercise with the Italian Navy," 3 July 2023, https://www.mod.go.jp/msdf/sf/english/news/2023/07/0704_2.html.

expeditionary capability of the Italian Air Force.²⁴ The growing engagement of Italy with Japan in the Indo-Pacific culminated in two significant agreements in 2024. The first, signed in June 2024, was an action plan to deepen cooperation in various domains. Notably, in this document Rome committed to expanding joint military activities and port calls, thus signalling its ambition to consolidate its presence in the Indo-Pacific.²⁵ The second milestone came in November 2024 with the signing of an Acquisition and Cross-Service Agreement (ACSA). This agreement further advanced the operational capabilities of Japan and Italy by “facilitating acquisitions, supplies, exchanges in the military field.”²⁶ It is worth noting that Japan maintains ACSAs with only six other partners beyond its traditional ally, the United States: Australia, Canada, Germany, France, India and the United Kingdom. A Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA) normally follows an ACSA. RAAs establish procedures for cooperative activities while the force of one country, including its civilian component, is visiting the other state. RAAs thus define the legal status of the visiting force, thus smoothening cooperation.

These developments in the northeastern Indo-Pacific, especially the growing partnership with Japan, underscore Italy’s ambition to carve out a broader role for itself in this strategic macro-region. This ambition was further demonstrated by two additional Indo-Pacific deployments. In May 2024, the PPA *Montecuccoli*, which is equipped with anti-air warfare capabilities, departed its homeport in Italy for the Indo-Pacific, where it participated in the U.S.-led multinational exercises RIMPAC 2024 and Pacific Dragon. This marked the first-ever participation by an Italian Navy ship in these two drills.²⁷ Beyond participating in these exercises, the *Montecuccoli* also made a port call at the White Beach naval base in Okinawa, Japan,²⁸ and in Busan, South Korea. More significantly, it was the first time an Italian warship took part in U.S.-led naval operations monitoring UN sanctions on North Korea, which usually take place in seas north of Taiwan.²⁹

The second major development was the historic deployment of the *Cavour* carrier strike group to the region from 1 June to 30 October 2024. Similar to the *Morosini* and *Montecuccoli* missions, the deployment of the carrier strike group was part of Italy’s broader efforts to signal political alignment and contribute to regional stability. In addition, according to the Italian Navy, this deployment aimed to test Rome’s ability to effectively project power and deploy assets beyond its traditional area of operations.³⁰ In fact, a key highlight of the mission was participation by the *Cavour* in the 2024 Exercise Pitch Black. This marked not only Italy’s debut in this air combat exercise, but the first time the exercise featured the participation of an aircraft carrier.³¹

The participation by the *Cavour* in Pitch Black was justified as part of the country’s aim to advance interoperability, “interchangeability” and integration with the forces of 34 partner nations,³² including the U.S. Navy, Japan and Australia in the eastern quadrant of the Indo-Pacific. Beyond Pitch Black, the *Cavour* engaged in several other bilateral and multilateral drills and exercises during its deployment. Notably, it joined the USS *Abraham Lincoln* carrier strike group in a bilateral multi-large deck event (MLDE) involving “enhanced maritime communication operations, air warfare operations and cross-deck flight operations to strengthen maritime integrated-at-sea operations and

24 Gabriel Dominguez, “Japan and Italy to elevate ties with first joint fighter drills,” *Japan Times*, 4 August, 2023, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2023/08/04/japan/japan-italy-fighter-jet-joint-exercises/>.

25 Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Japan-Italy Action Plan (2024-2027),” 14 June 2024, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100684778.pdf>.

26 “Italy, Japan sign agreement on defence cooperation – statement,” *Reuters*, 25 November 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/italy-japan-sign-agreement-defence-cooperation-statement-2024-11-25/>.

27 Luca Peruzzi, “Italy’s First PPA with AAW Capabilities Deploys to the Indo-Pacific,” *Naval News*, 3 May 2024, <https://www.navalnews.com/naval-news/2024/05/italys-first-ppa-with-aaw-capabilities-deploys-to-the-indo-pacific/>.

28 Gabriel Dominguez, “Italy-Japan ties enter ‘new era’ amid deepening alignment, top envoy to Tokyo says,” *The Japan Times*, 22 August 2024, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2024/08/22/japan/politics/italy-ambassador-japan-interview/>.

29 Ministero della Difesa (Marina Militare), “ITS Montecuccoli participates in Enforcement Coordination Cell mission,” 11 September 2024, https://www.marina.difesa.it/EN/Conosciamoci/notizie/Pagine/20240911_Montecuccoli_Enforcement_Coordination_Cell_Mission.aspx.

30 Marina Militare, “Gli highlights della prima campagna in Indopacifico del Carrier Strike Group Italiano,” 3 December 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tz4Vt_Eahj0&t=1s.

31 *Ibid.*

32 *Ibid.*

combat readiness.”³³ Following the MLDE, the *Cavour* made a port call in Yokosuka, Japan, where it participated in joint exercises with the Japanese Maritime Self-Defence Force (JMSDF) to further enhance interoperability with Tokyo.

Beyond naval engagements, the Italian Air Force has also undertaken regional deployments to test its expeditionary operational capabilities and enhance integration. Air Force personnel and assets were aboard the *Cavour* and they took part in Exercise Pitch Black alongside their Navy counterparts. Following Pitch Black, the Italian Air Force participated in the second Rising Sun 2024, a joint exercise with the JASDF held in Misawa, Japan. This exercise focused on sharing mutual operational knowledge, flight tactics and procedures.³⁴ Notably, this also included U.S. Air Force personnel and assets stationed in Misawa, marking the first-ever trilateral aerial exercise involving the three partners.

While the above developments suggest that Italy has attempted to politically align with allies and strategic partners in the Indo-Pacific, Rome continues to retain a pragmatic approach, balancing its Indo-Pacific engagement with the need to avoid tension, particularly with China. On the occasion of the Japanese port call, for example, Italian Defence Minister Guido Crosetto emphasised Rome's interest in fostering a close relationship and military cooperation with Japan.³⁵ However, he also clarified that Italy's deployment of assets in the Indo-Pacific was not intended to provoke or antagonise any nation. Moreover, none of the above-listed military assets seemingly sailed through the Taiwan Strait, unlike virtually all other G7 states and many U.S. regional allies, including the 2024 new additions: Germany, Japan, and New Zealand. Neither did Italian assets elicit Chinese reactions during their deployment, unlike other European players.³⁶ The above suggests a prudent balance, also to compensate for Rome's quiet withdrawal from the Belt and Road Initiative framework memorandum of understanding in December 2023.

These transits and exercises confirmed strong U.S. suasion of its allies to engage in the region, which is corroborated by interviews with Department of Defense officials.³⁷ Therefore, the Italian missions to the Indo-Pacific reflect an effort to partially accommodate U.S. desiderata: they signal the presence of Italy in an increasingly crowded region, while also simultaneously being characterised by a degree of moderation in dealing with sensitive areas. This pragmatic approach stems from an ongoing national debate between those, particularly diplomatic quarters, advocating a more balanced and cautious stance and those, such as the military and industrial defence sectors, pushing for greater engagement opportunities.³⁸

According to the framing by the Italian Navy, the deployment of the *Cavour* in the Indo-Pacific was also critical to achieve initial operational capability (IOC) of Italy's F-35B, specifically joint expeditionary sea-based activities. As Captain Dario Castelli, the carrier strike group Air Wing Commander, stated, reaching IOC is regarded as “a fundamental step for Italy since it is the only EU nation able to guarantee a concrete sea-based power projection capability founded on 5th generation assets.”³⁹ In fact, during the Indo-Pacific deployment, the Italian Armed Forces tested their Navy and Air Force's F-35B capabilities, to include cross-deck flight operations with the USS *Lincoln*, and achieved IOC after 2,700 flight hours. While attaining IOC represents a milestone for the Italian Navy, the merits of doing so in the Pacific Ocean deserve scrutiny. On the one hand,

33 “U.S. Navy and Italian Navy Conduct First Indo-Pacific Multi-Large Deck Event,” *Naval News*, 11 August 2024, <https://www.naval-news.com/naval-news/2024/08/u-s-navy-and-italian-navy-conduct-first-indo-pacific-multi-large-deck-event/>.

34 “Rising Sun 2024: the Air Force concludes the training mission in Japan,” *Difesa Online*, 8 August 2024, <https://en.difesaonline.it/news-forze-armate/missioni/rising-sun-2024-laeronautica-militare-conclude-la-missione-addestrativa>.

35 “イタリア空母が日本に初寄港 国防相は日本と連携深めたい考え” (Italy's Aircraft Carrier Docks in Japan for the First Time – Defence Minister wants to deepen cooperation with Japan), *NHK News*, 27 August 2024, <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/html/20240827/k10014560401000.html>.

36 Seong Hyeon Choi, “China warns against Dutch naval ‘intrusion,’ disputes East China Sea encounter,” *South China Morning Post*, 11 June, 2024, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3266181/china-warns-against-dutch-naval-intrusion-disputes-east-china-sea-encounter>.

37 Interview with US Department of Defense officials (G. Pugliese, Interviewer). (Pentagon, Arlington, Virginia, 6 February 2024).

38 Interview with Italian diplomat (a), (A. Dell'Era, Interviewer). (30 January 2024)..

39 Marina Militare, “Prima campagna in Indopacifico.”

the Italian Navy could have aimed at IOC in the context of multicarrier operations and multilateral maritime exercises performed closer to home, the function of which would more clearly reflect Italy's strategic imperatives and potential crisis scenarios.⁴⁰ On the other hand, new multi-carrier operations (or multi-large deck events) are often centred on U.S. fifth generation fighter jets and their integration in a networked, information-based and multi-domain 'aircraft carrier system' (*sistema portaerei*) that relies on cutting-edge operational and tactical procedures borrowed from the U.S. Navy.⁴¹ On the face of it, reliance on both defence hardware and military praxis originating from the U.S. may allow force multiplication through greater interoperability among U.S. allies with similar air-sea capabilities. At the very least, the Italian Navy is seizing this opportunity to enhance its capabilities through training and exchanging best practices with middle powers, such as Japan, that operate similar platforms to further bolster relations,⁴² not unlike the United Kingdom. At the same time, however, these exercises should be chiefly understood as relationship-building signals, because it is highly unlikely that European players will actually engage in kinetic military operations, or even intelligence surveillance target acquisition and reconnaissance activities, with counterparts from the eastern quadrant of the Indo-Pacific, especially in the light of geopolitical *and* political trends pushing towards prioritisation of their respective strategic theatres.

In any case, Italy's military presence and multilateral maritime exercises in the Pacific Ocean raise concerns about overstretched assets and limited resources. There appears to be a disconnect between Italy's defence resources and its Indo-Pacific ambitions which could potentially jeopardise its overall operational readiness even in its priority area.⁴³ Instead, Italy may benefit from prioritising its expenses and efforts in its traditional strategic sphere of influence, the Enlarged Mediterranean.⁴⁴ A sustained presence in the Indo-Pacific by deploying military assets with the main purpose of military signalling, is indeed a costly endeavour. This is especially true of the deployment of a carrier strike group in terms of taxpayer money, the personnel and assets away from the home theatre, and broader opportunity costs that must be carefully balanced against Italy's interests closer to home. The Red Sea crisis, which deepened in 2024, serves as an apt reminder of the opportunity costs of such dispatches.

