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➤ Trump's Imperial Strategy towards China Meets Meloni's Indo-Mediterranean Initiative

- A thread – dotted with ports and logistical hubs – connects Donald Trump's geo-economic containment of China with Giorgia Meloni's plan to position Italy as India's and Middle Eastern countries' gateway to Europe.
- The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) – possibly the only serious alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative – is where Trump's and Meloni's interests meet, supported by the private sector.
- While the Trump-Meloni geo-economic convergence around the IMEC may benefit both, it would be in Italy's long-term interest to further the Europeanisation of Rome's Indo-Mediterranean strategy, hedging against an erratic US President.

The 2026 National Defense Strategy published by the US Department of War takes aim at China head-on, declaring that Washington's goal is "to prevent anyone, including China, from being able to dominate us or our allies in the Indo-Pacific".¹ Trump wants to contain the Asian giant "through strength, not confrontation", leveraging on the US' Asian and European allies and partners' contributions to balance against Beijing.

In December 2025, the White House National Security Strategy had prepared the ground for geo-economic confrontation with China by framing the competition with Beijing in economic terms. Unlike the Biden administration, Trump has avoided defining the Asian giant as 'the' primary geopolitical threat. What matters, according to the US President, is "winning the economic and technological competition over the long term".² In such context, shipping – which is the dominant method for transporting goods across the world – and control of ports and sea routes have emerged as a top concern for Washington, which seeks to counter China's growing maritime influence.³

China's Maritime Silk Road and its network of ports and logistical hubs have strengthened Beijing's hold on global supply chains, a trend that, according

¹ US Department of War, *National Defense Strategy*, January 2026, p. 3-4, <https://media.defense.gov/2026/Jan/23/2003864773/-1/-1/0/2026-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY.PDF>.

² White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, November 2025, p. 24, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/2025-National-Security-Strategy.pdf>.

³ Liu, Zongyuan Zoe, "Tracking China's Control of Overseas Ports", in *CFR Trackers*, 26 August 2024, <https://www.cfr.org/tracker/china-overseas-ports>.



to the last National Security Strategy, needs to be closely monitored by the US intelligence community as part of the broader goal to decouple America's economy from foreign adversaries – a stance supported by the US Congress which at the beginning of 2025 passed the Secure Our Ports Act (H.R.252) with the aim to block – and/or significantly limit – access by hostile countries to port infrastructure vital to Washington's interests.⁴

Building up on this, the 2026 US National Defense Strategy considers maritime access as a prerequisite for economic security, declaring that it is paramount to prevent any actor – and above all China – from controlling or coercing access to key sea lanes and maritime assets. To be effective, Trump's imperial geo-economic containment of China needs the support of US allies and partners – and Italian actors, both public and private, have emerged as key helping hands.

Italy's Indo-Mediterranean Initiative

» **Giorgia Meloni launched the Indo-Mediterranean Initiative with the aim to position Italy as India's and Middle Eastern countries' gateway to Europe**

After exiting China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in December 2023 – in a clear attempt to strengthen ties with Washington⁵ – the Meloni government has focused attention on developing ties with other Asian countries, and most notably India. During the India Forum in Rome organised by the Indian Chamber of Commerce on 16 June 2024,⁶ Giorgia Meloni launched the Indo-Mediterranean Initiative (IMI) with the aim to position Italy as India's and Middle Eastern countries' gateway to Europe.

Meloni had previously backed the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC),⁷ a massive project set to build a rail and sea infrastructure network to create a commercial corridor (for both energy and goods) from the Indian Ocean across the Arabian peninsula all the way to Europe. Launched in September 2023,⁸ IMEC has so far failed to deliver on its initial promises. The construction of key infrastructure components only began in earnest in April 2025, and since the IMEC goes through some war-torn areas marred by political tensions, it is unlikely to become a serious alternative to China's BRI in the short term.

Notwithstanding its slow progress, the Italian government has made the IMEC the centrepiece of its Indo-Mediterranean strategy, which encompasses an area stretching from the Indo-Pacific, through the Middle East and the Mediterranean Sea. This area has been identified by the conservative coalition in power in Rome as increasingly important for Italy's strategic interests, though doubts have emerged as to whether the Meloni government will be able to commit the necessary resources at a time of budget restraints and increased expenses related to the war in Ukraine.

⁴ US Congress, *Secure Our Ports Act of 2025* (H.R.252), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/252>.

⁵ Albanese, Chiara, "Meloni to Tell Biden Privately Italy Plans Break with China", in *The Japan Times*, 27 July 2023, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2023/07/27/world/meloni-biden-italy-break-with-china>.

⁶ Çanakya website: *The Indo-Mediterranean Initiative (IMI)*, <https://cnky.in/?p=24>.

⁷ Observer Research Foundation (ORF), *The IMEC Corridor: Game-Changer or Challenge?* (video), 23 November 2024, <https://www.orfonline.org/videos/the-imec-corridor-game-changer-or-challenge>.

⁸ See the official website: <https://www.imec.international>.



