


RELATIONAL DYNAMICS AND ITALY'S STRATEGIC INTEGRATION INTO THE INDO-PACIFIC

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The Indo-Pacific region is currently the primary arena in which global geopolitics is being played out. Italy has taken a more flexible approach, cultivating links and engaging in strategic activities without having an official strategy in place, despite the fact that several other governments have formed formal plans for the Indo-Pacific region. Initially, Italy's involvement in the Belt and Road Initiative was focused on establishing business linkages, particularly with China. In recent times, however, Rome has been increasing its involvement in multilateral cooperation, maritime security, and regional stability. This issue brief argues, through the application of a relational theory of international relations, that Italy's approach to the Indo-Pacific region is defined not by strict state-centric policies but rather by dynamic networks. Through participation in the Pacific Islands Forum and the formation of strategic partnerships with Vietnam and South Korea, Italy has successfully woven itself into a network of regional ties.

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Introduction

The Indo-Pacific has become a critical arena for global geopolitics, as the vast geographical expanse it encompasses with its maritime routes plays a key role in international trade and economic activity. This increased convergence of interests in the region has led to the drafting of a slew of Indo-Pacific Strategies from a panoply of countries. First among these countries have been Indo-Pacific states themselves, and the United States, with the

European Union and European states joining the fray later. Nations like France, the UK, Germany, and the EU have lead the way through formalized policies, while countries without formal strategies have nonetheless carved out significant roles in the Indo-Pacific.¹

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cultivated interests in the region as shaped by its role in global politics. Traditionally, Italy's stance toward the Indo-Pacific has been tied to economics, with a keen focus on China, which was seen as a significant trade multiplier, as evidenced by Rome signing the Belt and Road Initiative Memorandum of Understanding and multiple other commercial agreements.² However, Italy has, in recent years, expanded its involvement in the region quite substantially enmeshing itself into dynamics revolving around regional stability, maritime security, and multilateral collaboration.³

Against the backdrop of the increased competition between China and the United States and the growing fraying of the global international order into a multipolar or multiregional arrangement, Italy's actions can be seen reflecting not just state-centric strategies but are deeply rooted in relational dynamics within a multilateral framework. This issue brief adopts a relational theory of international relations, particularly that of processual relationalism (p/r) as developed by Nexon and Jackson to analyze Italy's Indo-Pacific engagement. p/r challenges the traditional focus on static, state-centric approaches in international relations. The theory argues that states and other entities do not exist independently but are constituted by the dynamic processes and

connections with others and their environments. The central tenet of p/r is that which is ontologically social and political is based on processes, or patterns of interaction and exchange. States, institutions, and identities are the results of these fluid and iterative exchanges rather than predetermined realities. Relationships do more than just connect existing actors; they are the players themselves, and as such, their identities and roles are inextricably linked to the networks in which they are involved.⁴

Configurations, which are structured patterns of relationships that provide interactions shape and coherence, are another idea introduced by p/r. These arrangements are flexible and change as the systems that support them do; they are not set in stone. Rather than concentrating on set hierarchies or static alliances, this perspective on international relations emphasizes how relationships develop, change, and end over time.

Another important aspect of p/r is its rejection of the hard distinction between the domestic and international realms, known as the inside/outside conundrum. p/r highlights the connection between the two domains, showing how actors' internal dynamics are impacted by external interactions and vice versa. This method emphasizes the importance of understanding the ongoing interaction and mutual blurring between internal politics and external influences.⁵

As a result, this theoretical perspective reframes Italy's Indo-Pacific actions as part of a complex and linked web of relationships that go beyond standard bilateral or hierarchical dynamics. Rather than perceiving Italy as a single actor imposing its will or reacting to external influences, relationalism emphasizes how Italy's interactions contribute to and receive meaning from the Indo-Pacific's complex network of alliances, conventions, and common objectives. This perspective allows for a more in-depth examination of Italy's strategic decisions and the ramifications for regional and global order.