Beyond Military Presence and Multilateral Maritime Exercises: Italy's Defence Industrial Cooperation with Japan

Defence industrial cooperation and mercantile aims are also high on the agenda of Italy's Indo-Pacific engagement, and arguably constitute the second main vector behind Italy's U.S.-led Indo-Pacific alignment. In recent years, fast-paced innovation has pushed technology frontiers to such levels that most individual countries' defence industrial complexes cannot keep up on their own. In particular, mature economies face a wide array of challenges ranging from substantial public debt to increasingly burdensome welfare systems, and low growth. This is particularly true of Japan, the Republic of Korea and many European states, including Italy, where the population is aging and shrinking. Against this backdrop, 'like-minded' actors are building defence industrial and techno-economic links to reduce the economic burden of innovation, research and development of frontier technologies.

These dynamics are well-exemplified by the Italy-Japan-United Kingdom Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP) framework. The GCAP aims to create a combat aircraft that combines unmanned cooperating systems, satellites and other military assets. While its main aim is to develop a sixth-

40 For example, see "NATO Strike Groups Demonstrate Multicarrier Operations," *Naval News*, 23 November 2022, <https://www.naval-news.com/naval-news/2022/11/nato-strike-groups-demonstrate-multicarrier-operations/>.

41 Michele Cosentino, "Marina Militare e Aviazione Navale: Una visione di lungo termine," *Rivista Italiana Difesa*, January 2025, Vol. 2, pp. 47-48.

42 "Comitato Permanente sulla Politica Estera per l'Indo-Pacifico: Audizione del Capo di Stato Maggiore della Marina Militare" (Audition of the Chief of the Italian Navy), *III Commissione – Camera dei Deputati*.

43 Mazziotti di Celso, "Is Italy Needed in the Indo-Pacific?"

44 Fabrizio Coticchia and Matteo Mazziotti di Celso, "Still on the Same Path? Italian Foreign and Defence Policy in the Enlarged Mediterranean," *Mediterranean Politics* (2024), pp. 1-10, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2023.2294252>.

generation combat aircraft, the broader economy may benefit from spinoff applications benefitting civilians. For instance, GCAP envisions connecting the aircraft hardware within an 'intelligent' network based on dedicated cloud architecture, artificial intelligence and next-generation datalinks. This qualifies as the most relevant and promising air combat industry programme for the UK, Italy and Japan for the coming years and can be better achieved by pooling resources and tech comparative advantages. According to the Chamber of Deputies Foreign & EU Affairs Commission, GCAP aims to further integrate emerging technologies in defence capabilities, enhance air combat system cooperation, support industrial capabilities, contribute to national security and international influence, and through multi-party cooperation foster global exports.⁴⁵ Furthermore, the three countries will bolster aerospace investment and R&D, thereby indirectly contributing to advances in defence, land observation, climate change mitigation and disaster response capabilities – areas in which they have common interests.⁴⁶

While techno-industrial and mercantile aims behind the collaboration apply to all the parties, their priorities differ. For Japan, its severe geopolitical environment prompts it to boost its sea and air power defence capabilities. Therefore, Tokyo is particularly interested in the strategic dimension of GCAP. In contrast, the British and Italian ambitions are arguably more economic, mercantile and technological,⁴⁷ not unlike much of Europe's rationale for showing the flag in the Indo-Pacific.⁴⁸ For instance, the UK may successfully allow Saudi investments in the GCAP in the light of UK-Saudi Arabia economic ties in the commodities and procurement sector. On the other hand, Tokyo was originally sceptical because of Saudi-China ties – an inherently strategic reserve – and given Riyadh's lower security standards, which may result in trade diversion, including the misuse of weapons on civilians.⁴⁹ At the time of writing, government and defence actors from these three countries are probably negotiating R&D allocations because the production of specific components of the fighter jet may have lucrative spinoff applications. In any case, GCAP will deepen Italy-Japan relations and provide new venues for strategic partnership and state-promoted defence projects – particularly ones with lucrative industrial applications.⁵⁰

Despite being an Italy-Japan-United Kingdom defence industrial project, here too the U.S. footprint cannot be overlooked. After all, the Biden administration gave the greenlight to the GCAP marriage.⁵¹ This was a byproduct of its Indo-Pacific strategy, which leveraged regional allies in a U.S.-led networked security system,⁵² one that more recently enlisted Europe in the mix, and of pre-existing defence industrial connections between the Japanese, British and Italian military-industrial complexes with their U.S. counterparts, subsidiaries and clients – especially in the aviation industry. This integration runs deep. For instance, Washington allowed Italy and Japan to develop the final assembly and check out facilities necessary to assemble and produce – and in the future possibly service and repair – F-35s outside the United States. Again, the U.S. link is key to better understanding the logic behind the military presence and defence industrial dynamics linking Italy with Northeast Asia. After all, U.S. pre-eminence in key defence industrial nodes also empowers Washington to enforce export controls on the assets of its allies and thus safeguard its own interests. This might also apply to GCAP.

More recently, the U.S. made Japan the first Asian member of the Multinational Industrial Security

45 "Ratifica ed esecuzione della Convenzione sull'istituzione dell'organizzazione governativa internazionale GCAP, fatta a Tokyo il 14 dicembre 2023. C. 2100 Governo, approvato dal Senato," *III Commissione Permanente*, 22 October 2024, pp. 60-63 <https://documenti.camera.it/leg19/resoconti/commissioni/bollettini/pdf/2024/10/22/leg.19.bol0387.data20241022.com03.pdf>.

46 Interview with Italian diplomat (b) (G. Pugliese, Interviewer). (Rome, 12 February 2024).

47 Dell'Era and Piasentini, "Strategic to Tech-oriented Minilateralism."

48 Giulio Pugliese, "The European Union's Security Intervention in the Indo-Pacific: Between Multilateralism and Mercantile Interests," *Journal of Intervention and State-Building*, Vol. 17, No. 1, (2023), pp. 76-98.

49 Nikkei Asia, "Japan, U.K. and Italy to invite Saudi Arabia to next-gen fighter project", 29 November, 2024, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Defense/Japan-U.K.-and-Italy-to-invite-Saudi-Arabia-to-next-gen-fighter-project>.

50 Dominguez, "Italy-Japan ties."

51 Interview with former diplomat (G. Pugliese, Interviewer). (Tokyo, 23 October 2024).

52 Matteo Dian and Hugo Meijer, "Networking Hegemony: Alliance Dynamics in East Asia," *International Politics*, Vol. 57 (2020), pp. 131-149.

Working Group to favour both U.S.-Japan and NATO-Indo-Pacific 4 (aka IP4: Australia, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea) cooperation.⁵³ Beyond strategic objectives, Washington is focused on developing industrial security, especially regarding research and development, and testing and evaluation. Similarly, the U.S.-Japan Defence Industrial Cooperation, Acquisition and Sustainment (DICAS) forum is an effort to further integrate the Japanese defence industry in the U.S. defence industrial base. As a result, Japanese shipyards and companies will do repair work on U.S. warships and aircraft. This may also appeal to the Italian ship-building industry as much of the FREMM/Constellation-class frigates is built by Fincantieri, a state-controlled company. Italy's interest in the growing rich regional procurement market may also contribute to U.S. grand strategy. Technological, industrial and mercantile aims in the procurement market thus go hand in hand with the U.S.-led alignment and underlying strategic interests in the region.

Conclusion

The rise of the Indo-Pacific as a geopolitical construct in recent years and the surging security interest it has gathered among European actors has been a byproduct of the rise of China, of its assertive behaviour and of growing U.S. concerns and moral suasion campaigns. While the Trump administration started to include China on the NATO agenda and incubated the cooperation of NATO-IP4 countries, it was the Biden administration that more fully leveraged alliances and partnerships to craft multi-layered security ententes and deepen strategic partnerships with and among Asian and European actors, pushing for a European 'buy in.' The war in Ukraine has hastened this political alignment. This has materialised through greater intelligence sharing, co-management and interoperability, and access to military bases, greater logistical support and armed force modernisation among allies and partners. Italy's growing security and political linkages with Northeast Asia, the focus of this paper, are a byproduct of the above dynamics, and so is the GCAP, a defence industrial cooperative framework. In fact, the growing regional security involvement of European actors also results from the above-mentioned mercantile procurement and defence industrial aims.

At the same time, policymakers are quietly taking into consideration the tyranny of geography and security, and political and economic challenges closer to home. For instance, while the Italian government has progressively aligned itself with Washington on its China and Indo-Pacific agendas, it continues to prioritise the Mediterranean region, Enlarged or otherwise. In Rome, the persistent focus of NATO on Ukraine and the deepening of relations with IP4 countries are understood in important circles as being at the expense of the southern flank of the alliance. For instance, while NATO-IP4 summit meetings have taken place on a regular basis, other NATO partnership forums – such as the Mediterranean Dialogue – have stalled. In the same vein, the priorities of Italy's G7 presidency (and G7 summit invitations) have revolved around the Enlarged Mediterranean.

Finally, the situation is in flux. A U.S. rebalancing towards Asia, hence a progressive disengagement from Europe and the Middle East, will dictate more attention to Italy's near abroad. This is in line with the thinking of influential new appointees to the U.S. Department of Defense, such as Donald Trump's nomination of Elbridge Colby as the next Undersecretary of Defense for Policy and is evidenced by recent developments. In connection with this, the new U.S. president and the national security establishment agree on a need for greater alliance burden-sharing. It is therefore very likely that Washington will expect Italy to increase defence spending and deprioritise the deployment of European military assets in East Asia. Moreover, Trump is notably preoccupied with current account deficits everywhere, among friends and foes alike, and has a profound dislike of multilateral bodies because they subtract leverage and structural power from the U.S. This, along with his transactional style, in which U.S. military protection is also premised on rectifying trade deficits and increasing host nation support, is often compensated with rich U.S. foreign military exports. This may lead to allies procuring U.S. military assets or allowing the U.S. to join in defence industrial projects such as

53 Nanae Baldauff, "Why Japan's defence technology cooperation with Europe deserves attention," EUI, RSC, Policy Brief, 2024/26, Global Governance Programme, [Europe in the World], 2024, <https://hdl.handle.net/1814/77323>.

GCAP. In short, Trump's 'America First' policies are likely to exacerbate competitive dynamics that will dent or constrain Italy's defence industrial cooperation and security overtures to regional Indo-Pacific players.

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POLICY PAPER

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Ministry of Foreign Affairs
and International Cooperation

Abstract

This report explores the growing ties between Italy and Southeast Asia through its engagement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its main members. Despite lacking a dedicated strategic policy document for the whole 'Indo-Pacific,' Italy has steadily increased its political, economic and cultural presence in the region. The report examines key areas of cooperation, including security, economic development and socio-cultural exchanges by focusing on bilateral relations with ASEAN member states such as Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines. The role of Italy in promoting multilateralism and its commitment to maintaining a rules-based international order are highlighted as core aspects of its regional strategy. The report concludes with policy recommendations to further enhance Italy's strategic footprint in Southeast Asia and emphasises increased development cooperation and expanded investments in emerging industries like technology and defence.

