



# Italy's Silent Engagement in the Indo-Pacific

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## Italy's Silent Engagement in the Indo-Pacific

*By Emanuele Ballestracci*

### SYNOPSIS

*Italy's growing engagement in the Indo-Pacific has largely gone unnoticed. Yet, Rome's multifaceted informal strategy has positioned it as a reliable partner. Its case underscores the significant role that even non-resident middle powers can play in shaping regional dynamics.*

### COMMENTARY

Italy is often overlooked in discussions on European engagement in the Indo-Pacific. Yet, over the past decade, Rome has quietly but consistently expanded its regional footprint, crafting a pragmatic and multi-dimensional informal strategy. While not a resident power like France or the United Kingdom, Italy has steadily positioned itself as a credible and reliable partner for countries seeking to diversify their external relations amid intensifying great power competition.

### A Growing but Understated European Player

Europe's strategic awareness of the Indo-Pacific has grown markedly over the past fifteen years, particularly following the United States' "Pivot to Asia" and the region's renewed centrality in global economic affairs. This growing interest has materialised in dedicated Indo-Pacific strategies, both at the [EU level](#) and among member states. [Italy](#), for its part, is currently debating the adoption of a formal strategy in Parliament; formalising a multi-dimensional informal strategy has already been underway for over a decade now.

Within this expanding European presence, analytical focus often disproportionately falls on the United Kingdom and France – Europe's only resident powers capable of sustained unilateral operations in the region. However, this framing tends to obscure

the contributions of other member states whose engagement, though less visible, is no less consequential. Italy exemplifies this trend.

Traditionally viewed as a middle power with a primary focus on Europe and the Enlarged Mediterranean, Italy has, since the mid-2010s, pursued a deeper Indo-Pacific engagement across multiple vectors. Its approach, combining diplomatic, economic, and security dimensions, has remained low-profile yet coherent. This has allowed Rome to emerge as a valued partner for regional actors seeking strategic diversification, especially amid unease over Chinese assertiveness and American unpredictability.

Italy's capacity to contribute meaningfully to regional stability and prosperity should not be underestimated. It is the [world's eighth-largest economy](#), the seventh-largest manufacturing country, and [Europe's second-largest industrial power](#) after Germany. Its military capabilities – including a [blue-water navy](#) and a globally competitive [defence industry](#) led by Leonardo and Fincantieri – further bolster its strategic credentials.

Moreover, [Italy's strong cultural and diplomatic presence worldwide](#), coupled with the absence of a colonial legacy in Asia, enhances its image in regional capitals and sets it apart from other European powers.

Importantly, Italy's Indo-Pacific engagement has remained consistent across successive governments, despite frequent political turnover at home. Bilateral relations have deepened, naval deployments have increased, and Italian companies – especially in manufacturing and defence – have expanded operations in East and Southeast Asia. These efforts have been undertaken under the “Sistema Italia” framework, which involves coordinated support from embassies, government agencies and a growing number of chambers of commerce.

## **Strategic Partnerships**

A major turning point in Italy's Indo-Pacific trajectory came in 2007 when Rome joined the [Pacific Islands Forum](#) as a Dialogue Partner – following France and the UK, but ahead of Germany, Spain, and Singapore.

Since then, Italy has established a web of strategic partnerships: with [Vietnam](#) in 2013, [South Korea](#) in 2018, and both [India](#) and [Japan](#) in 2023. Memoranda of Understanding (MoU) have also been signed with Indonesia and Thailand.

In 2024, Joint Strategic Action Plans were signed with [New Delhi](#) and [Tokyo](#). Italy's role has also expanded within regional organisations. It joined the [Indian Ocean Rim Association \(IORA\)](#) as a Dialogue Partner in 2019 – one of only three European countries to do so – and became an [ASEAN Development Partner](#) in 2020.

## **Economic Diplomacy**

Within these partnerships, the economic dimension has been central, reflecting [Italy's prioritisation of trade and investment](#). Italian companies have partnered with Vietnam, Indonesia, and Thailand to provide machinery and industrial equipment for

manufacturing modernisation and have also collaborated with the Philippines and Malaysia on renewable energy and climate adaptation programmes.

On 1 June 2025, Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani unveiled the government's "[Action Plan for Italian Exports in High-Potential Non-EU Markets](#)", which explicitly identifies ASEAN as a strategic priority. Italian exports to ASEAN reached €10.7 billion in 2024, marking a 10.3 per cent increase over the previous year.

