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Indo-Pacific: The 2022-2024 Tilt and New
Engagement with India**

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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

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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/pm0708/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 Bhāratīya 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-aspides/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 Bangladesi in Italia*. Accessed May 2025. <https://ambdhaka.esteri.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&iid=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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