Keywords

Italy, ASEAN, economic cooperation, security, multilateralism, development cooperation, regional strategy

Disclaimer

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In recent years, the relevance of Southeast Asia has been on the rise. The region is experiencing substantial and sustained economic growth, and is facing major social, economic and geopolitical challenges. The particular position of Southeast Asia in the broader 'Indo-Pacific' area has attracted the interest of many European countries, including Italy. While Rome is currently unequipped with a strategic policy document for the region, in recent years it has enhanced its economic and political connections with ASEAN and its member states. With increased world instability and significant challenges posed by the regional competition between China and the U.S., Italy¹ has substantial economic interests in the Indo-Pacific arising from its export-oriented economy² and its stake in the preservation of the current global order based on trade and international cooperation. Therefore, being at the centre of such a macro-region, Southeast Asia may be pivotal in future Italian Indo-Pacific policy.

This report examines the status of the ties between Italy and Southeast Asia and focuses on security, economic and development cooperation and cultural ties. It focuses on Italy's overall positive relationships and the image it enjoys in ASEAN and relevant Southeast Asian countries. The engagement of Rome with the region is strengthened by solid economic foundations, common preferences for multilateralism and cooperation, and an absence of colonial history. The report concludes by formulating some policy recommendations on how to further deepen cooperation and further elevate ties between Italy and Southeast Asia.

ASEAN

Since the beginning of the last decade, Italian decision-makers have understood the importance of engaging with the ASEAN economic bloc as an opportunity for Italian companies, in line with the objective of re-launching Italian exports.³ This has prompted an increase in engagement by Italy with ASEAN seeking to work on areas of cooperation that will result in mutually beneficial win-win outcomes for both parties. A few years after establishing these objectives, in 2020 ASEAN gave Italy the status of Development Partner, which set common ground to further expand cooperation. After kickstarting the partnership in 2021 by convening a Development Partnership Committee (AI-DPC)⁴ and setting out the priority areas for the partnership in 2022,⁵ the parties have cooperated on four pillars: political-security cooperation, economic cooperation, socio-cultural cooperation – reflecting the three ASEAN communities – and development.

1 Termine, L. and Ercolani, A. (2024). *Driver e ostacoli di un ribilanciamento asiatico dell'Italia*. Rome: UNINT University Press.

2 Piasentini, M. and Vesprini, A. (2024). *Geopolitical brief iii, Il ribilanciamento asiatico dell'Italia: Driver e prospettive della cooperazione Economica nell'indo-pacifico*. UNINT University Press.

3 Calenda, C. (2015). *L'impegno del Governo verso i mercati emergenti*. In *Associazione Italia-ASEAN*. (2015). *Le Imprese Italiane nei Paesi ASEAN*. https://www.itasean.org/wp-content/uploads/woocommerce_uploads/2019/09/aziende-asean-compressed-1.pdf; Letta, E. (2015). *Conoscere l'Asean per coglierne le opportunità*. In *Associazione Italia-ASEAN*. (2015). *Le Imprese Italiane nei Paesi ASEAN*. https://www.itasean.org/wp-content/uploads/woocommerce_uploads/2019/09/aziende-asean-compressed-1.pdf.

4 ASEAN. 2021. "ASEAN, Italy Launch Development Partnership." <https://asean.org/asean-italy-launch-development-partnership/>.

5 ASEAN and Italy. 2022. *ASEAN-Italy Plan of Action 2022-2026*. <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/ASEAN-Italy-PCA-2022-2026-adopted.pdf>.

First, Italy is increasingly interested in working closer with ASEAN to face common security challenges, and its contribution is substantial in sharing non-traditional security practices and know-how. In this domain the key issue areas of immediate interest are peace and reconciliation efforts, women's participation in peace processes, transnational crime prevention, cybersecurity capacity-building, counter-terrorism, maritime security, good governance and human rights promotion. This support extends to ASEAN-IPR, AICHR and cybersecurity centres, and emphasises the need to uphold rule of law, sovereignty and digital security with training, exchanges and best practices.⁶ As of 2025, Italy has participated in regional maritime security through an initiative organised by its Centre of Excellence for Stability Police Units (CoESPU), which are aimed at fighting piracy and awareness of maritime law. While it is still in an initial phase, Italy-ASEAN security cooperation underscores the mutual values that motivate the actions of the parties, namely their commitment to upkeep the current maritime order, observing international law and, crucially, supporting the Association's vision of an Indo-Pacific region that promotes development, peace and inclusivity through initiatives to strengthen connectivity and economic resilience.

Second, economic cooperation is given great attention by both parties with the establishment of several initiatives in trade, technology and development. Moreover, economic cooperation between them started prior to the establishment of the partnership with the first Italy-ASEAN High-Level Dialogue on Economic Cooperation in 2017, a platform for integrated dialogue between high-level businesses and institutions. In 2022 guidelines further stressed the possibilities for immediate cooperation in areas such as trade, development of medium and small-medium enterprises, digital integration, tourism, energy security and food sustainability. Priorities include business engagement, support for entrepreneurship, cybersecurity, AI, e-commerce, climate research, sustainable tourism and knowledge-sharing in agriculture, forestry and energy. Attention is also paid to sharing capacity-building in technology, governance and innovation in order to foster inclusive economic growth. Indeed, according to data provided during the last Italy-ASEAN High Level Dialogue in Manila in late 2024, from 2017 to 2022 the overall volume of foreign direct investment (FDI) by Italy in ASEAN rose to €31.5 billion, a more than threefold increase compared to the €9.73 billion recorded from 2011 to 2016.⁷ Similarly, overall commercial trade between Italy and ASEAN increased to \$131 billion between 2017 and 2023,⁸ with an increase of 1.4 times compared to the \$93.1 billion registered between 2010 and 2016. Economic ties between Italy and ASEAN outpace many of Italy's European peers in both investment and trade. In fact, Italy was the top trader with ASEAN and second top investor after France between 2017 and 2023.⁹ Similarly, according to Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs trade data, The volume of trade between Italy and the region has experienced consistent increases reaching 30% year-on-year in 2022, with a decline of 9.3% in 2023, showing, however, robust growth over time.¹⁰ Moreover, ASEAN recognises the importance of initiatives such as the High-Level Dialogue and the role of other actors like the *Cassa Depositi e Prestiti* and the Italy-ASEAN Association in fostering economic cooperation. The latter contributes to strengthening economic dialogue, while the former provides financial support to small and medium-sized enterprises. In addition, during the last Dialogue, it was stressed that Italy's efforts in economic cooperation and know-how transfers cater to the need of many ASEAN countries to strengthen their resilience to extreme weather phenomena, especially through the use of the Italian Climate Fund, which allocates some 4.4 billion euros to

6 Ibid.

7 The European House – Ambrosetti. (2024 (a). *State-of-the-art of Italy and ASEAN economic relationship and partnership opportunities. High Level Dialogue on ASEAN Italy Economic Relations*. [https://eventi.ambrosetti.eu/high-level-dialogue-asean-italy-2024/wp-content/uploads/sites/274/2024/11/Asean-2024-Position-Paper-State-Art-Italy-ASEAN-economic-relationship-REV.pdf?contentReference\[oaicite:3\]{index=3}](https://eventi.ambrosetti.eu/high-level-dialogue-asean-italy-2024/wp-content/uploads/sites/274/2024/11/Asean-2024-Position-Paper-State-Art-Italy-ASEAN-economic-relationship-REV.pdf?contentReference[oaicite:3]{index=3}).

8 Ibid. note 7.

9 Ibid. note 8.

10 Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale. 2024. *ASEAN – Principali indicatori economici*. InfoMercatiEsteri. https://www.infomercatiesteri.it/public/osservatorio/schede-aree-geografiche/Indicatori%20ASEAN_23_02_2024_1708686369.pdf.

finance initiatives aimed at fighting the effects of climate change.¹¹ Last, burgeoning tourism¹² flows between the regions testify to the vitality of this industry, which constitutes a pivotal sector to promote both economic engagement and people-to-people connectivity, in a context of growing economic relations promoted by institutions and at the top of foreign policy agendas.

Third, bilateral relations also involve socio-cultural cooperation. The parties have set a substantive list of priorities such as education, cultural exchanges, workforce development, disaster resilience, health training, climate action, biodiversity conservation and air quality improvement. Initiatives include student exchanges, vocational training, diplomatic collaboration, digital education, heritage preservation and transboundary haze control. Capacity-building and knowledge-sharing drive sustainable development, resilience and regional connectivity. In this field, it is reported¹³ that Italy has sustained efforts in archaeology and educational training and promoted initiatives financed by its Directorate-General for Global Affairs such as the 'Italy-ASEAN Virtual Learning Centre,' kickstarting a Youth Conference on ASEAN and Italy and financing summer schools on Human Rights and Democracy organised by the Global Campus of Human Rights at the National University of Timor Est with the participation of students and lecturers from ASEAN countries.

Last, the parties set as a common objective narrowing the development gap and cooperating on sustainable development, with a focus on poverty alleviation and sustainable development (according to the UN Sustainable Development Goals). ASEAN praises Italy's efforts and the activity of AICS (Italian Agency for Development Cooperation), an agency financed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation. In 2022 AICS centralised its operations in Southeast Asia and the Pacific islands by elevating its branch in Vietnam (operational in different forms since 1990) to be its regional headquarters and by setting up a secondary accreditation office in Jakarta, where the ASEAN Secretariat (ASEC) is located.¹⁴ In the region, AICS is active in Vietnam, the Philippines and Myanmar with several projects. In addition to specific interventions in each country, AICS is also active with ASEAN in several initiatives, in compliance with ASEAN's 2030 development goals. Specifically, AICS is involved in a 2.8-million-euro project for sustainable agriculture to fight climate change and poverty, an almost 3-million-euro project for cooperation on sustainable fisheries and fishing activities, and finally AICS has budgeted 2.5 million euro for the ASEAN fund for the mitigation of COVID effects.¹⁵

In sum, Italy sees ASEAN as a crucial actor to increase its footprint in the region in several fields, and it has recently accelerated its reach and ties with the association. Growing relationships built on expanding economic foundations and economic interests definitely sustain such processes. However, this overview of the areas of cooperation shows that a commonality of preferences for multilateralism and international cooperation on conducting inter-state affairs permeate the relationship. Such norm-alignment is testified by the adherence and compliance of Italy to ASEAN norms and priorities on the one hand, and by the focus on connectivity and cooperation that characterises the EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific¹⁶ on the other hand. Through these channels, Italy seeks to quietly expand its ties with the Association and further enmesh itself in the relationship with ASEAN in the management of regional affairs, which is consistent with the overall Italian approach to the Indo-Pacific region as a whole. In fact, Italy must continue to shape its engagement with ASEAN by stressing the importance of maintaining the rules-based order and respecting international law in the

11 The European House – Ambrosetti. 2024 (b). *Competitiveness of ASEAN Countries: The State-of-the-Art as Measured by TEHA's 2024 Global Attractiveness Index*. Accessed 9 March 2025. https://www.ambrosetti.eu/en/site/get-media/?type=doc&id=21965&doc_player=1.

12 Ibid. note 7.

13 Ibid. note 6.

14 Development Cooperation – Ambasciata d'Italia Jakarta. <https://ambjakarta.esteri.it/en/italia-e-indonesia/cooperazione-allo-sviluppo/>.

15 Agenzia Italiana per la Cooperazione allo Sviluppo. 2024. *Rapporto annuale 2023*. <https://hanoi.aics.gov.it/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/AICS-Hanoi-Rapporto-Annuale-2023.pdf>.

