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Italy's quiet pivot to the Indo-Pacific: Towards an Italian Indo-Pacific strategy

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Abstract

Italy is the only 'Big Four' European country and 'Quint' North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member ostensibly uninterested in the world's geopolitical and geoeconomic epicentre. However, a number of developments contradict the assumption that Rome overlooks the importance of the Indo-Pacific. By analysing official policies, naval deployments, new partnerships and evolving trajectories, this article reveals that Italy's strategic engagement with the Indo-Pacific is already significant and unfolding under three broad areas: (a) *economy*; (b) *security*; and (c) *norms*. It then assesses the benefits and risks of this developing foreign policy, and argues that the former outweigh the latter, a condition which is conducive to the establishment of an official Italian Indo-Pacific strategy. As the first scholarly work on the Italian role in the Indo-Pacific, this research makes a novel contribution to the literature on both Italian foreign policy and the Indo-Pacific security landscape, by investigating a complementary approach to that of existing Indo-Pacific strategies.

Keywords

Asia-Pacific, cooperation, diplomacy, European foreign policy, Indo-Pacific, Italian foreign policy, Italian Indo-Pacific strategy, Italy, norms, trade

Introduction

The international affairs of the 21st century are strongly characterised by the nexus between geopolitical and geoeconomic concerns, a condition that is effectively represented by the gradual shift from the Asia-Pacific to the Indo-Pacific. In an increasingly multipolar system, where power struggles, challenges to the international law and weaponised economic interdependence occur in this macro-region more frequently than elsewhere, a number of states and institutions have focused on the Indo-Pacific as the new epicentre of global affairs. Among the many, Italy's own recent pivot

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to this region has largely gone unnoticed, despite bearing substantial economic, security and normative ramifications. This article rectifies this conspicuous lacuna in the international relations (IR) and strategic literature by providing the first academic analysis of the Italian approach to the Indo-Pacific.

Due to the very geography of the Indo-Pacific, regional actors were the first to be impacted by the growing number of regional challenges as well as by the new strategic implications of the Indo-Pacific construct (Köllner et al., 2022). Consequently, the IR literature has understandably focused on Sino–United States (US) superpower rivalry (Wu et al., 2022), and at a later stage began to examine the role of the region's great and middle powers (Abbondanza, 2022). Amidst these significant and evolving power dynamics, a novel development stands out for its recency and therefore the somewhat scant amount of research in the relevant literature, that of Europe's growing interest in the Indo-Pacific. Within the latter, resident powers such as France and the United Kingdom (UK) have unsurprisingly attracted more attention, whereas very little has been said in the scholarly literature about countries without a territorial presence in the region.

Italy clearly belongs to this group, and it is therefore unsurprising that its foreign policy is not typically associated with the Indo-Pacific. Without embarking on discussions that would fall outside the scope of this article, it should suffice to emphasise that Italian foreign policy is conventionally analysed with a framework consisting of three circles: Europe and the European Union (EU); relations with the United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO); and the Mediterranean, in which it pursues a leading role (Felsen, 2018). The Indo-Pacific is notably absent, despite the country's large naval capabilities (Calcagno and Marrone, 2023), since Italy has traditionally approached this macro-region chiefly with an economic mindset aimed at benefitting its export-led economy. China, in particular, was regarded as both a significant trade partner and a potential trade multiplier in East and Southeast Asia (Pugliese et al., 2022), whereas current notions of Beijing as a challenger of the international system are far more recent.

Against the backdrop of Rome's supposed indifference to this region, this article provides the first scholarly research on Italy's engagement with the Indo-Pacific, thus contributing to the literature on both Italian foreign policy and the Indo-Pacific security landscape by addressing an understudied development. To do so, it adopts a liberalist understanding of inter-state cooperation, makes use of both international and Italian primary and secondary sources, and utilises foreign policy analysis as a methodological approach (see Hudson and Day, 2019). Consequently, it addresses this special issue's three broad questions concerning *why* and *how* European states are approaching the Indo-Pacific, as well as *what* the importance of such developments is.