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Italy's Approach to the Indo-Pacific

Italy's engagement with the Indo-Pacific has evolved not as a series of isolated actions but as part of a dynamic, ongoing process of relational integration. Starting in 2007, Italy commenced engaging the Indo-Pacific through political-diplomatic endeavors joining the Pacific Islands Forum (PIF) as a Dialogue Partner, participating actively in meetings and initiatives.⁶ This foundational step marked the initiation of processes that led Italy to intertwine itself into the mesh of interaction and collaboration of the Forum's 18 member states. This process far from being merely symbolic established new pathways for dialogue, cooperation, and exchange of resources and expertise aligning Italy to the region's priorities of sustainability and resilience. Hence, engaging in relational processes evolving to respond to shared challenges, Italy supported renewable energy projects in Tuvalu and Samoa aimed at reducing dependency on fossil fuels and enhance energy security.⁷ Similarly, initiatives to enhance early warning systems, community-based disaster preparedness, and to provide technical expertise in emergency response were established in collaboration with Fiji and Vanuatu.

Additionally, the processes of economic interaction between Italy and countries such as Fiji, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands saw the integration of regional economies into global markets. By importing fishery products, Italy did not just support the livelihoods of local fishing communities, it also established interdependent mutually beneficial relations that reinforced not only Rome's presence in the region but also the position of PIF members globally. Therefore, by joining the PIF and engaging with its member-states Italy forged an Indo-Pacific identity for itself, situating itself into a broader multilateral network as a constructive external partner.⁸

Continuing this push to a deeper enmeshing in the Indo-Pacific regional structure, Italy established a strategic partnership with Vietnam in 2013.

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Building upon and guided by its Indo-Pacific identity shaped around multilateralism and dialogue and collaboration with partners, Italy, recognized by Vietnam as a valuable partner, aimed at integrating itself into Vietnam's development trajectory. Additionally, Southeast Asia's growing geopolitical and economic importance prompted Italy to pursue engagements that would grant it access to more regional opportunities, such as connection with the ASEAN bloc. Furthermore, this partnership contributed to the co-construction and evolution of both Vietnam's and Italy's identities. Vietnam, by gaining access to European markets, technology and investments, became a node in Southeast Asia and a door into the ASEAN bloc and solidified its globalizing identity. Italy, on the other hand, reinforced its identity as a nation truly invested in multilateralism and as a proactive external partner in Asia, moving beyond its traditional geographical focus, namely Europe and the broader Mediterranean.⁹

The following years saw a reinforcement of these processes of iterative exchange, with Italy formalizing a strategic partnership with South Korea in 2018. Relations with South Korea budded thanks to growing interests in the Indo-Pacific and the establishment of broader networks between institutions and nations not geographically tied to the region itself. For instance, the knowledge-

sharing partnership established between Fincantieri and Daewoo Shipbuilding and Marine Engineering for naval technology development, and the stronger supply chains in the automotive and design sectors and advanced machinery established between South Korean and Italian manufacturers, exemplify how processes evolve over time to adapt to broader necessities and objectives in economic and security domains. In a similar fashion, Italy's Enel Green Power and South Korean renewable energy companies collaborated in furthering processes aimed at ensuring greater sustainability in the energy sector.¹⁰

A critical aspect of Italy's Indo-Pacific involvement has been its maritime security efforts, which can be seen as critical examples of processual engagements. Since 2008, Italy has been participating in Operation Atalanta, initiated under the European Union's Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP), evolving from combating piracy to addressing broader transnational challenges, including illegal fishing and weapons trafficking. Italy's consistent support of these iterative processes reinforced Italy's role as a reliable security actor in the Western Indian Ocean, while also contributing to shaping

the broader relational dynamics between the EU and Indo-Pacific partners, such as Japan, India, and South Korea.¹¹

