

Italy's Pivot to the Indo-Pacific – Towards a Value-driven Foreign Policy?

by Nicola Casarini

Italy is stepping up its involvement in the Indo-Pacific, both in the economic and security realms. The cabinet led by Giorgia Meloni – a centre-right coalition often portrayed by commentators as right-wing and nationalist – is rebalancing Rome's policy in the Far East by scaling down ties with Beijing and by effectively lending support to the United States and its Asian allies vis-à-vis an increasingly assertive and self-confident China.

Moving away from previous centre-left governments that tended to prioritise commercial relations with Beijing, the conservative coalition in power since September 2022 has been fostering defence-related cooperation with Japan and India and chip-related cooperation and investments with Taiwan. Moreover – and remarkably for a country that has long been absent from Asian security – the Italian government has sent a patrol vessel to the South China Sea and plans to forward the country's flagship aircraft carrier to the area to conduct joint exercises with the navies of Australia,

Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States.

The quantity and quality of initiatives being undertaken warrant the label of an Italian 'pivot' to the Indo-Pacific. By upgrading its presence in the region, Italy joins the other G7 nations in their efforts to uphold the rules-based order and dissuade Beijing from invading Taiwan. However, to consolidate the western anchorage of this pivot, the Meloni government needs to fully align its policy towards Beijing with that of the Euro-Atlantic allies – which includes deciding whether to continue to lend Italy's official support to China's Belt and Road Initiative or not.

The Italian pivot

Italy is a latecomer in Asia, having traditionally focused on the Mediterranean region and Africa. However, Rome is catching up fast with the other major European countries that in recent years have outlined their visions for the region. For instance, London has traditionally been involved

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in Asian affairs through the Five Power Defence Arrangements – a series of bilateral defence relationships and multi-lateral agreements between Australia, Malaysia, New Zealand, Singapore and the United Kingdom. In March 2021, the UK's Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy announced that London would “tilt” towards the Indo-Pacific.¹ France has a territorial presence in the Indo-Pacific and has traditionally sailed vessels in the area, engaging in naval diplomacy with the regions' resident countries. In 2018, the French government published its Indo-Pacific strategy, updated in February 2022.² In September 2020, the German government issued its Indo-Pacific Guidelines,³ followed two months later by the Netherlands,⁴ while the European Union issued its own strategy for the region in September 2021.⁵

¹ UK Government, *Global Britain in a Competitive Age. The Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy*, March 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/global-britain-in-a-competitive-age-the-integrated-review-of-security-defence-development-and-foreign-policy>.

² French Government, *France's Indo-Pacific Strategy*, February 2022, https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/en_dcp_a4_indopacifique_022022_v1-4_web_cle878143.pdf.

³ German Federal Government, *Policy Guidelines for the Indo-Pacific*, September 2020, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/en/aussenpolitik/regionaleschwerpunkte/asien/german-government-policy-guidelines-indo-pacific/2380510>.

⁴ Netherlands Government, *Indo-Pacific: Guidelines for Strengthening Dutch and EU Cooperation with Partners in Asia*, 13 November 2020, <https://www.government.nl/documents/publications/2020/11/13/indo-pacific-guidelines>.

⁵ European Commission and European External Action Service, *The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific* (JOIN/2021/24),

Italy is currently adding its voice as well as its military assets to Europe's burgeoning presence in the area with the aim to support the United States, Japan and other like-minded partners to uphold a “free and open” Indo-Pacific.⁶ To this end, the centre-right coalition in power in Rome sent the *Nave Francesco Morosini* – a multipurpose offshore patrol vessel – to the Far East in April 2023 for a mission that will last five months. The aim is to develop synergies and training experience with the navies of allied nations and like-minded partners. The Italian patrol vessel will make port calls in several countries in the region and reach the port of Yokosuka in Japan in mid-June. The Italian vessel will also participate in the Indonesia-led “Komodo 23” search and rescue exercise in the South China Sea.⁷

It is still unclear whether the *Francesco Morosini* will transit through the Taiwan Strait. Doing that would send the message that Italy considers the Strait to be international waters – despite PRC's claim that it is not. Should such transit happen, it would give content to the recent call to European navies made by Josep Borrell, the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and

⁶ 16 September 2021, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/TXT/?uri=celex:52021JC0024>.

⁷ See for instance: Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Free and Open Indo-Pacific*, last updated 24 April 2023, https://www.mofa.go.jp/policy/page25e_000278.html.