» *Italy-US cooperation in the IMEC has been a recurrent theme of discussions between Trump and Meloni since their first official meeting in Washington in April 2025*

IMEC lies at the convergence of other major initiatives for Italy, including the Mattei Plan for Africa,⁹ the EU-promoted Global Gateway,¹⁰ and the recently finalised EU-India Free Trade Agreement.¹¹ Meloni's Indo-Mediterranean strategy nicely fits with Trump's economic and strategic interests in the region aimed at keeping China in check, including efforts by the US President to promote political normalisation between Israel and several Arab states through the Abraham Accords¹² and economic cooperation with Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia which in recent times has strengthened economic and defence ties with Beijing and has been openly criticised by the US President for doing that.¹³

Trump's Middle Eastern policy certainly aims to attract investments in the US while seeking to contain China's advances in the region. In this vein, the US President has praised the IMEC corridor as "one of the greatest trade routes in all of history".¹⁴ Italy-US cooperation in the IMEC has been a recurrent theme of discussions between Trump and Meloni since their first official meeting in Washington in April 2025, when they called their backed alternative to China's BRI the "one of the greatest economic integration and connectivity projects of this century".¹⁵

During her mission to Bahrain for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) summit on 3 December 2025, Meloni proposed a new "GCC-Med" summit to be hosted in Italy, with the aim to create an "ambitious" framework for dialogue between the Gulf and Mediterranean,¹⁶ a project that builds on Meloni's trip to Riyadh and her visit to the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in January 2025 which laid the foundation for strengthening economic relations and advance the IMEC. As part of this strategy, Italy is strengthening ties with India, as witnessed by the visit of Italy's foreign minister Antonio Tajani to New Delhi on 10-11 December 2025.¹⁷

A common thread of these visits is the aim by the Meloni government to present Italy as a bridge between Europe and Asia¹⁸ and promote Italian ports, particularly Trieste, within the IMEC. On 4-5 December 2025, the Italian government hosted in Trieste the Indo-Mediterranean Business Forum which

⁹ Fattibene, Daniele and Stefano Manservisi, "The Mattei Plan for Africa: A Turning Point for Italy's Development Cooperation Policy?", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 24|10 (March 2024), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/18219>.

¹⁰ European Commission website: *Global Gateway*, https://commission.europa.eu/node/5445_en.

¹¹ European Commission, *EU and India Conclude Landmark Free Trade Agreement*, 27 January 2026, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_26_184.

¹² US Department of State website: *The Abraham Accords*, <https://www.state.gov/the-abraham-accords>.

¹³ White House, *Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Solidifies Economic and Defense Partnership with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia*, 18 November 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/11/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-solidifies-economic-and-defense-partnership-with-the-kingdom-of-saudi-arabia>.

¹⁴ White House, *President Trump Hosts a Press Conference with Prime Minister Narendra Modi* (video), 13 February 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/videos/president-trump-hosts-a-press-conference-with-prime-minister-narendra-modi>.

¹⁵ USA and Italy, *United States-Italy Joint Leaders' Statement*, Washington, 17 April 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/2025/04/united-states-italy-joint-leaders-statement>.

¹⁶ Italian Government, *President Meloni's Speech at the Gulf Cooperation Council Summit*, 3 December 2025, <https://www.governo.it/en/node/30494>.

¹⁷ Italian Embassy in India, *Official Visit to India of the Italian Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, Hon'ble Antonio Tajani*, 15 December 2025, <https://ambnewdelhi.esteri.it/en/?p=6109>.

¹⁸ Ghosh, Nilanjan, "IMEC's Relevance to India and Its Chokepoints", in *ORF Online*, 2 January 2026, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/imec-s-relevance-to-india-and-its-chokepoints>.



» **Trieste is the main logistics hub that the Meloni government is proposing to IMEC partners as a potential counterweight to China's connectivity project**

brought together transport logistics companies set to benefit from Rome's involvement in IMEC.¹⁹

The symbolism could not be stronger: Trieste was one of the key ports identified for Italy-China cooperation in the framework of the Memorandum of Understanding on the Belt and Road Initiative signed by the first Conte government (2018-19) during Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Italy in March 2019. The same port is now the main logistics hub that the Meloni government is proposing to IMEC partners as a potential counterweight to China's connectivity project.

Trieste is also the place where there is convergence of interests between the Meloni government and the Mediterranean Shipping Company (MSC) – a private company founded by Gianluigi Aponte in the 1970s and currently led by his son Diego Aponte which controls 80 per cent of Trieste's marine terminal. MSC is one of the world's leading shipping companies, building connections with influential members of the Trump administration and the Meloni cabinet.

