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**Italy's Security Engagement in Northeast  
Asia: Drivers and Outlook**

Giulio Pugliese & Alice Dell'Era

European University Institute  
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Ministry of Foreign Affairs  
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## **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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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,<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup> Italy has also played a leading role in the EMASOH-AGENOR mission in the Strait of Hormuz, assuming command twice,<sup>11</sup> and it participates in the recently launched Operation Aspides.<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup> Italy's 2017 defence diplomacy, which was chiefly aimed at the failed (and controversial) bid for Australia's Hunter class frigate procurement,<sup>14</sup> 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](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](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/](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.<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup>

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.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup>

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.<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup>

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.<sup>23</sup> 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](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](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](https://www.mod.go.jp/msdf/sf/english/news/2023/07/0704_2.html).

expeditionary capability of the Italian Air Force.<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup> 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.”<sup>26</sup> 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.<sup>27</sup> Beyond participating in these exercises, the *Montecuccoli* also made a port call at the White Beach naval base in Okinawa, Japan,<sup>28</sup> 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.<sup>29</sup>

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.<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup>

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,<sup>32</sup> 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](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](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tz4Vt_Eahj0&t=1s).

31 *Ibid.*

32 *Ibid.*

combat readiness.”<sup>33</sup> 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.<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup> 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.<sup>36</sup> 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.<sup>37</sup> 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.<sup>38</sup>

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.”<sup>39</sup> 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.<sup>40</sup> 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.<sup>41</sup> 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,<sup>42</sup> 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.<sup>43</sup> Instead, Italy may benefit from prioritising its expenses and efforts in its traditional strategic sphere of influence, the Enlarged Mediterranean.<sup>44</sup> 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.<sup>45</sup> 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.<sup>46</sup>

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,<sup>47</sup> not unlike much of Europe's rationale for showing the flag in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>48</sup> 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.<sup>49</sup> 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.<sup>50</sup>

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.<sup>51</sup> This was a byproduct of its Indo-Pacific strategy, which leveraged regional allies in a U.S.-led networked security system,<sup>52</sup> 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](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.<sup>53</sup> 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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