Following this introduction, it briefly outlines the country's economic and strategic credentials. Second, it traces the contours of its informal Indo-Pacific strategy, developing in three significant areas: (a) *economy*; (b) *security*; and (c) *norms*, which echo the broader European approach outlined in this special issue. Third, it considers potential future developments along with the benefits and risks of a closer engagement with the Indo-Pacific, including the possibility of an official Indo-Pacific strategy. Lastly, it concludes by highlighting that the benefits outweigh the potential risks. This is inferred by virtue of Italy's broad approach focusing on soft power, multilateralism and the international law. This is not meant to have considerable consequences by itself, but rather in conjunction with like-minded European and Indo-Pacific partners, including the European Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), whose strategies Italy supports with analogous goals and means. This 'third way' therefore appears complementary to that of Anglosphere nations that are actively involved in this region, which tend to emphasise minilateralism and more traditional balancing strategies directed towards a strong and assertive China.

Italy in the Indo-Pacific

From a theoretical viewpoint, international cooperation is generally interpreted in (neo)liberalist terms, as the result of significant mechanisms such as complex interdependence; democratic, commercial and institutional peace; normative understandings of the international order; and other drivers of global cooperation (see Keohane, 2012). Inter-state cooperation is favoured by the presence of certain elements, including shared *interests*, *potential* to fulfil them and systemic *pressures*, updating Miller's (1968) valuable conditions for cooperation. Accordingly, Italy has both economic and strategic interests deriving from closer relations with Indo-Pacific nations and fora. Economic interests are due to the complementarity of its large export-led economy, whereas strategic ones relate to the country's active promotion of a stable global order as a prerequisite for peace and common prosperity.

In terms of potential to fulfil such interests, despite the havoc brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic internationally, Italy remains the eighth-largest economy, the seventh-largest manufacturing country and export market and the second-largest European industrial and manufacturing nation. Its military capabilities – including a blue-water navy – and political-diplomatic and cultural footprints are equally in the global top-10 according to several indices with a well-grounded statistical methodology, including both the Elcano Royal Institute's military and soft presence indicators (see Abbondanza, 2021), and therefore potentially support stronger relations with Indo-Pacific partners. Lastly, virtually all of the country's allies have started (or are increasing their commitment) to more steadily support the existing global order – challenged by China and Russia in different ways – by focusing more on the Indo-Pacific, which satisfies the third criterion for cooperation. In essence, there are favourable conditions for stronger interactions between Italy and Indo-Pacific nations, which resonate well with the broad policy drivers of economy, security and norms guiding the articles in this special issue. Notwithstanding the absence of a formal Indo-Pacific strategy, such developments have already taken shape, as displayed below.

Economy

Economic cooperation – and trade, in particular – are traditional means with which to foster closer ties between states, and Italian trade levels with Indo-Pacific nations support this article's argument for an informal but steady Italian pivot to this region, by virtue of both their extent and typology. Starting with the former, and adopting a restrictive definition of the Indo-Pacific for brevity's sake (i.e. excluding African and American countries facing the Indian and the Pacific oceans), Italian bilateral trade in goods with 10 of the region's largest trading nations has risen by 16.4% in the past 10 years (from US\$107.5b in 2011 to US\$125.2b in 2021), despite the economic repercussions of both the global financial crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, according to the latest data released by the United Nations (UN Comtrade, 2023). Moreover, the new strategic partnerships that Italy has signed with several Indo-Pacific countries, discussed later in the article, explicitly mention the support of economic cooperation through rules-based trade and the strengthening of two-way exchanges. Although there are certainly other factors at play, it ought to be noted that bilateral trade increased with all of the countries with which Italy signed a partnership in the past 10 years, with no exception.