⁸ Emanuele Rossi, “Rome Steps Up Indo-Pacific Engagement by Sending Patrol Vessel”, in *Decode39*, 22 February 2023, <https://decode39.com/?p=5923>. See also Chiara Rossi, “Morosini salpa verso l'Indo-Pacifico... e nave Cavour?”, in *StartMagazine*, 8 April 2023, <https://www.startmag.it/?p=229326>.

Security Policy, to patrol the Taiwan Strait to show Europe's commitment to freedom of navigation in what the leadership of the EU considers an "absolutely crucial area".⁸

The Italian government reportedly plans to deploy also the flagship *Cavour* aircraft carrier in the Indo-Pacific. If confirmed, the *Cavour* will be sent alongside its battle group, consisting of a destroyer, a frigate and a refueller. It will sail to Japan – where it is expected to arrive at the end of the year – and then take the return route while carrying out joint operations with the US and its Asian allies.⁹ Italy's naval diplomacy is compounded by growing technological and defence-related ties with India and Japan as well as chip-cooperation with Taiwan.

Focus on India, Japan and Taiwan

The Italian premier chose India for her bilateral first trip to Asia. Meloni's meeting with Prime Minister Narendra Modi in March resulted in the elevation of the India-Italy relationship to the level of strategic partnership. The two sides concluded a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on defence cooperation with a focus on manufacturing, co-production, co-design and co-innovation as well as military exercises in the naval domain.¹⁰

⁸ Stuart Lau, "Send Warships to Taiwan Strait, Borrell Urges EU Governments", in *Politico*, 23 April 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/?p=2951121>.

⁹ Gabriele Carrer and Emanuele Rossi, "Italy Looks to the Indo-Pacific by Sending Carrier, Fostering Defence Ties", in *Decode39*, 15 March 2023, <https://decode39.com/?p=6143>.

¹⁰ "India, Italy Elevate Ties to Strategic Partnership, Sign MoU on Defence Cooperation", in *The Hindu*, 2 March 2023, <https://www>.

China loomed large in the background of the Meloni-Modi meeting.

In the same vein, Italy's Defence Minister Guido Crosetto visited Tokyo in March to strengthen the strategic partnership and technological and industrial cooperation between the two sides, including on the joint project for the development of a sixth-generation combat aircraft – the Global Combat Air Program (GCAP) – announced by Japan, the United Kingdom and Italy at the end of last year. On 16 March 2023, the three countries held their first trilateral defence ministerial meeting in Tokyo where they jointly raised concerns about Beijing's revisionist attitudes.¹¹

Italy's activism in the Indo-Pacific is compounded by the deepening of Rome-Taipei ties to a level unthinkable only a few years ago. Defending Taiwan's democracy and territorial integrity has become a major concern for the conservative coalition in power in Rome. In an interview given to the Central News Agency of Taiwan on 23 September 2022 – only a couple of days before Italy's parliamentary election – Meloni declared that with her coalition, "Taiwan will be an essential concern for Italy", adding that her government would pressure the EU to "deploy all the political and diplomatic weapons at its disposal" to defend the Taiwanese democracy.¹²

thehindu.com/news/national/article66572174.ece.

¹¹ Mari Yamaguchi, "Japan, UK, Italy Push Joint Fighter Jet Development by 2035", in *AP News*, 16 March 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/3ed647eee772fa1e622479ffda49801>.

¹² "Italy's PM Hopeful Has Concerns over China,

These statements have been put into action in recent weeks. In April 2023, Italy's Minister for Business and Made in Italy Adolfo Urso sent a ministry task force to Taiwan to discuss potential cooperation in the semiconductor sector. It was followed by the announcement of a Taiwanese investment of about 400 million US dollars in Italy's chip industry as well as the opening of a Taipei Representative Office in Milan this summer – a move meant to facilitate closer trade and cultural links with Italy's economic hub as well as strengthens the island's international standing.¹³

In light of these developments, it is time for the Meloni government to clarify its stance on China, in particular on Italy's role in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – China's massive infrastructural and connectivity project.

The China question

Rome has not yet decided whether to renew, or cancel, the Memorandum of Understanding on China's Belt and Road Initiative that was signed by the previous Conte government in 2019 and has since been viewed by Chinese leaders as a major win since it split the Western allies.

Italy is the only G7 nation to have officially endorsed Xi Jinping's signature foreign policy project. The

Vows Closer Ties with Taiwan", in *Focus Taiwan*, 23 September 2023, <https://web.archive.org/web/20220924102204/https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202209230009>.

