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## ITALY'S NON-STRATEGY IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

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On 15 September 2021, the Italian Defence Minister, Lorenzo Guerini, rejected Italy's military involvement in the Indo-Pacific by participating in operations such as the US-led FONOP to counter China, arguing it was not in the country's strategic interests. However, he did not reject the possibility of participating in missions with economic and industrial objectives in the region to show Italian armaments to potential buyers.

Despite being a major EU maritime state, Italy does not have its own comprehensive strategy for the Indo-Pacific. As the region has become a central area for maritime geopolitics, security, trade and environmental activities, France adopted a national strategy on the Indo-Pacific in 2018, with Germany and the Netherlands following suit in 2020. By contrast, since 2017, the Italian security strategy is almost exclusively focused on the concept of the "enlarged Mediterranean" (*'Mediterraneo allargato'*). This concept is associated with a wider geographical area — from the Balkans to the Sahel and the Gulf of Guinea, the Horn of Africa, the Gulf of Aden and the Western Indian Ocean — and represents one of the three pillars of Italian foreign policy, the other two being Europeanism and

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Mediterranean”, with its focus on energy and commercial connectivity, seems to complement China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This may explain why, in March 2019, Italy became the first and only G7 country to sign a BRI-MoU with Beijing hoping to attract massive commercial investments. However, the expansion of economic relations with China has not prevented Italy from taking a firm stance in emphasising the fundamental importance of the peaceful settlement of maritime disputes in the East and South China Seas within the G7 format and in line with UNCLOS to preserve the security of sea lines of communication.

*Italy's 'non-strategy' in the Indo-Pacific is partly conditioned by the fact that Rome does not want an open confrontation with China. Rather, it seeks a pragmatic approach with Beijing.*

Recently, a similar attitude seems to apply to the tensions in the Taiwan Strait, although Italy has continued to strictly adhere to the ‘One-China’ policy since it recognised the PRC in 1970. The absence of a comprehensive strategy in the Indo-Pacific does not mean that Italy has not outlined some axes for the development of its foreign and security policy in the area over the years. This is exemplified by Italian engagements to reinforce cooperation with Indo-Pacific partners, including in bilateral and regional contexts.

## **Relevant political and economic ties with Indo-Pacific countries**

2021 has been the turning point in Italy's foreign policy towards the region. Its role as rotating

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administration have encouraged Italy to develop and consolidate political and economic relationships with the main countries in the Indo-Pacific. Rome has played an active role in promoting and supporting EU initiatives to define more intense forms of economic cooperation with the Indo-Pacific. For instance, in 2020, Italy voted in favour of the EU's decision to upgrade EU-ASEAN relations to the level of strategic partnership and conclude a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with Vietnam. Likewise, in 2021, Italy supported Brussels' resumption of negotiations for an FTA and the signature of a Comprehensive Air Transport Agreement with ASEAN, and the adoption of an EU Strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.

One important aim of Italian foreign policy is to strengthen international structures for multilateral cooperation. Thus, in 2019, Italy joined the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) as a 'Dialogue Partner'. The IORA has been recognised as a key player in the regional architecture and an ideal partner for addressing global challenges such as climate change, sustainable development and maritime security. In 2020, Italy also acquired the status of a 'Development Partner' of ASEAN to promote practical cooperation in the following key areas: political and security issues; connectivity and economic relations; socio-cultural exchanges; agriculture and environment; health; humanitarian cooperation. Finally, in 2021, Italy joined the International Solar Alliance (ISA), a collaborative platform for the development of solar energy production technologies and the implementation of the Paris Climate Agreement through rapid and massive

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trilateral dialogue with India and Japan to promote an articulated multilateral approach in the Indo-Pacific, starting from sharing common democratic values and strengthening economic and trade relations. The three countries share a common vision of the Indo-Pacific region founded on some essential principles: equal access to the common sea and air spaces for all countries, a guarantee of freedom of navigation and overflight, and the promotion of peaceful settlement of disputes per international law. This engagement shows that India and Italy have overcome the tensions arising from the *Enrica Lexie Incident*, which was settled by the arbitral award of 21 May 2020.