Secondly, the presence of numerous defence procurement contracts heightens the significance of such exchanges, since defence contracts typically take place after long and careful scrutiny and therefore indicate a certain degree of political and strategic proximity in themselves. Adopting the same geographical boundaries for illustrative purposes, and looking at the 10 Indo-Pacific countries with which Italy traded the most in the field of defence in the past 10 years,¹ there has been an

increase of 44.7% compared to the previous 10-year time frame (from US\$1.062b in 2001–2011 to US\$1.54b in 2011–2021), according to the latest data published by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI, 2023). Of these exports, warships, aircraft, armoured vehicles and sensors were the largest items.

Moreover, in the past two years Rome has signed two new large defence contracts with countries in the broader Indo-Pacific: a US\$5.5b contract to build a new class of frigates for the US Navy, and a US\$4b contract signed with Indonesia to build a new class of frigates for the Indonesian navy (Scipione, 2021). In December 2022, Italy, the United Kingdom and Japan entered a major equal partnership to develop a sixth-generation fighter aircraft (Global Combat Air Programme – GCAP). This has been conceived with interoperability with European, NATO and Indo-Pacific partners in mind, and will therefore result in a global defence procurement programme, thus strengthening both Italian and European relations with Indo-Pacific partners (Italian Government, 2022). The trade in defence, surveillance and satellite technologies to establish stronger ties with the region's nations is also evidenced by the latest Indo-Pacific Expo, held in Sydney in May 2022, in which Italy had the second-largest foreign presence after the United States. In the light of the significant politico-economic cooperation that is required to finalise those contracts, the growing interoperability with several Indo-Pacific armed forces and the large economic transactions that ensue, defence procurement stands out as a further driver of closer relations between Italy and the Indo-Pacific, in addition to the more conventional forms of trade discussed above.

Security

Despite a quieter approach to that of France and the United Kingdom, and more similarly to Germany, the Netherlands and the European Union, Italy has increasingly engaged with Indo-Pacific security with the goal of supporting a shared defence of the international law and regional stability. In 2017, Rome deployed its *Carabiniere* frigate in a six-month Indo-Pacific tour whose aim was to foster naval diplomacy, freedom of navigation and defence capacity-building. The frigate visited 14 key countries, with which it engaged in numerous forms of cooperation, including military exercises (Busonero, 2017). This symbolic tour signalled the country's will to support the rules-based order outside the country's sphere of interest, the so-called Enlarged Mediterranean (*Mediterraneo Allargato*), which nevertheless extends to the western Indian Ocean and thus overlaps with the western sectors of the Indo-Pacific. This mission would be echoed four years later by Germany, which deployed its *Bayern* frigate to perform freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs),² as recounted by Rafał Ulatowski in his article for this special issue.

In 2019, conversely, the country's first populist government, led by then Prime Minister (PM) Conte, seemed to temporarily revert Italy's stance on regional security building by signing a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with China concerning the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), notably being the first G7 country to do so, while also gauging the possibility of joining the 16 + 1 initiative. However, close analysis revealed that "the MoU was a case of populist grandstanding, not one of grand strategy and international realignments" (Pugliese et al., 2022: 1036). The following government, led by PM Draghi, rapidly dissociated from China's BRI and cemented Italy's traditional foreign policy posture. Apart from reasons of political expediency, this rapid shift was also possible due to the country's specific trading profile. To wit, Germany, France and Spain all trade more with China than they do with the United States. However, according to the latest data provided by the United Nations (UN Comtrade, 2023), Italy displays an inverted relationship as it still trades more with Washington than with Beijing, and indeed the possibility that Rome might decide not to renew the MoU in 2024 is under discussion at the time of writing. The combination of

economic (trade profile) and strategic reasons (awareness of China's systemic challenges) therefore helps to explain Rome's distancing from China.