16 European Commission. (2021). *The EU strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific* (Joint Communication JOIN/2021/24 final). European External Action Service. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_2021_24_1_en.pdf.

conduct of international affairs, for sustained economic expansion and mutually beneficial growth.

Vietnam

Vietnam is one of the closest partners of Italy among the ASEAN nations. The two states have maintained a strategic partnership since 2013.¹⁷ This was strengthened by high-level visits in 2023. This framework encompasses several agreements: an executive protocol for cultural and educational collaboration, a letter of intent to create a joint centre of excellence for training in industrial cooperation, on academic exchanges and a Defence Cooperation Memorandum. These agreements constitute the groundwork for tangible projects such as academic exchanges and military industrial collaboration. Italy and Vietnam jointly engage in a Mixed Economic Commission,¹⁸ the 9th meeting of which in January 2025 focused on enhancing energy, joint industrial projects, infrastructure, trade, investment, market access, information and communication, the environment, agriculture, culture, sport and tourism. Trade has flourished, with Vietnam being Italy's primary commercial partner in ASEAN.¹⁹ Moreover, Italy has facilitated the development of Vietnam with a debt-for-development swap programme and has provided technical assistance in sectors such as water management.²⁰

Italy has strengthened naval cooperation with Vietnam, notably with a 2023 port visit of the Italian Navy offshore patrol vessel ITS Francesco Morosini to Ho Chi Minh City, which included a joint drill with the Vietnamese Navy.²¹ Indeed, the visit highlighted Italy's intention to promote defence collaboration and employ dual-use maritime technology.

Furthermore, bilateral trade surpassed \$6.57 billion in 2024,²² reflecting 11% growth compared to the previous year. Vietnam is a vital provider of electronics, textiles and agricultural commodities, whereas Italy exports equipment, fashion items, medicines and automotive goods. Following the implementation of an EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA)²³ in August 2020, restrictions on Italian products entering Vietnam were reduced, which boosted Italian exports of industrial equipment and luxury items. As multinational corporations move their operations away from China, Vietnam has become a pivotal manufacturing centre and could potentially manufacture Italian exports of machinery, industrial automation and renewable energy technologies. Italy is eager to incorporate Vietnam more extensively in its supply chains and investment frameworks and to utilise the EVFTA as a vital trade tool. Italy ought to boost its investments in Vietnam's high-tech industries.²⁴ Vietnam is advancing in value chains by cultivating businesses such as semiconductors, artificial intelligence and sustainable technology. Italy should promote investment and collaborative partnerships in these industries to maintain competitiveness. Moreover, promoting collaboration between small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) would be advantageous since Italian SMEs possess knowledge of industrial machinery, design and automation, which aligns with Vietnam's industrial enhancement initiative.

17 Pezzati, Andrea. 2023. "Italy and Vietnam Mark 50 Years of Diplomatic Relations." *The Diplomat*, 21 December.

18 Italian Embassy in Hanoi. "Meetings." *Ambasciata d'Italia Hanoi*, accessed 15 March 2025. <https://ambhanoi.esteri.it/en/italia-e-vietnam/rapporti-politici/meetings/>.

19 Vietnam.vn. "Chấp Cánh Cho Quan Hệ Thương Mại Việt Nam – Italy." *Vietnam.vn*, accessed 15 March 2025. <https://www.vietnam.vn/chap-can-ho-cho-quan-he-thuong-mai-viet-nam-italy>.

20 Italian Agency for Development Cooperation. "Italy-Vietnam Debt Swap Program Starting Its Activities in Quang Tri." *Italian Agency for Development Cooperation – Hanoi*, 27 February 2024. <https://hanoi.aics.gov.it/news/italy-vietnam-debt-swap-program-starting-its-activities-in-quang-tri/?lang=en>.

21 Port call of the Italian vessel "ITS MOROSINI" in Ho Chi Minh City https://ambhanoi.esteri.it/it/news/dall_ambasciata/2023/05/port-call-of-the-italian-vessel/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

22 Osservatorio Economico MAECI, "Scheda di Sintesi: Vietnam," 2025 https://www.infomercatiesteri.it/public/osservatorio/schede-sintesi/vietnam_143.pdf.

23 Vietnam Briefing. "Italian Investment in Vietnam: How to Leverage the EVFTA." *Vietnam Briefing*, <https://www.vietnam-briefing.com/news/italian-investment-vietnam-leverage-evfta.html>.

24 Pezzati, Andrea. "Italy and Vietnam Mark 50 Years of Diplomatic Relations." *The Diplomat*, 21 December 2023.

In addition to these robust economic links, Italy and Vietnam aim to enhance their defence collaboration. This is motivated by Vietnam's desire to diversify its military suppliers and Italy's sophisticated defence sector, especially in naval technology, aircraft and training. A 2013 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Defence Cooperation instituted high-level discussions, military training exchanges and collaborative research efforts. In January 2025, Vietnam's Deputy Military Minister convened a delegation from Italy's Leonardo military business²⁵ to deliberate on prospective agreements on radar systems, naval technologies and aircraft. In January 2025 Leonardo expanded its footprint in Southeast Asia by establishing a representative office in Hanoi, which shows its interest in fostering collaboration with the country.²⁶

Although military connections were restricted during the time of the Vietnam War, current relations are facilitated by Italy's historical diplomatic initiatives during the War, which strengthened Rome's image as a "neutral middleman"²⁷ in the conflict. This may open avenues for further enhancing cooperation in the defence industry, since Vietnam's naval modernisation initiative offers prospects for Italian shipbuilders (Fincantieri)²⁸ and defence companies (Leonardo) to provide frigates, patrol vessels and surveillance equipment. Notably, in December 2014, Vietnam Helicopter Corporation (VNH) signed a contract with Italy's AgustaWestland, part of Leonardo, for the acquisition of two AW189 super-medium helicopters. These were deployed by VNH South and VNH North for offshore transport operations, showing Vietnam's trust in Italian aerospace technology.²⁹

Indonesia

Italy and Indonesia have cultivated a dynamic relationship in recent decades marked by increasing trade, investment, cultural exchanges and nascent security collaboration. As the largest economy in Southeast Asia and a pivotal member of the G20, ASEAN and recently BRICS, Indonesia has economic and geopolitical significance for Italy. Rome ranks as the third-largest commercial partner of Indonesia³⁰ in the EU and is essential in enhancing economic and diplomatic relations between Europe and Southeast Asia. Nonetheless, obstacles such as legal constraints, competition by other EU nations and evolving geopolitical factors make it necessary for Italy to enhance its approach.

Economic and trade links constitute a fundamental aspect of Italy-Indonesia ties. Bilateral commerce has consistently increased, and it reached \$3.9 billion in 2023. Indonesia exports rubber, palm oil, textiles and coffee to Italy, while Italy sells machinery, automotive components, fashion items and pharmaceuticals to Indonesia.

25 Ambasciata d'Italia ad Hanoi. "Leonardo Inaugura l'Ufficio di Rappresentanza in Vietnam, Rafforzando la Cooperazione Tecnologica nel Sudest Asiatico." Ambasciata d'Italia ad Hanoi, January 2025. https://ambhanoi.esteri.it/en/news/dall_ambasciata/2025/01/leonardo-inaugura-lufficio-di-rappresentanza-in-vietnam-rafforzando-la-cooperazione-tecnologica-nel-sudest-asiatico/.

26 Leonardo. "Leonardo Expands Asian Footprint with New Vietnam Representative Office." AIAD, 23 January 2025. <https://aiad.it/leonardo-espande-la-sua-presenza-in-asia-con-un-nuovo-ufficio-di-rappresentanza-in-vietnam/?lang=en>.

27 Varsori, Antonio. "Italy – A 'Bridge' Between the Blocks During the Vietnam War." In *Perforating the Iron Curtain: European Détente, Transatlantic Relations, and the Cold War, 1965–1985*, edited by Poul Villaume and Odd Arne Westad, 213–230. Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2010.

28 Antara News. "Indonesia Buys Two Upgradable OPVs from Italian Shipyard Fincantieri." Antara News Jawa Timur, March 2025. <https://jatim.antaranews.com/berita/780894/indonesia-buys-two-upgradable-opvs-from-italian-shipyard-fincantieri>.

29 AgustaWestland. "AW1206 AW189 Vietnam." Leonardo, 10 December 2014. <https://www.leonardo.com/en/press-release-detail/-/detail/aw1206>.

30 Embassy of Italy in Jakarta. "Economic Diplomacy." Ambasciata d'Italia Jakarta, accessed 15 March 2025. <https://ambjakarta.esteri.it/en/italia-e-indonesia/diplomazia-economica/>.

Italy endorsed Indonesia's accession to the OECD and continues to strongly support Jakarta's candidacy. In addition, Italy advocates continuation of a constructive dialogue between the EU and Indonesia on differences at the technical level, including ones stemming from the ongoing negotiations on an EU-Indonesia Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA),³¹ which aims to reduce tariffs and boost Italian investments in Indonesia's industrial and service sectors. In 2018, Italian foreign direct investment (FDI)³² in Indonesia totalled \$32.09 million in 187 projects, positioning Italy as one of the leading EU investors in the nation, especially in the manufacturing, energy and infrastructure sectors. Prominent Italian corporations, like ENI (energy), Leonardo (defence) and Piaggio (automotives), have augmented their activities in Indonesia and capitalised on the nation's economic expansion. Italy has progressively engaged in Indonesia's renewable energy sector and infrastructure initiatives, which are essential in Indonesia's economic modernisation endeavours.

The Italian government ought to enhance collaboration in the defence industry and establish itself as a pivotal ally in Indonesia's military upgrading efforts. Italy already has a strategic entry point through Fincantieri,³³ which has successfully sold multipurpose offshore patrol vessels (PPA) to Indonesia. However, Italy faces stiff competition from other EU countries, particularly France and Germany, which are also vying for influence in the region. Furthermore, unlike Vietnam, Indonesia offers a more intricate legislative and business landscape, which Italy must meticulously traverse to optimise its involvement.

Indeed, it is imperative for the Italian government to assess the challenges posed by frequent political fluctuations and persistent military involvement in governance, which may present significant obstacles for Italian enterprises and diplomatic engagement in both Indonesia and Vietnam.

Thailand

Italy and Thailand maintain a historical diplomatic relationship that commenced in 1868, making it one of Italy's most enduring ties in Asia.³⁴ This connection has developed into a strong economic, cultural and strategic partnership, with Thailand becoming Italy's fourth-largest trading partner in ASEAN.³⁵ Italy significantly contributes to Thailand's infrastructure, luxury market and industrial sectors. In addition to economic relations, the two nations maintain robust cultural and educational interactions, although security and defence collaboration is somewhat constrained. As Thailand has established itself as a regional leader in advanced industries, technology and green energy,³⁶ Italy must enhance its engagement strategy to capitalise on these opportunities while addressing geopolitical complications, regulatory hurdles and competition from other EU and Asian partners. Bilateral commerce between Italy and Thailand amounted to \$4.27 billion in 2024³⁷ after exhibiting consistent growth over the preceding decade. Thailand sells air conditioning units, automobile components, rubber, electrical transformers and jewellery to Italy, while Italy exports machinery, high-end fashion, medicines and automotive parts to Thailand. The 4th Italy-Thailand Business Forum (2018) aimed to enhance corporate collaboration and emphasised investment prospects in Thailand's Eastern Economic Corridor (EEC), a high-tech industrial zone. Italian investments in Thailand have expanded, with firms such as Ducati (automotives), Ferrero (food) and Leonardo

31 Iannone, Aniello. "The European Union and Prabowo's Indonesia: What's Changed?" The Jakarta Post, 22 November 2024. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/opinion/2024/11/22/the-european-union-and-prabowos-indonesia-whats-changed.html>.

