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# POLICY PAPER

**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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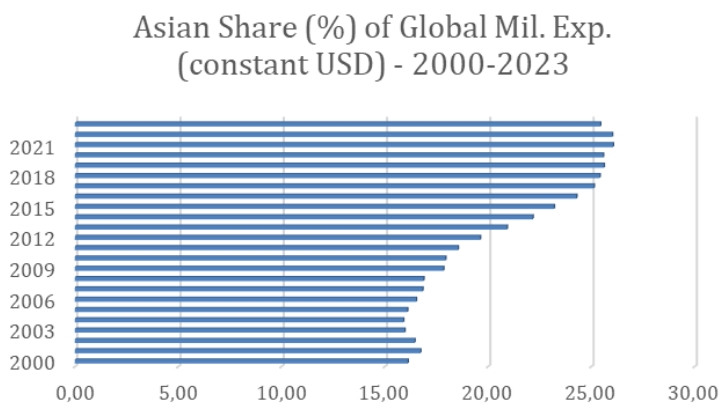
Italy is increasingly active in the Indo-Pacific,<sup>1</sup> a previously distant, if not exotic, destination for Rome’s military assets. While allies and partners in and outside the region may welcome this greater involvement, Italy should develop a strategic compass to navigate new waters while dodging pitfalls<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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-Pacific<sup>4</sup> has become a significant element in Italy’s foreign policy in recent years. While it has traditionally focused on European and Mediterranean affairs,<sup>5</sup> where the Chinese presence, albeit increasing,<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> 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)<sup>9</sup> 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 Carabinieri'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,<sup>10</sup> 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,<sup>11</sup> 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

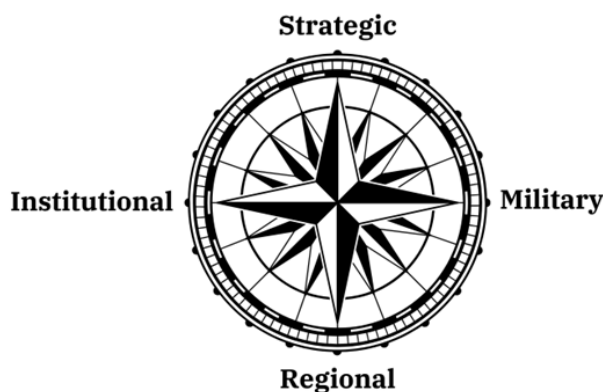
stability.

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,<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup>

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-Pacific<sup>15</sup> and neglecting its southern neighbourhood. This is sparking a lively debate on the necessity<sup>16</sup> and potential<sup>17</sup> 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 powers<sup>18</sup> 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.<sup>19</sup>

*A Strategic Document.* A pending issue for Italy is whether it should publish a National Security Strategy<sup>20</sup> 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.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup>

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.<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup> 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 India<sup>26</sup> 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,

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[cmfence/26/report.html](https://www.cmfence.com/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 power<sup>27</sup> 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,<sup>28</sup> 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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