In the next three years, Italy substantially contributed to what would later become the official EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific (European Commission, 2021). As highlighted by Gorana Grgić in her article for this special issue, this was a significant step forward in European strategic cooperation with Indo-Pacific partners. Shortly after the European Union unveiled its new strategy, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs released an official document outlining the country's specific contribution to the new EU policy, identified in the areas of sustainable prosperity; green transition; ocean and digital governance; bi/multilateral links; security and defence; and human security (Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022). This document highlights two complementary aspects, namely the country's unwavering contribution to multilateralism and the pursuit of national interests through the support of the rules-based order. The combination of these two elements is often exemplified by Italy's leading role in commanding and contributing to peace-keeping operations among so-called Global North countries (Abbondanza, 2020).

Confirming the aforementioned shift in how Rome approaches China, in March 2022 the Italian parliament passed a motion spurring the government to focus on the Indo-Pacific, due to strategic challenges in the South China Sea and Taiwan, urging it to adopt an Indo-Pacific strategy (Italian Chamber of Deputies, 2022). These elements thus depict a quiet but steady Italian approach to the Indo-Pacific, pivoting around the defence of the rules-based order and regional stability alongside both Indo-Pacific and European partners. On this point, although Italy's nascent Indo-Pacific approach is predominantly based on soft power means, it does not eschew more practical applications. This is evidenced not only by the 2017 tour of the *Carabiniere* frigate and by the multiple engagements in the Enlarged Mediterranean, but also by Operation AGENOR, a European mission active in the Hormuz Strait (western Indo-Pacific boundary) which has been commanded by Italy from July 2022 to January 2023, and to which Rome has contributed with two frigates and aircraft (Italian Navy, 2023). Lastly, Rome is currently deploying its *Morosini* offshore patrol vessel for an Indo-Pacific tour from April to September 2023, to perform a variety of operations alongside European and Indo-Pacific partners – including joint exercises and FONOPs – and might deploy the *Cavour* carrier strike group in 2024 (Decode39, 2023).

Although there are numerous points of convergence with other European approaches (especially the European Union, Germany and the Netherlands), there are also some differences with French and British ones. These chiefly revolve around the means with which to reach otherwise comparable goals, and are exemplified by two specific aspects. First, Italy's unwaveringly multi-lateral posture, according to which its Indo-Pacific presence is always coordinated with either European or Indo-Pacific partners, thus eschewing unilateral or minilateral actions at times pursued by France and the United Kingdom. Secondly, the broader scope of its regional vision, which, as attested by a recently published document (Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2022), mostly encompasses non-traditional security objectives, a noticeable difference from the UK approach in particular. With these significant issues acknowledged, Italy's growing engagement in the Indo-Pacific security landscape stands out as a considerable foreign policy development.

Norms

Much like other elements analysed in this article, Italy's normative approach displays significant developments that have yet to be jointly assessed in the literature, rather than individually. To wit, in the past 16 years Rome has increasingly engaged with numerous Indo-Pacific nations through norm-based high-profile initiatives and partnerships, here interpreted as a gradual and continuous convergence of shared interests, values and norms centred on the Indo-Pacific. In 2007 Italy

became a Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) Dialogue Partner, after Europe's two countries with Indo-Pacific presence but before Germany, Spain and Singapore. The admission criteria include long-term connections with and commitment to the Pacific in diplomatic, socio-cultural, economic and strategic terms, along with active relations with PIF member states (PIF, 2023). Six years later, after a hiatus caused by the repercussions of the global financial crisis, Rome signed a strategic partnership with Vietnam revolving around trade, environmental-scientific cooperation and defence procurement. The two countries elevated their strategic partnership in 2023, for the 10th anniversary of the original agreement (Italian Embassy in Vietnam, 2022).