Two other important players in the region are Indonesia and Australia, both members of the G20. In 2009, Italy and Indonesia upgraded their relations to the level of a *de facto* “strategic partnership” signing an agreement on a Bilateral Consultation Forum and their current cooperation extends to manufacturing, energy, agri-food, tourism, telecommunications and defence industries, as well as tourism, the protection and promotion of intellectual property and the creative economy. In parallel, Italy supports the negotiation of an FTA between the EU and Indonesia, which will lay the groundwork for broader exchanges in more sectors, including services and procurement.

Bilateral relations between Italy and Australia are generally described as warm and cordial by both countries, but their relationship is lacking in terms of economic, security and political engagement. At the moment, the only significant factor is the strengthening of bilateral cooperation in science

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of bilateral relations particularly in the light of the AUKUS pact to counter China.

## **Cooperation in the field of defence and maritime safety**

Italy has also extended its active participation in the Indo-Pacific to preserve the security of the leading route for international maritime trade, where the Mediterranean Sea is its natural point of arrival for cargo ships from Asia. Indeed, at the multilateral level, since 2016, Italy has participated in the Shangri-La Dialogue, the most important intergovernmental security forum in the region, alongside France and Germany. Rome has also developed forms of bilateral cooperation in the defence sector by signing specific MoUs with Malaysia and Vietnam, and agreements with India and South Korea. In these deals, areas of military cooperation generally include joint military exercises, exchange of information and officers, cooperation in exchanging technology, and the training of military personnel. Agreements with India and South Korea also prescribe cooperation in security and defence policy, which would suggest an intention to develop a deeper dialogue and mutual engagement in matters concerning strategic areas of national security.

An important element of Italian security policy is its strong commitment to counter piracy and armed robbery against ships in the Western Indian Ocean and the Gulf of Aden since a large part of Italian exports are handled through international shipping routes with Asia. Thus, Italy has had an operational role in the EU naval force off the Somali coast, Operation ATALANTA, and

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in Djibouti under a defence agreement signed in 2002 and renewed in 2020 (not yet ratified). Although Italy is seeking to play a more active role in combating and preventing piracy, it is nevertheless bizarre that it has not considered acceding to the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP) as a means of improving the security of maritime routes of the Indo-Pacific, as Germany did in August 2021.

## **A pragmatic approach**

Overall, Italy has many political and economic relations with the main countries in the Indo-Pacific and has particularly privileged relations with Vietnam and Indonesia. However, the lack of a comprehensive strategy for the Indo-Pacific as a whole could become a serious problem. It does not make the continuity of its political action and the geopolitical relevance of every single choice immediately clear to third states, as the country has learnt through the signature of the BRI-MoU with China. This problem seems to be momentarily overcome by the adoption of the EU Strategy for cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, which Italy believes provides a framework for it to pursue its national interests.

Italy's 'non-strategy' in the Indo-Pacific is partly conditioned by the fact that Rome does not want an open confrontation with China. Rather, it seeks a pragmatic approach with Beijing. Recently, Italian Foreign Minister, Luigi Di Maio, stressed that the concept of 'selective engagement' must be applied in relations with China on issues such as the fight against terrorism, climate change and

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'non-strategy' is furthermore justified by the traditional Italian policy that only conceives the deployment of armed forces abroad within the framework of international missions under the aegis of the UN, the EU or NATO and not as a projection of power in contexts that are considered relevant for national interests. Thus, direct involvement of the Italian Navy in the Indo-Pacific could only be conceived as part of an EU naval operation in the region.

Today, the evolution of the strategic scenario implies an increasing commitment to strengthening European deterrence and defence within the framework of closer political integration within the EU. This should be the primary commitment of Italy's foreign and security policy. Only with these instruments can the country hope to play a major role in areas that are geographically far away and dominated by intense competition between the United States and China.

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## **Author biography**

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