32 OECD. OECD International Direct Investment Statistics 2019. Paris: OECD Publishing, 2020. <https://doi.org/10.1787/g2g9fb42-en>.

33 Asia Military Review https://www.asianmilitaryreview.com/2025/02/fincantieri-renames-two-new-combat-ships-for-indonesian-navy-foc/?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

34 Elite Plus Magazine. "150 Years of Thai-Italian Relations." Elite Plus Magazine, n.d. https://www.eliteplusmagazine.com/Article/103/150_Years_Of_Thai-Italian_Relations.

35 "Italy the Focus for Outlays in the EEC." Bangkok Post, n.d. <https://www.bangkokpost.com/business/general/2558041/italy-the-focus-for-outlays-in-the-eeec>.

36 World Bank. Clean Energy: An Exporter's Guide to China, India, and the European Union. Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2011. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/zh/576401468120848097/pdf/662200WP0p12440e0Clean0Energy0all07.pdf>.

37 Osservatorio Economico MAECI, "Scheda di Sintesi: Thailandia," https://www.infomercatiesteri.it/public/osservatorio/schede-sintesi/thailandia_141.pdf. <https://www.bangkokpost.com/business/2489787/thai-and-italian-business-leaders-meet-to-enhance-relations>.

(aerospace and defence) enhancing their operations, thus capitalising on the country's strategic position as a manufacturing and logistical hub. Consequently, there has been a revival of EU-Thailand free trade agreement (FTA) negotiations, which were halted following Thailand's 2014 coup but resumed in 2023. In addition, Thailand's economic policies and industrial aims, especially in the Thailand 4.0 programme, provide significant prospects for Italy in smart manufacturing, the digital economy and green technology.

Regarding security and defence collaboration, in contrast to Italy's robust defence agreements with Vietnam, its military relations with Thailand are somewhat weak. However, recent naval visits and arms trade deals signify an increasing interest in security partnership. Thailand's military significantly influences the nation's political environment³⁸ and maintains robust connections with the monarchy. Defence diplomacy with Thailand must be conducted cautiously to mitigate potential political sensitivities. EU-Thailand relations are influenced by Thailand's democratic developments, which have direct implications for trade discussions.

Malaysia

Italy and Malaysia have maintained amicable relations focusing on commerce and investment. Italy buys Malaysian electronics and palm oil, whereas Malaysia purchases Italian machinery and chemicals. Defence cooperation between Italy and Malaysia is based on a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) in force since 1998, which establishes a framework for collaboration in areas such as training, technology transfer and defence industry relations. For instance, Malaysian pilots continue to receive training on Italian aircraft. The parties also have a Bilateral Investment Treaty (BIT) in force since 1998, which aims to promote and protect mutual investment by ensuring fair treatment and protection against expropriation while facilitating the transfer of funds and resolving disputes between investors and states. A notable event was Malaysia hosting the 6th ASEAN-Italy High-Level Dialogue in Kuala Lumpur (July 2022),³⁹ during which both governments expressed their commitment to enhancing economic relations. Subsequently, Italy's aerospace giant Leonardo declared its intention to establish collaboration with Malaysian institutions in aerospace technology⁴⁰ by 2030.⁴¹

Defence cooperation between Italy and Malaysia has been underpinned by significant arms deals and growing industrial collaboration.⁴² Italy's defence firms play a central role in Malaysia's defence modernisation. In the late 1990s, Malaysia purchased four Laksamana-class corvettes from Italy's Fincantieri shipyard. Under contracts signed in 1995 and 1997, the Italian shipbuilder supplied the Royal Malaysian Navy with these 650-ton missile-armed corvettes (originally built for Iraq).⁴³ Helicopters are a centrepiece of Italian contributions to Malaysia. Leonardo (through its helicopter division, formerly AgustaWestland)⁴⁴ has supplied a large fleet of rotary-wing aircraft to Malaysia. In the past decade, Malaysia's military and agencies have acquired around 60 Italian-made helicopters for roles including naval operations, search-and-rescue, transport and law enforcement.

38 Cogan, Mark S. "Can Thailand's Military Evolve?: Moving Beyond Domestic Interference, Institutional Corruption, and Personal Gain." *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, 2023.

39 6th High-Level Dialogue on ASEAN-Italy Economic Relations." Malaysian Investment Development Authority (MIDA). <https://www.mida.gov.my/media-release/6th-high-level-dialogue-on-asean-italy-economic-relations/>.

40 Leonardo Attends the Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace in Malaysia." Leonardo. Accessed 15 March 2025. <https://www.leonardo.com/en/press-release-detail/-/detail/leonardo-attends-the-langkawi-international-maritime-and-aerospace-in-malaysia>.

41 Mida, "Malaysia, Italy seek stronger ties in aerospace". <https://www.mida.gov.my/mida-news/malaysia-italy-seek-stronger-ties-in-aerospace/>. 2021.

42 Asian Military Review. 2024. "DSA 2024: Leonardo and the Ministry of Defense of Malaysia Celebrate Industrial Collaboration Programme Agreement." Asian Military Review, May 2024. <https://www.asianmilitaryreview.com/2024/05/dsa-2024-leonardo-and-the-ministry-of-defense-of-malaysia-celebrate-industrial-collaboration-programme-agreement/>.

43 *Naval Technology*. 2001. "Laksamana-Class Corvettes." Naval Technology. <https://www.naval-technology.com/projects/laksamana/?cf-view>.

44 InvestKL. n.d. "AgustaWestland Hovers Higher on Helicopter Boom." InvestKL. <https://www.investkl.gov.my/insights/success-stories/europe/agustawestland-hovers-higher-on-helicopter-boom>.

Beyond platforms, Italian defence technology is present in Malaysia's defence infrastructure. Leonardo has provided air-defence radars, avionics and naval combat systems for various Malaysian assets (for instance, Oto Melara naval guns and Aspide/Mistral⁴⁵ SAM systems on Malaysian ships). In 2019, the Italian aerospace and defence company Leonardo signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Malaysia's Sapura Secured Technologies focusing on cybersecurity, and particularly on protection of critical infrastructure. A Memorandum of Understanding signed at the Paris Air Show 2019 led to collaboration on a Cyber Academy and Cyber Range in Malaysia. It is reasonable for Italian and Malaysian security agencies to share terrorism-related intelligence, methodologies for deradicalisation and lessons from counter-IED operations. This can occur through defence attachés, joint working groups or via multilateral forums (e.g. Italy's participation in the Global Coalition against ISIS and Malaysia in ASEAN counter-terrorism bodies). By exchanging threat information and best practices, both countries enhance their abilities to prevent attacks and dismantle extremist networks. Given Malaysia's strategic location along the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea, maritime domain intelligence is crucial. Italy has therefore deployed naval assets to Southeast Asia, reflecting a shared interest in freedom of navigation and combating piracy and illicit trafficking. While official details on intelligence-sharing remain limited, cooperation between Italy and Malaysia appears to concentrate on counterterrorism and counter-piracy initiatives. This collaboration is further supported by broader EU programmes, such as the Critical Maritime Routes Programme (CRIMARIO), which aims to enhance regional maritime domain awareness.

Singapore

Singapore is Italy's most advanced partner in ASEAN and serves as a strategic hub for Italian enterprises in the region, with bilateral commerce reaching approximately \$4.82 billion in 2024.⁴⁶ A Scientific and Technological Cooperation Agreement has existed for years,⁴⁷ which provides money for collaborative research initiatives in robotics and materials science. In August 2021, Italy and Singapore signed a significant Memorandum on Digital Cooperation,⁴⁸ which enhanced engagement in the digital economy, cybersecurity, e-government and fintech. The MoU, signed by Italy's Innovation Minister Vittorio Colao and Singapore's Minister Josephine Teo, seeks to enhance collaboration in domains including digitalisation plans, e-commerce, new technologies and digital governance. It shows the commitment of both nations to innovation as a catalyst for progress.

Furthermore, in 2012 the two countries signed a Memorandum of Understanding on defence cooperation. As a result, Singapore's air force conducts training on Italian M-346 jet trainers and has procured Leonardo helicopters for its Navy. Under an Italy-Singapore Design Framework (updated in 2019) the parties also collaborate on fashion and industrial design. Singapore and Italy jointly participate in international finance, with Singapore's sovereign wealth funds investing in Italian enterprises. At the same time, Italy appreciates Singapore's involvement in global climate finance, which aligns with Rome's promotion of sustainable development.

45 Army Recognition. 2019. "Paris Air Show 2019: Leonardo and Sapura Signed a MoU on Cyber Defence." Army Recognition, June 2019. <https://armyrecognition.com/news/aerospace-news/2019/paris-air-show-2019-leonardo-and-sapura-signed-a-mou-on-cyber-defence>.

46 Osservatorio Economico MAECI, "Scheda di Sintesi: Singapore, 2025.

47 Singapore's Existing S&T Relations with Italy." Ambasciata d'Italia a Singapore. <https://ambsingapore.esteri.it/en/italia-e-singapore/diplomazia-scientifica/singapores-existing-st-relations-with-italy/#:~:text=Singapore%E2%80%99s%20existing%20S&T%20relations%20with,which%20was%20subsequently%20signed>.

48 The Minister for Technological Innovation and Digital Transition of the Italian Republic and the Minister for Communications and Information of the Republic of Singapore Sign Memorandum." Ministero per l'Innovazione Tecnologica e la Transizione Digitale. <https://innovazione.gov.it/notizie/comunicati-stampa/en/signing-of-memorandum-between-italy-and-singapore/#:~:text=The%20Minister%20for%20Technological%20Innovation,The>.

The Philippines

The relationship between Italy and the Philippines has been cordial and longstanding for over 78 years. While they are aligned in terms of their views and sustainment of the current liberal order and are committed to multilateralism, the relationship has been largely economic. Italy is one of the European countries with the largest number of overseas Filipino workers, and so is an important economic partner to sustain Philippine exports (in the form of remittances in foreign currency). In turn, Italy is an important exporter to the Philippines, with a trade volume increasing from 611 million euros in 2016 to 1.2 billion euros in 2022,⁴⁹ with computer parts, optics, food and machinery having the greater shares. Beyond trade, Italy is also active in some development projects led by AICS, which is bringing to conclusion a multi-year project to sustain rural development worth approximately 40 million euro, and is still active in minor projects on climate change resilience and a debt-conversion initiative worth 2.9 million euros.⁵⁰ While certainly growing, Italy-Philippines economic relations have potential for further expansion. Moreover, Italy has been indirectly supporting the Philippines' stance in its maritime disputes with China in its Exclusive Economic Zone in the South China Sea (also known as the 'West Philippine Sea'). After an award rendered in South China Sea arbitration, Italy subscribed to a joint statement issued by the Council of the European Union⁵¹ acknowledging the relevance of the award as a backbone for upkeeping international and maritime law.