¹³ "Italian Group Visited for Chip Talks, Minister Says", in *Taipei Times*, 23 April 2023, <https://www.taipeitimes.com/News/taiwan/archives/2023/04/23/2003798458>.

Chinese President chose Italy for his first trip abroad in the year 2019, investing considerable political capital in attracting Italy into China's orbit. This was certainly facilitated by some Italian elites eager to foster commercial ties with Beijing – a move that disregarded the implications that a close embrace of China would have for Rome's Euro-Atlantic allies.

Beginning with the government led by Mario Draghi and accelerated with the victory of the conservative coalition in Italy's parliamentary election in September 2022, Rome's China policy is now more in line with that of the EU and NATO.

A decision on the Memorandum must be taken by the end of the year. According to the text of the accord, two options are on the table: a tacit renewal or a cancellation.¹⁴ The latter needs a political declaration from one of the two sides. China is lobbying hard in favour of a renewal of the MoU for five more years. Chinese top diplomat Wang Yi's visit to Italy in February 2023 was all about renewing the MoU.

Italy's Euro-Atlantic allies and Asian partners hope that Meloni would put an end to the Memorandum so as to realign Rome's China policy with that of the other G7 nations, none of which has officially endorsed Xi's project. While an

¹⁴ Italy and China, *Memorandum of Understanding Between the Government of the Italian Republic and the Government of the People's Republic of China on Cooperation within the Framework of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road Initiative*, 23 March 2019, https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/Memorandum_Italia-Cina_EN.pdf.

eventual renewal of the accord would embolden the Chinese leadership at home and abroad, cancelling the MoU would reduce dependency on Beijing, giving content to the notion of “de-risking” from China, as outlined by the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen in a recent speech.¹⁵

Italy's premier stated on various occasions her preference for a cancellation of the accord, a stance that has been interpreted by some observers of Italian politics as a way by Meloni to send a friendly message to the transatlantic allies so as to conceal the more troublesome aspects of her nationalist government.¹⁶ However, renegeing on Xi Jinping's key geo-economic initiative may expose Italian companies to commercial reprisals from Beijing, while diverting trade from Italy towards those EU partners such as France and Germany that have never officially endorsed China's connectivity project. In this vein, were the Meloni government to decide for a cancellation of the accord, it should open discussions with the other G7 nations on how to coordinate a unitary response to foreseeable Chinese economic coercion against Italy.

¹⁵ European Commission, *Speech by President von der Leyen on EU-China Relations to the Mercator Institute for China Studies and the European Policy Centre*, Brussels, 30 March 2023, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_23_2063.

¹⁶ Leo Goretti and Irene D'Antimo, “Italy between the Draghi and Meloni Governments”, in *Documenti IAI*, No. 23|03 (February 2023), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/16562>. See also: Gabriele Carrer, “Why 2023 Might Mark a Watershed in Italy's China Policy”, in *Decode39*, 8 February 2023, <https://decode39.com/?p=5761>.

Those in favour of renewing the MoU argue that the accord is more about symbol than substance and will likely remain a dead letter in those areas more sensitive to strategic considerations, including the Italian ports and other critical infrastructures. There is no doubt that renewing the Memorandum would boost Italy-China economic ties and facilitate Italian companies' access to the huge Chinese market. It would also facilitate Italy-China cooperation in other regions of the world, in particular in those countries in the Mediterranean region, Africa and the Middle East that have decided to fully embrace China's Belt and Road Initiative, regardless of Western criticism of the Chinese project.

Towards a value-driven foreign policy?

The decision on whether to renew, or cancel, the MoU on China's BRI has strategic implications that go beyond Italy-China relations. Putting an end to the MoU would certainly consolidate Italy's Western positioning and be consistent with growing defence-related cooperation with Japan and India and chip-related cooperation and investments with Taiwan. The gains in these markets could partially offset foreseeable losses in China.

Should Meloni decide to cancel the MoU on the BRI, the Italian premier will have to explain to a sizeable number of Italian companies that losses in the Chinese market – and missed opportunities coming from Chinese investments in Italy – will have to be factored in.

A full alignment of Italy's China policy with that of the other G7 nations would also send the signal of a change in priorities, moving away from past governments which tended to prioritise commercial ties with Beijing and shy away from security involvement in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Strait for fear of sending an unfriendly message to Beijing.

By advancing cooperative initiatives with like-minded partners in Asia and by practically supporting Taiwanese democracy, the Meloni government can show to the world that Italy's pivot to the Indo-Pacific is not only about interests, but also values. As the war in Ukraine shows, there is a price to pay for implementing a value-driven foreign policy.

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