The deployment of the frigate *Carabiniere* in 2017 and subsequent naval engagements, such as the *Morosini* patrol vessel tour in 2023 and the *Cavour* Carrier Strike Group mission in 2024, represent extensions of this maritime security process. Each deployment builds upon prior interactions, fostering interoperability and mutual trust with regional partners and allies while enmeshing Italy further into the Indo-Pacific's evolving security architecture, as one of the only three European states with sustained deployment in the region (the others being France and the United Kingdom). Similarly, the years 2019-2020 marked another milestone within Italy's involvement in processes contributing to the Indo-Pacific maritime security and regional stability. Among these, the Critical Maritime Routes in the Indian Ocean (CRIMARIO) initiative stands out as a clear example of Italy's iterative and adaptive approach to furthering the relational engagement necessary to address the region's evolving challenges. CRIMARIO focuses on enhancing maritime domain awareness and governance in the Indian Ocean region through capacity-building efforts and information sharing, which by extension contribute to the creation of a cohesive network of cooperation between European and Indo-Pacific partners.¹²

Operation AGENOR is another pivotal initiative which positions itself within the evolving processes contributing to regional stability, of which Italy has been a leading contributor. AGENOR, launched as part of the European-led Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASoH), operates at the western edge of the Indo-Pacific. Italy commanded AGENOR from July 2022 to January 2023, contributing two frigates and aircraft to this mission. Italy's leadership was not simply testimony of its operational capabilities, but also an act of yoking, wherein Rome deliberately enmeshed its considerable maritime expertise and power with

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shared regional and global concerns, such as freedom of navigation, and tensions mitigation along one of the most busy trade waterways.¹³

Between 2019 and 2020, Italy engaged in two major initiatives that institutionalized its integration into the multilateral frameworks of the Indo-Pacific. Embedding itself in the network of nations active in the Western Indian Ocean, Rome joined the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) as a Dialogue Partner focusing on initiatives that address challenges related to maritime security, sustainable development and economic cooperation.¹⁴ The second initiative marked the solidification of Italy's presence within the Southeast Asia regional network. In 2020, Rome, became a Development Partner of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). Maintaining a similar approach to the processes established previously within the region, Italian companies partnered with Vietnam, Indonesia, and Thailand to provide machinery and equipment for manufacturing and industrial modernization. Italy collaborated with the Philippines and Malaysia on renewable energy and climate adaptation programs, through solar and hydropower initiatives. Furthermore, Italian engineering firms, including Fincantieri and Salini Impregilo (now WeBuild), collaborated on port and railway developments in Indonesia and Thailand. Through these processes, Italy substantially embedded itself within both the Western Indian Ocean and ASEAN networks furthering the strengthening of institutional and states' regional identities while also influencing what would later become the official EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁵

Among the developments that demonstrate the adaptability of existing relational processes in response to changing contexts are Italy's recalibration of its China policy between 2019 and 2021 and the Italian Parliament petition to increase the country's focus on the Indo-Pacific. Firstly, in 2019, under the then Conte government Rome signed a memorandum of understanding on the Belt and

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Road Initiative with China, becoming the first G7 country to do so. The agreement itself was part of a broader ongoing process of engagement between Italy and China, which tied Italy to Beijing's growing processes and configurations aimed at enhancing its regional and global influence, yoking itself to infrastructure and trade networks of signatories of the BRI. In essence, the Memorandum was a project engagement wherein Italy sought to yoke itself to China's framework in order to create mutual dependencies that would bring economic benefit—Italy gained potential access to Chinese investments, while China secured a foothold in Europe. This linkage brought legitimacy to the BRI within the EU context; however, this interaction put Italy's positioning within the EU configuration under strain, as multiple EU and NATO countries voiced their concern about the implications of Italy signing the memorandum.¹⁶ However, the subsequent government, led by Prime Minister Draghi, quickly distanced itself from China's BRI and reinforced Italy's traditional foreign policy posture. This trajectory has been maintained under the current Meloni government, which decided not to renew Italy's participation in the BRI. Beyond reasons of political expediency, Italy's rapid recalibration is

an example of the blurring and fluid interplay of domestic and international dynamics and how Italy's identity is continuously co-construed through its interactions. In numbers, approximately 56 percent of Italy's exports go to EU countries, while trade with China constitutes a much smaller portion.¹⁷ This economic reality reinforced the importance of maintaining strong ties within Europe and the transatlantic alliance, rather than risking relational tensions by deepening ties with China.