The deepening of relations with Malaysia further exemplifies this trajectory. In July 2025, Prime Minister [Anwar Ibrahim](#) visited Rome, where he met with Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni in a summit that signalled an evolving strategic partnership. With over US\$8 billion in pledged investments, steadily growing trade flows and rising private sector interest, Italy has reinforced its position as one of Malaysia's most important economic partners. Bilateral trade reached US\$3.1 billion, making Italy Malaysia's fifth-largest trade partner.

### **Defence Cooperation**

Defence industry cooperation has also emerged as a key driver of deepening ties with the region, bolstered by high-profile initiatives such as the 2022 launch of the [Global Combat Air Programme](#) (GCAP) – a trilateral partnership with the United Kingdom and Japan to co-develop a sixth-generation fighter jet.

In 2024, Indonesia became the [largest importer of Italian armaments](#) – with purchases totalling €1.25 billion – following a [landmark contract](#) between Fincantieri and Leonardo for the transfer of two multipurpose offshore patrol vessels. This dramatic leap, from 35th to first place among importers in just one year, reflects not only Italy's growing defence industrial outreach but also Jakarta's recognition of Rome as a capable and responsive security partner. Moreover, there have been reports of talks to sell the [aircraft carrier \*Garibaldi\*](#) to Indonesia.

Military cooperation forms a central pillar of Italy's Indo-Pacific strategy. Over the past decade, the Italian Navy has conducted regular deployments to the region, including the [Carabiniere frigate](#) in 2017, [ITS Morosini](#) in 2023, [ITS Montecuccoli](#) and [F-35A deployments](#) to Japan in 2024, and [ITS Antonio Marceglia](#) in 2025. Italy also participated in [Operation AGENOR](#) – a European maritime security initiative in the Strait of Hormuz – from July 2022 to January 2023, assuming command and contributing two frigates and aerial assets.

These missions demonstrate both operational capacity and political commitment. They underscore Italy's willingness to contribute to regional security alongside allies and partners. More broadly, Italy's active role complements the EU's 2021 Indo-Pacific Strategy, which continues to face credibility challenges due to the Union's limited hard power and difficulties in being perceived as a geopolitical actor. In this context, the contributions of member states like Italy are essential to translating EU ambitions into a tangible regional presence.

### **Constraints to Rome's Indo-Pacific Ambitions**

Nonetheless, Rome faces two major constraints to further expanding its Indo-Pacific

footprint: growing instability in its near abroad and the need to preserve balanced relations with China.

Russia's aggression against Ukraine has underscored the urgency of European defence, and instability in countries like Georgia further reinforces this trend. While the conflict in Ukraine has not yet significantly undermined Italy's Indo-Pacific engagement, a reduced American security guarantee in Europe could eventually compel European states to focus inward, limiting their ability to project force elsewhere.

Meanwhile, the mounting instability across the Enlarged Mediterranean may also require Italy to recalibrate its broader strategic posture as demonstrated by its [2022 Multi-Year Defence Policy Document](#), which has identified this region as the primary axis of national and European security. Should instability intensify on both traditional and non-traditional security fronts, Italy – as the EU's key Mediterranean actor – may have to recalibrate its military activities in the Indo-Pacific.

Italy's military, already one of NATO's most heavily deployed, operates in Africa, Asia, the Arctic, the Middle East, the Balkans, and Eastern Europe, raising concerns of overstretching. Although a NATO pledge to increase defence spending to five per cent of GDP may ease these pressures, any resulting increase in capabilities will only materialise at best in the medium term.

Finally, Italy must navigate its Indo-Pacific engagement without undermining relations with China. While cooperation with regional partners and participation in freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait enhance Italy's credibility as a security actor, they also risk straining ties with Beijing.

Similarly, robust defence exports to countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Japan may complicate Rome's effort to maintain stable economic and diplomatic channels with China.

## Conclusion

Italy's Indo-Pacific strategy, though understated, reflects a sustained and multidimensional commitment to the region. Combining economic diplomacy, security cooperation, and institutional partnerships, Rome has carved out a meaningful space for itself among like-minded partners. While domestic constraints and geopolitical tensions may pose future challenges, Italy's approach underscores the important role that non-resident middle powers can play in shaping Indo-Pacific dynamics. Recognising Italy's contribution is essential to understanding the evolving European presence in the region and the broader diversification of partnerships in an increasingly multipolar world.

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