In the past five years, moreover, Italy's normative and diplomatic engagement with the region has risen at a much quicker pace, arguably due to the heightened economic and strategic importance of the Indo-Pacific. In 2018 it concluded a strategic partnership with South Korea, a comparable industrial powerhouse, focusing on trade, scientific cooperation, defence and support for the rules-based order (Korean Government, 2018). The following year, Italy became Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) Dialogue Partner, one of the only three European countries to hold such status, therefore strengthening its regional cooperation through maritime diplomacy and capabilities (IORA, 2023). In 2020 it joined ASEAN as a Development Partner, notably on the same day as France, thus agreeing to cooperate with ASEAN and its 10 member states under a multi-layered cooperation framework (ASEAN, 2021). As discussed by Thomas Wilkins in his article for this special issue, these common memberships and partnerships hold the potential for greater intra-European cooperation aimed at greater relations with Indo-Pacific nations and organisations, although some doubts still linger over the actual convergence of all European policies after Brexit (Baldini and Chelotti, 2022).

The following three years have been remarkably proficuous for Italy's norm-based regional cooperation. The year 2021 witnessed a new strategic partnership with India revolving around energy environmental transition; a new Italy–India–Japan trilateral to jointly support the rules-based order; and a strong focus on Indo-Pacific challenges at the G20 hosted in Rome. The following year, Italy's new right-wing government led by PM Giorgia Meloni confirmed her predecessor's wariness of China – steadily seen as a challenger of the rules-based international order since 2021 – while being outspokenly on Taiwan's side (Focus Taiwan, 2022). In January 2023, Italy and Japan elevated their bilateral relations to the strategic partnership level, also due to the goals and implications of GCAP (Decode39, 2023). Lastly, shortly before relaunching a strategic partnership with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Italian PM Meloni co-inaugurated the 2023 Raisina Dialogue alongside Indian PM Modi, joined India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) by officially leading its scientific and technological activities, and elevated its relations with New Delhi to the full strategic partnership level, along with a new defence cooperation agreement (Pant, 2023). The Meloni administration might therefore upgrade the country's Indo-Pacific approach in the future, provided that its somewhat fragile party coalition does not collapse. In the light of these significant and fast-paced diplomatic developments, Italy's normative pivot to the Indo-Pacific – based on multilateral efforts to support the international law and foster cooperation – stands out on account of both the growing number and the clear significance of the partnerships and other forms of cooperation that have just been discussed.

The road ahead: benefits and risks of a closer engagement

Despite traditional notions of Italy being focused almost exclusively on its sphere of interest, however large, Rome is pursuing an informal but steady approach to the Indo-Pacific. Consequently, as with any unfolding foreign policy endeavour, both benefits and risks ensue (see Table 1). Starting with the former, they can be grouped into the broad categories of trade,

cooperation and values, which echo Europe's policy drivers centred on economy, security and norms guiding the articles in this special issue. Indo-Pacific trade is expected to account for more than half of global exchanges in the next three decades (UK Department of International Trade, 2021: 7). As a result, the advantages of closer relations with the region's countries are self-evident, especially for large export-led economies like Italy's. Moreover, there are significant opportunities for mutually benefitting cooperation not just economically, but also normatively (new partnerships and other forms of cooperation to support norms multilaterally), and strategically (joint projects, exercises, missions, interoperability). To that end, the network of partnerships and associations that Rome is building with an increasing number of Indo-Pacific actors is a strong point of departure, and symbolises synergy opportunities with other European countries and organisations (the European Union) engaged in this region. Moreover, the emphasis on multilateralism, regional inclusivity and the international law resonates well with many of the region's countries and organisations (e.g. ASEAN), as attested by their official documents (see ASEAN, 2019).

Concurrently, there are some potential risks that ought to be taken into account by policymakers. Significantly, and notwithstanding Rome's substantial capabilities and interests, Italy generally displays governmental precariousness (12 governments in the past 20 years) and feeble economic growth. Although these are well-known domestic issues, however, it ought to be noted that they have not precluded the country's remarkably active foreign policy since the end of the Cold War, including the significant developments mentioned earlier. A more tangible source of risks, therefore, is that of the Enlarged Mediterranean itself, a broad region riddled with security challenges. These comprise Mediterranean power rivalries, multifarious security risks in the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) region, strong irregular migration flows and related human rights violations, and external military (Russia, including its new invasion of Ukraine) and economic (China) presence worsening the Enlarged Mediterranean's security environment (see Ceccorulli and Coticchia, 2017). Such challenges already require a significant level of strategic attention in Rome, and a potential degeneration of them may limit a more proactive Italian role in the Indo-Pacific.