This recalibration is also quite closely connected to the Italian parliament's motion, presented in March 2022, which asked for a greater focus on the Indo-Pacific, especially in the context of challenges pertaining to Taiwan and the South China Sea. The processual interplay between external dynamics and domestic political processes which brought Italy to tie itself quite closely to the Indo-Pacific region and its necessities is quite evident.¹⁸ On the one hand, by calling for a more explicit strategy, the parliament wished for Rome to strengthen its Indo-Pacific identity as a nation committed to regional stability efforts especially vis-à-vis concerns over strategic challenges in the South China Sea and Taiwan,

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which conversely deepen its traditional EU and transatlantic relational configurations. On the other, Italy's internal political discourse is not only directly informed by the aforementioned considerations, namely its extant relational configurations, active processes and projects with Indo-Pacific partners and the broader geopolitical landscape of the region, but also influences them. These steps are not to be understood as reactive actions due to external pressure but more as a natural and somehow necessary process of adaptation demanded by the configurations Italy has been embedded in, wherein Italy has not only maintained alignment with its traditional allies but has also re-asserted its co-construed role in the broader Indo-Pacific configuration.

Lastly, from 2023 onward, Italy's diplomatic and strategic engagements in the Indo-Pacific have accelerated. The relaunch of Italy's strategic partnership with the United Arab Emirates signified the renewal of a process focused on linking the Mediterranean and Indo-Pacific configurations. Similarly focused on fostering cross-regional processes that tie Italy's defense capabilities and expertise to regional priorities is the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP). The GCAP signed between the UK, Italy and Japan, to which India has been invited, aims to develop a sixth-generation fighter jet by 2035, thanks to the establishment of a joint venture involving Leonardo (Italy), BAE Systems (UK), and Japan Aircraft Industrial Enhancement Co. Ltd. (JAIEC). The enmeshing is exemplified through a multilateral framework of shared priorities, necessities and ambitions in the technological innovation and security fields. Concomitantly, Italy's participation in India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative, by leading its science and technology pillar, highlights another facet of Rome's interest in yoking processes and projects that, by forging mutual dependencies, contribute to the perpetuation of its identity as a reliable partner for sustainability and technological cooperation within the context of the Indo-Pacific region.¹⁹

Conclusion

Italy's interest in the Indo-Pacific, starting in 2007, has been not just strategic but relational. The initial decision reflected Italy's recognition of the Indo-Pacific as an increasingly and exponentially relevant fulcrum on the global stage, which in turn contributed to embedding Italy in an extant network where its contributions resulted in the co-construction and development of identities, mutual benefits and shared priorities.²⁰ As such, from a relational perspective, Italy's overtures to the Indo-Pacific and the members of its configurations, are not isolated events but part of a continuous process of adaptation and alignment to external and domestic priorities which end up blurring into each other the more these processes and projects are deepened. Rome's actions respond to and influence broader configurations of alliances and partnership that define the Indo-Pacific and its priorities.

From an early focus in sustainable development, disaster risk reduction and management and energy, Italy's engagements had to adapt to broader strategic concerns which saw the budding of collaborations in the defense domain with South Korea, India and Japan among others. Concomitantly and similarly, the initial focus on the Western Indo-Pacific, particularly the Western reaches of the Indian Ocean, through participation in processes such as Operation Atalanta evolved and adapted to encompass the broader Indo-Pacific, through the deployments presented in the chapter above.

As such, through all these efforts, Italy managed to reinforce and develop an adaptive identity of a multilateral actor open to be influenced and influence the dynamics derived from the Indo-Pacific internal regional structures and configurations. This interplay reflects also the blurring of traditional boundaries between internal and external dynamics

wherein Italy's domestic strengths are mobilized to meet and aid in mitigating external challenges, and vice versa. Hence, by extension, Italy's contributions are not just additive but transformative, shaping the relational configurations that define the Indo-Pacific's future.

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