In terms of security cooperation, it is unclear whether Italy will follow the same path adopted by some of its European peers like France, Germany and the UK in signing defence cooperation agreements with Manila. Rome's interest in maritime security is manifested in some significant deployments of naval assets, such as a visit by the Morosini interceptor to Manila in 2023⁵² and by the aircraft carrier Cavour for humanitarian assistance/disaster relief and hospital care in 2024. According to declarations made by the Italian Embassy in Manila, negotiations on a memorandum of understanding on defence cooperation between Italy and the Philippines are ongoing, with renewed commitments made in October 2024. In addition, the Italian Navy has begun discussions with the Philippine Navy on potential collaboration on shipbuilding, on which Italy could contribute its technical expertise.⁵³

Conclusion

Italy's engagement with Southeast Asia continues to be shaped by converging economic interests, from exports and development cooperation to targeted foreign investments in key regional hubs, particularly Thailand and Vietnam. At the same time, Italy has strengthened its security and defence ties with selected partners such as Vietnam and Malaysia. This growing defence dimension reflects both industrial outreach and increasing institutional efforts to deepen strategic cooperation with the region. Italy's deepening ties with ASEAN and the wider region signal a shared preference for cooperative, peaceful and mutually beneficial relations. This alignment constitutes the groundwork for further expansion, not only in the economic and defence areas but also in development cooperation. Italy's involvement in this part of the world is significantly enhanced with its increased participation in EU-wide initiatives such as the Global Gateway, which enables Rome to deliver development assistance while concurrently supporting the internationalisation of Italian companies. To further consolidate its presence in the region, Italy is increasingly aligning its diplomatic, commercial and

49 Farina, M. (2023). *Le relazioni commerciali Italia- Sudest Asiatico: Rapporto TOASEAN n. 4*. Torino World Affairs Institute. <https://www.twai.it/journal/rapporto-toasean-4/>.

50 Ibid. note 12.

51 Council of the European Union. (2016). *Declaration by the High Representative on behalf of the EU on the award rendered in the case of the South China Sea arbitration*. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2016/07/15/south-china-sea-arbitration/>.

52 Piasentini, M. 2023. "Il Pattugliatore Morosini Attracca a Manila: Un Punto di Svolta per le Relazioni Militari tra Italia e Filippine?" *Geopolitica.info*, <https://www.geopolitica.info/pattugliatore-morosini-manila-italia-filippine/>.

53 Tribune.net.ph. (18 March 18 2025). *PHL Navy engaged in exploratory talks on shipbuilding with Italian Navy*. Tribune ph. <https://tribune.net.ph/2025/03/18/phl-navy-engaged-in-exploratory-talks-on-shipbuilding-with-italian-navy>.

defence efforts with a deeper understanding of Southeast Asia's diverse legal, institutional and political contexts. Countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines offer unique opportunities that benefit from tailored context-sensitive approaches. Strengthening institutional ties and fostering strategic bilateral partnerships will enable Italy to expand its role as a credible and long-term partner in the Indo-Pacific.

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POLICY PAPER

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Abstract

The growing engagement of Italy in the Western Indo-Pacific is grounded in the evolving concept of the 'Enlarged Mediterranean,' a theoretical framework that has long shaped the broader strategic and maritime projection of the country. This concept is now increasingly understood as extending to the Indian coastline, thus establishing an Indo-Mediterranean nexus that is, however, still in the early stages of development. As the strategic debate continues to evolve, the external action of Italy in the Western Indo-Pacific is also undergoing a transformation. Indeed, while security concerns have traditionally driven the regional engagement of Italy and remain relevant, economic interests and political-diplomatic outreach are now gaining prominence. In this shifting context, Gulf partners and India emerge as pivotal elements in the regional policy of Italy, which is shaped by new strategic partnerships and involvement in the ambitious India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). Overall, the engagement of Italy in the western Indo-Pacific could potentially serve as a model for a more strategic and coherent national approach to the broader region.

Keywords

Italy; Enlarged Mediterranean; Indo-Pacific; Indo-Mediterranean; IMEC; Mattei Plan; Italian Navy

Disclaimer

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The Evolution of the Conceptual Framework: an Enlarged Mediterranean or the Indo-Pacific?

The development path of the 'Enlarged Mediterranean' concept, which has shaped the external action of Italy in the western Indo-Pacific, symbolically passes through India, a partner that has recently emerged as key in the regional engagement of Italy. Indeed, a significant moment in the evolution of the concept was a visit by the current Italian Prime Minister, Giorgia Meloni, to New Delhi on 2 March 2023 on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the establishment of bilateral diplomatic relations.¹ During a press conference following bilateral talks with her Indian counterpart, Narendra Modi, the Italian leader made a notable statement on the importance of the Enlarged Mediterranean. According to PM Meloni's view, the Enlarged Mediterranean reaches the shores of India. Therefore, Italy, she stated, wanted to improve the interconnection between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean.²

In order to understand present-day Italian engagement in the western Indo-Pacific, it is necessary to clarify the correlation between the broader concept of the Indo-Pacific and that of the Enlarged Mediterranean.³ In fact, while the Mediterranean basin is considered one of the most pre-eminent areas in the strategic interests of Italy, since the years preceding the opening of the canal Italian political circles have been drawn to the world beyond Suez.⁴ According to scholars, therefore, the Mediterranean has always been 'enlarged'.⁵ Although the concept of an Enlarged Mediterranean appeared in 1981, being introduced by the Istituto di Guerra Marittima (IGM – Institute of Maritime War),⁶ the area defined by the term remained rather vague: over the years it included the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, the Black Sea separately or all these areas together. The first meaningful public reference to the Indo-Pacific region as part of the Enlarged Mediterranean was, as mentioned above, in the statement by PM Meloni on 2 March 2023, although the term had been part of military jargon since the 1990s and its use had been officialised in strategic, geopolitical and international studies since a 'Giornata di studio sul Mediterraneo Allargato' organised by the Institute of Maritime War in Livorno on 26 November 1998. On this occasion, it was also defined as the space in which the Italian armed forces were to be trained to operate, an area stretching from the Canary Islands to the Persian Gulf.⁷ Beyond definitions, the systematic geopolitical interest of Italy and its military commitment in the Persian Gulf dates back to 1987, when during the Iran-Iraq war at the request of the US the Italian Navy participated in the war operations with a limited naval contingent and three unexploded device disposal units in order to ensure safe navigation in the area.⁸ Despite an increasing Italian military presence in the Gulf, due also to active involvement in four major wars in the region between the Red Sea, the Gulf and the Indian Ocean (two Iraq wars, Somalia and Afghanistan)⁹ and to intensive anti-piracy activity in the western Indian Ocean since 2009,¹⁰ more than twenty years passed between

1 Governo Italiano, Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri. 2023. *President's Meloni's speech at the Raisina Dialogue conference*. Published on 2 March 2023. <https://www.governo.it/en/articolo/president-melonis-speech-raisina-dialogue-conference/21957>.

2 Governo Italiano, Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri. 2023. *Dichiarazioni alla stampa del Presidente Meloni con il Primo Ministro dell'India Modi*. Published on 2 March 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FKuLE-Ggeug>.

3 For a theoretical definition of 'Mediterranean' and 'Enlarged' Mediterranean, see De Ninno, Fabio. 2024. "Introduzione" in *Il Mediterraneo allargato e l'Italia. Dalla Guerra fredda al mondo post-bipolare*, edited by Fabio De Ninno and Federica Cavo, Roma: Viella, p.10.

4 Casolari, Marzia. 2023. *L'Asia agli asiatici. La politica 'indiana' del regime fascista e i rapporti con il nazionalismo radicale*. Firenze: Le Monnier, pp. 18-20.

5 Labanca, Nicola. 2024. "Le guerre e il Mediterraneo, tra storia e geopolitica" in Fabio De Ninno & Federica Cavo, *Il Mediterraneo allargato e l'Italia*, p. 16.

6 De Ninno, Fabio, and Federica Cavo. 2024. "L'Italia e il Mediterraneo allargato. Difesa e politica estera dalle origini della Guerra fredda al mondo post-bipolare" in *Il Mediterraneo allargato e l'Italia*, edited by Fabio De Ninno and Federica Cavo, pp. 44-45.

7 De Ninno, Fabio and Federica Cavo, *L'Italia e il Mediterraneo allargato*, p. 63.

8 *Ibid.*

9 Although Afghanistan is a landlocked state with limited or no impact on maritime issues, the political repercussions of the war required an increase in security measures between the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean.

10 The reference is to the European Union Naval Force Operation Atalanta – EUNAVFOR, which was carried out by several European countries.

the conceptualisation of the Enlarged Mediterranean as a geopolitical space and effective military engagement in the broader area. Indeed, the first Italy-India joint naval exercise took place on 4 and 5 July 2021, with the participation of the Italian FREMMs (European multi-purpose frigates) *Antonio Marceglia* and the *INS Tabar*, but it was in the Tyrrhenian Sea.¹¹ The first joint naval exercise in the Indian Ocean took place from 1 to 6 October 2024 off the coast of Goa, ahead of the Malabar quadrinational naval exercise.¹²

Overall, the delay in Italy stepping into the Indo-Pacific was due to three main factors: the frequent changes of Italian governments, recurring divergence of views between the military and the government, and NATO constraints. Notably, the frequent turnover of Italian governments is one of the main hindrances to an assertive and consistent foreign policy. In most cases, indeed, a new government reviews and at least partially reformulates the initiatives adopted by the previous ones. As a result, Italy faces a risk of being outpaced by other emerging powers actively engaged in the highly competitive Indo-Pacific region.¹³

Ultimately, evidence suggests that there is significant overlap between the 'Enlarged Mediterranean' and the Western portion of the Indo-Pacific, as some scholars have argued.¹⁴ The persistent use of the former term by several experts and actors, including the Prime Minister, is clearly due to the enduring importance of the Mediterranean space as the privileged area of the geopolitical, strategic, military and economic interests of Italy. In this context, some experts suggest defining the area stretching from the eastern Mediterranean to the western Indo-Pacific as the 'Indo-Mediterranean.' Although this definition seems more appropriate, it risks remaining unrealised unless the geopolitical area it refers to is clearly defined, and a coherent and comprehensive 'Indo-Mediterranean policy' is implemented.¹⁵ The terminological confusion therefore reflects Italian regional policy still under development and not yet fully defined.

11 Marina Militare. 2021. *Italian FREMM Frigate Antonio Marceglia exercises with Indian Navy INS Tabar*. Published on 21 July 2021. https://www.marina.difesa.it/EN/Conosciamoci/notizie/Pagine/_20210713_Italian_FREMM_Frigate_Antonio_Marceglia.aspx.

12 Rossi, Emanuele. 2024. "Italy and India's Naval Cooperation: A Path to NATO Interoperability?" *NATO Defence College Foundation*, 29 October 2024. <https://www.natofoundation.org/indo-pacific/italy-and-indias-naval-cooperation-a-path-to-nato-interoperability/>.

13 In addition, Italian economic initiatives in east (apart from Japan) and south Asia lagged behind. Businessmen and policymakers have always been cautious in deploying large-scale economic initiatives or in developing a consistent foreign policy beyond the Suez Canal, except for the Persian Gulf, a vital area for Italian energy interests. Business in China and in South Asia, in spite of a longstanding Italian economic presence, is a relatively new 'discovery.' Systematic and fairly coordinated economic schemes in these areas date to the 1990s in the case of China and to about twenty years ago in the case of South Asia. Regarding the contradictory and discontinuous Italian economic interest in India and Pakistan, see respectively Armellini, Antonio. 2013. *L'elefante ha messo le ali. L'India del XXI secolo*. Milano. Università Bocconi Editore; and Spagnulo, Giuseppe. 2020. *Il Risorgimento dell'Asia. India e Pakistan nella politica estera dell'Italia repubblicana (1946-1980)*. Firenze. Le Monnier.