With the main benefits and risks acknowledged, a more balanced assessment is possible. As discussed above, domestic constraints have not curbed the country's active international role so far, thus it seems unlikely that they would play a crucial role in this instance. From an extra-regional perspective, apart from the inevitable challenges arising from new foreign policy endeavours, there are no explicit obstacles to closer ties between Rome and Indo-Pacific nations – quite the opposite, in fact – as evidenced by the growing relations previously described. Consequently, the main risks are potential flashpoints in the country's own sphere of interest, which require continuing efforts to alleviate further deterioration of the strategic landscape. As previously noted, however, neither endogenous nor exogenous constraints – including Russia's new invasion of Ukraine – have so far curbed Rome's foreign policy activism in the Indo-Pacific, as attested by the substantial partnerships and naval deployments occurred of the past two years. In this respect, Italy's complex goal of supporting multilateralism while balancing economic opportunities and strategic concerns is comparable to Germany's and the European Union's own Indo-Pacific predicaments, as outlined by Rafał Ulatowski and Gorana Grgić in this special issue.

On the other hand, the existing benefits falling under the broad categories of economy, security and norms are already manifest and regarded as growing in the next few decades. Additionally, Rome's increasing deployment of naval assets occurs solely within multilateral contexts, eschewing unilateral and minilateral engagements more commonly sanctioned in Paris or London, thus supporting Italy's open and cooperative approach. More to the point, since the only

cases of military deployment are multilateral missions (already in place) and multi-nation exercises and FONOPs in the South China Sea, they would foster trans-regional cooperation given that several European and Indo-Pacific countries participate. Although these will always hold the potential to irritate Beijing, comparable endeavours of other countries have not precipitated their relations with China, and the multilateral nature of Italy’s deployments would decrease such risks. In essence, despite the presence of significant challenges that policymakers should constantly monitor, the tangible benefits of Italy’s quiet pivot to the Indo-Pacific seem to outweigh the potential risks.

Consequently, there is room for a potential Italian strategy for the Indo-Pacific, whose necessity is now openly acknowledged in political debates. Notwithstanding strong populist components, the country’s current government has vocally called for the respect of the international law to ensure Indo-Pacific stability, and is actively fostering multi-layered cooperation with many of the region’s actors, as outlined earlier in this article. Presumably, there would be no objection from the centre-left opposition either, since only a few months earlier it released compatible statements published the country’s Mediterranean Strategy (Italian Ministry of Defence, 2022: i). That document attested that the significance of the Indo-Pacific is now inescapable for Italy, which leads to a bipartisan interpretation of this macro-region as a complementary element to Italy’s Enlarged Mediterranean focus.

If pursued through an open and inclusive approach, a formal strategy would likely work well with existing strategies of Italy’s partners. On the one hand, it would support the overarching EU direction on account of Rome’s adherence to the European Union’s own strategy, in terms of both soft and (somewhat) hard power means. The country’s large economic linkages with Indo-Pacific partners, its new partnerships and its blue-water navy would further support the broader European endeavour, thanks to its multilateral approach. On the other, given the comparable priorities, an Italian Indo-Pacific strategy would also complement the policies of many of the region’s nations and organisations (including India, Japan, South Korea and ASEAN), which would support its overall objective of strengthening trans-regional ties. Although it is not within the scope of this article to outline the contours of this hypothetical strategy (rather, the aim is to shed light on the informal approach that has been quietly unfolding), it is nevertheless important to note that a new Indo-Pacific strategy is a potential – and severely understudied – implication of Italy’s growing role in this region.