The US President met with MSC Group president Diego Aponte (and other Swiss business leaders) in the Oval Office in November 2025. Members of the Meloni cabinet have close links with the Aponte family, also given the fact that MSC is the main operator in Italy. For instance, Matteo Salvini, leader of the League and Italy's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Infrastructure and Transport announced the appointment of Edoardo Rixi (a member of the League) to become Deputy Minister of Infrastructure with responsibility for ports and sea activities, in front of the owner of MSC in November 2022.²⁰

The role of the private sector

MSC – through the Aponte family-controlled Terminal Investment Ltd (TiL)²¹ – is the main investor in a consortium that has proposed a 22.8 billion dollars accord to buy 43 ports from Li's CK Hutchison Holdings, including two facilities on the two ends of the Panama Canal, which has fuelled Trump's conviction that China 'owns' the canal. The Aponte family has a majority stake of 40 per cent in TiL which also sees the participation of BlackRock and its Global Infrastructure Partners unit with a stake of 30 per cent, and the Government of Singapore Investment Corporation (GIC) for the remaining 30 per cent.

What began as a business venture has devolved into a high-stakes geopolitical stand-off between Washington and Beijing over the control of global trade routes. Since CK Hutchison Holdings is based in Hong Kong, Chinese authorities have intervened in March 2025 to launch a comprehensive antitrust review, effectively halting the sale, and have recently threatened to block the deal unless Chinese state-owned firm COSCO gets a majority stake – a demand unacceptable for Trump, as reported by *The Wall Street Journal* in December 2025.²²

¹⁹ See official website: <https://triestesummit.org/?p=1824>.

²⁰ "Matteo Salvini all'armatore Gianluigi Aponte: 'Rixi avrà le deleghe ai porti e al mare'" (video), in *Il Secolo XIX*, 16 November 2011, https://www.ilsecoloxix.it/italia/2022/11/16/video/matteo_salvini_allarmatore_gianluigi_aponte_rixi_avra_le_deleghe_ai_porti_e_al_mare-12243489.

²¹ See the official website: <https://tilgroup.com/about-us.html>.

²² Paris, Costas, "Panama Ports Deal Hits Impasse as China Makes New Demands for Its Approval",



» The Hutchison ports deal is bringing the Italian government and MSC together, connecting them with the US President

Negotiations between the TiL-led consortium and COSCO are still in progress and there are of course chances that the terminal sale will not go through. Should, however, a compromise with Beijing be found, and TiL's acquisition of 80 per cent of the capital of the terminal operator group Hutchison Ports go through, MSC will become the sole owner of 41 of the 43 ports now owned by the Hong Kong-based group, with the exception of the two Panamanian ports – a deal which has major implications not only for US-China relations but also for the development of the IMEC and, more generally, Italy's Indo-Mediterranean Initiative.

The Hutchison ports deal is thus bringing the Italian government and MSC together, connecting them with the US President. Gianluigi Aponte – an avowed conservative person – is aligned with the current centre-right coalition led by Giorgia Meloni whose Indo-Mediterranean strategy clearly benefits MSC. In the same vein, the Aponte family has developed close connection to Trump.²³

Should the MSC's offer to expand its global footprint with new hubs purchased from Hutchison Holdings succeed, it would certainly strengthen the Trump-Meloni link and make Western interests on the sea 'great again'. The new ports acquired by MSC will certainly be used to develop the IMEC, making a seamless connection between the Indian Ocean and the Panama Canal through the Middle East and the Suez Canal.

Going forward: The need for hedging

While the Trump-Meloni geo-economic connect around the IMEC may benefit both, it would be wiser for Italy – a declining middle power with limited capabilities – to further Europeanisation of its Indo-Mediterranean strategy, hedging against the erratic nature of the US President. This could be done, for instance, by multilateralising Italy's Indo-Mediterranean Initiative, linking it more strongly with major existing initiatives led by Brussels, including the Global Gateway, the EU Indo-Pacific Strategy and the recently adopted EU-India Comprehensive Strategic Agenda²⁴ meant to deepen ties and achieve better Brussels-New Delhi coordination in the Indo-Mediterranean area.²⁵

In the same vein, the Meloni government should take the lead to convene in Rome an Indo-Mediterranean conference inviting the key countries participating in the IMEC to discuss both economic and political issues, including the promotion of multilateralism, and ways for middle powers to preserve their strategic autonomy amid intensifying US-China competition. This would allow Italy to increase leverage, hedging against the fleeting and unpredictable behaviour of the US President who – as seen more recently in the case of Greenland – does not think twice to put America's imperial considerations ahead of the strategic interests of the allies, even the closest ones.

in *The Wall Street Journal*, 16 December 2025, <https://www.wsj.com/business/logistics/panama-ports-deal-hits-impasse-as-china-makes-new-demands-for-its-approval-ff741523>.

²³ Heepmann, Antje, "Rolex's New Supervisory Board Member Has Excellent Trump Contacts", in *Insight Luxury*, 10 November 2025, <https://insight-luxury.com/en/?p=11416>.

²⁴ European Commission, *Towards 2030: A Joint European Union-India Comprehensive Strategic Agenda*, 27 January 2026, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/statement_26_224.

²⁵ Pant, Harsh V. "The India-Europe Connect", in *ORF Online*, 26 January 2026, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/the-india-europe-connect>.

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