14 Termine, Lorenzo, and Alice Dell'Era. 2023. *Strategie di collegamento dell'Indo-Pacifico al Mediterraneo allargato. La prospettiva dell'Italia oltre il corridoio IMEC*. Osservatorio di Politica Internazionale: Parlamento italiano, 2023, pp. 1-68. <https://www.parlamento.it/application/xmanager/projects/parlamento/file/repository/affariinternazionali/osservatorio/approfondimenti/PI0210.pdf>.

15 The 'Enlarged' Mediterranean is vague also as a concept, defining different areas, according to changes in strategic priorities. From time to time it was used, for instance, to define the space across the eastern Mediterranean, the Black Sea, the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. When national interests concentrate in the southern area beyond the Mediterranean shores, the 'Enlarged' Mediterranean includes central Africa. After the introduction of the 'Mattei Plan' in central Africa and Sahel, the 'Enlarged' Mediterranean reached those areas. A clear explanation of this perspective was expressed by Prime Minister Meloni in her speech at the 8th edition of "Dialoghi sul Mediterraneo": Governo Italiano, Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri. 2022. *Intervento del Presidente Meloni ai Dialoghi sul Mediterraneo di Roma*. Published on 3 December 2022. <https://www.governo.it/it/articolo/intervento-del-presidente-meloni-ai-dialoghi-sul-mediterraneo-di-roma/21174>.

The Drivers of External Italian Action in the Western Indo-Pacific

According to a common perception, the Indo-Pacific is associated with military issues and is perceived as a regional security concept primarily aimed at containing China. Unsurprisingly, the concept promoted by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2007 before the Indian Parliament has never been embraced by the People's Republic.¹⁶ As a geopolitical space, the Indo-Pacific is typically identified with east and south-east Asia, while its western (Indo) side, where Italy is traditionally more active, is generally overlooked. However, the challenges faced in this area are similar to those arising in the central and eastern regions. Indeed, security and containment of China are also two main issues in the western sector, where the struggle for influence revolves around control of port infrastructure from the Arabian Sea to the Strait of Malacca.¹⁷ Moreover, while security issues in the central and eastern sectors are primarily driven by tension in the South China Sea and the Taiwan issue, in the western Indo-Pacific they also stem from regional instability, notably the risk of radicalisation in Pakistan, political turmoil in Bangladesh (as evidenced by the August 2024 coup) and fragility of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. In this context, the unresolved conflict between India and Pakistan stands out as a potential cause of a major regional war with broad international implications, as was also shown by the tension and clashes in May 2025.

Security and Defence

The security dimension and the presence of military assets have long been key elements in Italy's engagement in the western Indo-Pacific. Indeed, for years Italian Navy vessels have been carrying out a range of missions in the region, from anti-piracy operations to participation in NATO- and EU-led missions aimed at safeguarding vital sea lines of communication (SLOCs). Since 2013, Italy has also maintained a permanent regional outpost, a military base in Djibouti. Although the presence of Italy has historically been concentrated between the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, through which about a third of the country's maritime trade passes,¹⁸ in recent years it has expanded to cover much of the region and reached southeast and east Asia.¹⁹ What has caused Italy to 'look east' are apparently the repeated exogenous shocks that have deeply shaken the global economy and trade flows. Recent crises, both military and non-military, have heightened the urgency to shorten supply chains and make them more resilient, while reducing vulnerability stemming from excessive dependence on actors that do not share the values and long-term aims of the Euro-Atlantic bloc.

These developments have involved a shift in Italy's military posture, with an intensification of naval diplomacy activities extending far beyond the Gulf of Aden. As a result, in addition to the traditional participation of Italy in the Combined Maritime Forces (CMF) and the EU-led naval operation EUNAVFOR Atalanta along the southern coast of the Arabian Peninsula, in 2017 the frigate *Carabiniere* sailed through the region, conducting numerous port calls in the Gulf and also visiting the port of Karachi in Pakistan, before reaching southeast Asia and Australia.²⁰ The goodwill

16 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. 2007. Confluence of the Two Seas. Speech by H.E.Mr. Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan at the Parliament of the Republic of India. Published on 22 August 2007. <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>.

17 Di Liddo, Marco, Tiziano Marino et al. 2025. *From the Red Sea to Malacca: The Strategic Competition for Ports in the Indian Ocean Region*. Osservatorio di Politica Internazionale: Parlamento italiano, 2025, pp. 1-42. <https://www.parlamento.it/application/xmanager/projects/parlamento/file/repository/affariinternazionali/osservatorio/approfondimenti/PI0224.pdf>.

18 De Vita, Enza and Anna Cristina Visconti. 2024. "Crisi nel Mar Rosso e rischi nelle forniture: un'analisi settoriale dell'import italiano". *Direzioni studi e ricerche, Intesa Sanpaolo*, February 2024. https://group.intesasanpaolo.com/content/dam/portalgroup/repository-documenti/research/it/industria/studi-di-settore/Nota%20Mar%20Rosso_febbraio%202024.pdf.

19 Termine, Lorenzo. 2025. "The Engagement of Italy with Indo-Pacific Security: A Compass to Navigate Pitfalls and Advance Interests." *EUI RSC Policy Paper 2025/04, Global Governance Programme*. <https://hdl.handle.net/1814/78173>.

20 Marina Militare. 2017. *Nave Carabiniere in sosta a Karachi*. Published on 5 April 2017. <https://www.marina.difesa.it/media-cultura/>

visit to Pakistan should be considered in the context of strong bilateral ties developed over the years between Rome and Islamabad in the defence sector, which were consolidated in 2009 with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding on bilateral military cooperation, subsequently ratified by the Italian Parliament in 2012.²¹ Later, from 2022 to 2024, Italy cautiously increased its security presence in the Indo-Pacific, resulting in a more ‘ambitious’ military posture in the region.²² Notably, in 2023 the Italian Navy offshore patrol vessel *Francesco Morosini* renewed the presence of Italy in the Indo-Pacific with a nearly five-month deployment toward the Far East. During this campaign, the Italian vessel also took part in operation AGENOR, a European maritime surveillance mission deployed between the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean region. The Indo-Pacific campaign of the *Morosini* was also significant in terms of naval diplomacy as it allowed the Italian Navy to participate in joint exercises such as Komodo²³, which was held in the South China Sea and led by Indonesia. In other words, the western sector of the Indo-Pacific has been gradually transformed from a docking point for most Italian ships in the region to a transit route to more eastern destinations.

After the outbreak of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in October 2023, the Red Sea crisis triggered by Houthi attacks on commercial shipping in transit prompted Italy to participate in the EUNAVFOR Aspides maritime mission, which was aimed at safeguarding freedom of navigation in the area.²³ As part of the broader deployment of naval assets in the Indo-Pacific, Italy made a significant leap forward with a regional mission of the *Cavour* Carrier Strike Group (CSG). Lasting about 5 months, the *Cavour* CSG tour allowed the Italian Navy to interact with air and naval assets from partner countries in Asia and the Gulf, such as Japan, Indonesia, Pakistan, Thailand, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Oman. In addition, the mission provided support for NATO mission Noble Shield and European operations Aspides and Atalanta, and included joint training with US CSGs led by aircraft carriers *Dwight Eisenhower* and *Abraham Lincoln*. The Italian Navy has also conducted training activities in the waters off the Indian port of Goa, alongside the Bhāratiya Nāu Senā (Indian Navy), which deployed the aircraft carrier *Vikramaditya*.

Overall, the military engagement of Italy in the Western Indo-Pacific serves three main interests. First, the deployment of Italian naval vessels contributes to the security of vital SLOCs for the country, while also positioning Italy as a net contributor to freedom of navigation, in alignment with its Euro-Atlantic partners. Second, its military presence in the Indian Ocean enables Italy to carry out missions and exercises with partner countries, which foster mutual understanding and interoperability, and develop naval diplomacy activities that showcase Italy’s operational and technological capabilities to both partner and allied nations, producing significant economic and political benefits.²⁴ Last, Italy’s military presence contributes to promoting the national defence industrial base, which finds several relevant partners in the region, from Gulf countries such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Oman, to South Asian partners, including India. Cooperation in the defence sector is indeed one of the pillars of Indo-Italian partnership, and a ‘Defence Industry Forum’ aboard the aircraft carrier *Cavour*, docked in Goa in 2024, was a perfect representation of the ways in which Italy operates to achieve the objectives outlined above.²⁵ Among the various joint initiatives recently undertaken, a key step in the process of strengthening Italy-India relations in the defence sector was the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on cooperation, which was announced by the leaders of the two countries in a March 2023 joint statement. The MoU then paved the way for an India-Italy Defence Cooperation Agreement signed by the Defence Ministers Guido Crosetto and

[press-room/comunicati/Pagine/20170406_carabinieri_karachi.aspx](https://www.difesa.it/press-room/comunicati/Pagine/20170406_carabinieri_karachi.aspx).

- 21 Gazzetta Ufficiale. 2013. *Difesa: ratifica Memorandum di cooperazione tra Italia e Pakistan*. Published on 15 January 2013. <https://www.altalex.com/documents/news/2013/01/16/difesa-ratifica-memorandum-di-cooperazione-tra-italia-e-pakistan>.
- 22 Dell’Era, Alice and Giulio Pugliese. 2024. “Il ribilanciamento asiatico dell’Italia: driver e prospettive della cooperazione securitaria nell’Indo-Pacifico.” In *Driver e ostacoli di un ribilanciamento asiatico dell’Italia*, edited by Lorenzo Termine and Antonella Ercolani, 28-45. Roma: UNINT University Press.
- 23 Ministero della Difesa. *Operazione EUNAVFOR ASPIDES*. Accessed April 2025. <https://www.difesa.it/operazionimilitari/op-intern-cor-so/eunavfor-aspidess/index/48319.html>.
- 24 Pugliese, Giulio and Alice Dell’Era. 2025. “Italy’s security engagement in Northeast Asia: drivers and outlook”. *EUI RSC Policy Paper 2025/06, Global Governance Programme*. <https://hdl.handle.net/1814/78227>.
- 25 Ministero della Difesa. 2024. *Defence Industry Forum tra Italia e India*. Published on 4 October 2024. <https://www.difesa.it/sgd-dna/notizie/defence-industry-forum-italia-india/56960.html>.

Rajnath Singh in Rome on 9 October 2023.²⁶

Trade and Economics

Given its immense demographic and economic potential, the Indo-Pacific region cannot be conceived solely in terms of security. Indeed, the preservation of SLOCs goes hand in hand with a search for new markets, which are crucial for an export-oriented country like Italy, and also reallocation of existing supply chains. This growing awareness seems to have guided Italy's recent external action in the western Indo-Pacific, where important strategic partnerships have been launched or consolidated. Furthermore, the new posture of Italy in the region, which is increasingly focused on diversifying economic partnerships, is not solely linked to national choices but represents the country's response to the new European Union strategy regarding China, which is aimed at gradual economic de-risking. Indeed, the dominance of China over global value chains may result in supply chain disruptions. Therefore, diversification of trade partners is essential to reduce the risks associated with over-reliance on a single market or a single actor, as political friction could escalate into economic losses and systemic vulnerabilities.