Table 1. Benefits and potential risks of Italy’s closer engagement with the Indo-Pacific.

BENEFITS	RISKS
Trade with Indo-Pacific nations is growing steadily, and is predicted to continue to grow	Governmental precariousness and low economic growth may curb Rome’s pivot to the Indo-Pacific, despite not having occurred so far
Cooperation with Indo-Pacific actors is developing, yet it still displays untapped potential politico-diplomatically, normatively, and strategically	Security risks in the Enlarged Mediterranean and Eastern Europe may sidetrack Italy and its allies, although the war in Ukraine did not so far
Shared values are numerous and could be pursued more purposefully with closer ties, thus reinforcing broader cooperation	Albeit not as influential as it is elsewhere, the politico-economic relation with China might deteriorate. To address this, the ‘third way’ ought to be clearly distinguishable from US-led and the ASEAN’s approaches
An open and multilateral regional engagement increases the likelihood of positive outcomes	

Conclusion

Similarly to the other articles included in this special issue, this research aimed to shed light on understudied aspects of Europe's growing interests and policies concerning the Indo-Pacific. To provide the first account of Italy's quiet pivot to the Indo-Pacific, it has introduced the significance of this macro-region for Italy and Europe, thus answering *why* Rome is now pivoting to it, prior to discussing the theoretical underpinnings of international cooperation. Next, it has expounded *how* Italy approaches this region; that is, through a three-pronged framework comprising economy, security and norms. As a novel and understudied development for both Italian foreign policy and the Indo-Pacific security landscape, it also addresses the special issue's third question asking *what* the importance of such developments is.

It finds that, in contrast to conventional perceptions, Rome is pursuing an informal but noticeable strategy for the Indo-Pacific, which it perceives as being complementary to its Enlarged Mediterranean focus, one that has been unfolding much more explicitly in the past five years. It argues that Rome's swift distancing from Beijing, following the MoU concerning the Belt and Road Initiative and potential interest in the 16 + 1 grouping, can be understood as a consequence of both Italy's non-preponderant trade levels with China and its acknowledgement of the latter as a challenger of the international system. It also outlines the main benefits and potential risks associated with this recent Indo-Pacific pivot, arguing that the former outweigh the latter. On that note, this research emphasises that the Italian approach is not intended to have significant consequences on its own. Instead, it aims to work alongside like-minded European and Indo-Pacific partners, including the European Union and ASEAN, thus contributing to their official strategies due to comparable goals and means. As a result of this assessment, and given a certain level of bipartisanship and continuity in Italy's foreign policy, it argues that there is room for a formal Italian Indo-Pacific strategy, which may be envisaged by either the current or future governments, depending on domestic political expediency.

In conclusion, as the Indo-Pacific is emblematic of the growing 21st-century multipolarity, developing European approaches will eventually be acknowledged as one of the (many) components of this complex equation. Italy's posture is more comparable to that of Germany, the Netherlands and the European Union, rather than that of France and (in particular) the United Kingdom, as it encapsulates broad and multilateral goals and soft power means which resonate well with a number of key Indo-Pacific nations and organisations (including ASEAN). Nevertheless, British and even US, Australian and Japanese policies, which build on more pronounced unilateral goals and traditional balancing strategies (with a number of inevitable differences), leave room for broader future cooperation in the light of the complementarity of these approaches. As a result, further research is necessary to investigate the extent and direction of Italy's emerging approach to this region, establish if it will succeed in fostering closer ties, and assess whether these unfolding European policies will be able to coordinate effectively, since this has traditionally been a weakness of collective European foreign policy endeavours.

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Notes

1. In descending order: Pakistan, India, Singapore, Australia, Thailand, Bangladesh, Indonesia, the Philippines, New Zealand and Nepal.
2. FONOPs are here defined as operations enforcing freedom of navigation in accordance with the international law. This involves sailing ships wherever it is allowed under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS).

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