Against this background, Rome is aiming to intensify its economic and commercial presence in the western Indo-Pacific region, where three of the main emerging high-potential markets identified in the Italian Export Action Plan are located: Saudi Arabia, the UAE and India.²⁷ In early 2025, the Italian government elevated its relations with Riyadh to a strategic partnership²⁸ and signed agreements worth around 10 billion euros, mainly in the energy sector, with joint projects on renewables and network connections.²⁹ A strategic partnership with the UAE was signed in 2023, concurrently with that established with India. The UAE is Italy's leading export market in the MENA region, with a value of 7.9 billion euros in 2024, and it is a key partner on which Italy is focusing to attract foreign investment aimed at boosting the position of the country in strategic technological sectors such as artificial intelligence and aerospace. As for India, it presents enormous potential and leaves ample room for the development of economic and trade relations. However, at present India is only Italy's fourth-largest export market in the east and southeast Asia region, with an export value of 5.2 billion euros in 2024. As part of the strengthening of their bilateral relations, on the sidelines of a G20 summit in Rio de Janeiro on 18 November 2024, Rome and New Delhi signed a Joint Strategic Action Plan for 2025-2029. This five-year plan is an ambitious and comprehensive road-map to strengthen ties in investment, trade, technology, defence and energy, and to enforce the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC).³⁰

India, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are all involved in the IMEC corridor. This Indo-Mediterranean connectivity project was unveiled at the G20 in New Delhi in 2023. Italy aims to play a leading role in it through the port of Trieste. The recent appointment of a special envoy for the project signals Italy's intention to accelerate the implementation of activities related to the corridor, although its development also depends on external factors. Beyond security concerns linked to the ongoing Middle Eastern crisis, a key element for success of the IMEC will be the ability of India to build a robust manufacturing sector. Moreover, successful conclusion of the complex negotiations for a free

26 Decode39. 2024. "Intelligence at the core of Italy-India defence deal. Geopolitical Insights from Italy." *Decode39*, 3 June 2024. <https://decode39.com/9103/intelligence-at-the-core-of-the-italy-india-defence-deal/>.

27 Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale. 2025. *Piano d'azione per l'export italiano nei mercati extra-UE ad alto potenziale*. Published on 21 March 2025. https://www.esteri.it/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Piano_dAzione_export_italiano.pdf.

28 Governo Italiano, Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri. 2025. *Visita del Presidente Meloni in Arabia Saudita*. Published on 27 January 2025. <https://www.governo.it/it/articolo/visita-del-presidente-meloni-arabia-saudita/27540>

29 Toppeta, Matteo. 2025. "Italia ed Arabia-Saudita: 26 accordi con al centro l'energia." *Geopolitica.info*, 5 February 2025. <https://www.geopolitica.info/italia-arabia-saudita-energia-idrogeno/>.

30 Governo Italiano, Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri. 2024. *Italy-India Joint Strategic Action Plan 2025-2029*. Published in November 2024. https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/India_Italy_Joint_Strategic_Action_Plan_13_November_24.pdf.

trade agreement between India and the EU could strengthen overall trade exchange among the principal actors in the corridor.³¹

In parallel, Italy continues to maintain significant diplomatic, economic and commercial relations with other South Asian actors, such as Pakistan. Notably, Rome has consistently ranked among Islamabad's top ten trading partners, with a total trade volume of approximately €1.4 billion in 2019 and around €2 billion in 2022. The possible inclusion of Pakistan in major connectivity initiatives, including the European Union's Global Gateway, therefore presents potential opportunities for Italy, which can rely on its strong bilateral relations. Significant progress has recently been made in relations between Italy and Bangladesh, with the former having established itself as the second-largest European exporter to the Bangladeshi market. Italy also hosts one of the largest Bangladeshi diasporas in Europe, which is estimated at around 200,000 people.³² This dynamic community puts Bangladesh among the top recipients of remittances sent by migrants working in Italy. In 2024, of a total of €8.3 billion in remittances, 16.9 percent was directed to Bangladesh, 7.2 percent to Pakistan and 3.9 percent to Sri Lanka.³³ Although limited in value and below €1 billion, trade between Italy and Sri Lanka also shows relative growth potential, and it can be developed within the broader context of strengthening cooperation between Italy and South Asia as a whole.

Overall, economic relations between Italy and the western Indo-Pacific region have considerable potential to grow, particularly in the current international context marked by heightened trade tension and the rise of protectionist policies, which underscores the need to accelerate the diversification of partnerships.

Politics and Strategy

While the growing engagement of Italy in the western Indo-Pacific region addresses both security and economic imperatives, it also has increasingly significant political and strategic implications. The rapprochement with India, for example, marks a significant shift in foreign policy on South Asia and, more broadly, in Italy's strategic approach to the wider region. In fact, the two countries experienced nearly a decade of tension due to the 'Marò' case and the Agusta Westland scandal, both dating back to 2012. It was precisely the cooling of the Rome-New Delhi axis that at least in part contributed to slowing down the entry of Italy in the Indo-Pacific region. What allowed this phase to be overcome were high-level political meetings between the two countries, most notably a visit to India in 2018 by PM Giuseppe Conte, followed by a virtual summit with Modi in November 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, and a bilateral meeting in Rome between the Indian leader and PM Mario Draghi on the sidelines of the G20 summit in 2021. Building on this momentum, the Meloni government has further deepened bilateral ties and adopted a broader and more systematic approach. In this context, recognising the importance of ensuring a sustained regional presence, Rome joined the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) established by Narendra Modi in 2015 with the aim of "fostering and promoting security, stability and sustainable development in the Indo-Pacific region with a specific focus on the maritime domain."³⁴

31 Querini, Elisa. 2025. "UE-India: verso un partenariato strategico rafforzato". *Centro Studi di Politica Internazionale (CeSPI)*, 5 April 2025. https://www.cespi.it/sites/default/files/osservatori/allegati/brief_5_india-eu_-_querini.pdf.

32 Ambasciata d'Italia a Dhaka. 2025. *Diaspora Bangladese in Italia*. Accessed May 2025. <https://ambdhaka.esteri.it/it/italia-e-bangladesh/cooperazione-allo-sviluppo/>.

33 Banca d'Italia. 2025. *Rimesse verso l'estero dei lavoratori stranieri*. Accessed May 2025. <https://www.bancaditalia.it/statistiche/tematiche/rapporti-estero/rimesse-immigrati/>.

34 Deiana, Federico. 2023. "Italy and India consolidate the link between the Mediterranean and the Indo-Pacific." *MedOr Italian Foundation*, 8 March 2023. <https://www.med-or.org/en/news/italia-e-india-consolidano-il-legame-tra-mediterraneo-e-indo-pacifico>.

The strategic relationship between Italy and India should also be viewed within the broader regional framework and in the context of foreign policy decisions undertaken in the same period. In particular, the choice to revitalise Indo-Italian relations was promoted alongside strengthening of ties between Italy and the UAE. In other words, aware of the strong relationship already existing between New Delhi and Abu Dhabi, Rome sought to create a strategic triangle, following an approach similar to that previously adopted by France. More broadly, renewed attention to the western Indo-Pacific region is also tied to Italy's ambition to integrate various far-reaching national strategic projects in this wide area. For instance, the Mattei Plan for Africa, formalised in 2023-2024, includes countries lying on the coast of the Indian Ocean such as Kenya, Mozambique and Tanzania.

The IMEC project, which should be developed in the region, also aims to move beyond a simple connection between Trieste and the ports of western India and seeks to extend links to central and eastern Europe, where there are economies closely integrated with the industrial base of northern Italy, such as Germany.³⁵ Looking eastwards, IMEC could then further develop in the framework of Indian foreign policy initiatives, namely the Act East Policy and BIMSTEC, an ambitious connectivity project for the Bay of Bengal which grapples with deep structural challenges. Finally, the regional projects in which Italy is involved are also strictly connected in terms of their objectives and vision to two key pillars of the EU vision: the 2023 European Economic Security Strategy and the Global Gateway. This dynamic, therefore, offers Italy significant room for manoeuvre to connect the various plans and to attempt to develop a broader strategic vision that goes beyond the western Indo-Pacific.

Although Italy's tilt towards the Indo-Pacific has mainly centred on India, it is still important for the country to preserve its ties with Pakistan, a player that represents an ideal bridge between Asia, the Middle East and Europe.³⁶ In fact, maintaining positive relations with the major regional players would allow Italy to potentially play a mediating role between the parties, where necessary. However, the capacity of Italy to deepen cooperation with key players in South Asia depends on the evolving and complex geopolitical landscape of the region. Notably, gradual rapprochement between India and the US, dating back to the early 2000s, which accelerated after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, has mirrored the growing estrangement between the US and Pakistan, with the latter aligning itself more closely with China. South Asia and the Indian Ocean region are therefore set to become key arenas for confrontation between Washington and Beijing, a rivalry that increasingly risks being reflected in the enduring tension between New Delhi and Islamabad. Adding further complexity to the overall picture is a recent hardening of relations between India and Bangladesh following protests that led to the ousting of leader Sheikh Hasina. Against this background, the implementation of ambitious initiatives such as the Global Biofuel Alliance, involving both Rome and Dhaka, represents one of the challenges that will contribute to shaping Italy's posture in the region.

In conclusion, a question frequently raised by scholars and analysts concerns the position of Italy and its potential role in the broader Indo-Pacific region, especially considering the absence of overseas territories, which distinguishes it from France.³⁷ As a middle power with no colonial or post-colonial interests in the region, in fact, Italy can be a more acceptable partner than the resident powers, which may pursue persisting covert interests in this part of the world. Moreover, Italy has a historic peacekeeping tradition, a proven capacity to safeguard trade routes between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean and an ability to mediate in complex conflicts. This may make Italy an ideal partner to balance the ambitions of the multiple subjects acting in this scenario.

35 Marino, Tiziano and Alexandru Fordea. 2024. "Building IMEC: The Path Towards the +Implementation of the Indo-Mediterranean Corridor." *Centro Studi Internazionali (CeSI)*, 4 April 2025. <https://www.cesi-italia.org/en/articles/building-imec-the-path-towards-the-implementation-of-the-indo-mediterranean-corridor>.

36 Marino, Tiziano. 2023. "Connettere Mediterraneo allargato e Indo-Pacifico: l'opzione pakistana." In *Strategie di collegamento dell'Indo-Pacifico al Mediterraneo allargato*, edited by Lorenzo Termine and Alice Dell'Era. Osservatorio di Politica Internazionale: Parlamento italiano, 2023, pp.53-58. <https://www.geopolitica.info/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/8.pdf>.

37 Pandey, Pragya. 2023. "India-Italy: An Evolving Partnership in the Indo-Pacific." *Indian Council of World Affairs*, 4 October 2023. https://www.icwa.in/show_content.php?lang=1&level=3&ls_id=10017&lid=6389.

However, Italy is also one of the latest entrants in the Indo-Pacific and it has yet to develop a well-defined foreign policy for the region that extends beyond economic interests, unlike France, which pursues a more comprehensive and structured strategy in the region. In the current international context, nonetheless, Italy appears to have the space to develop a more autonomous Indo-Pacific strategy, potentially building on its already well-established engagement in the western sector of the region.

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