

Converging Waters: Strategic Partnership in the Enlarged Mediterranean-Indo-Pacific

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In recent years, we have witnessed an increasingly frequent convergence between two seemingly distant regions: the Mediterranean and the Indo-Pacific. This convergence has been driven not only by trade and supply routes for raw materials and finished products but also by complex geopolitical factors.

In today's age of "unpeace",¹ where everything has the potential to be weaponised, trade routes naturally acquire geostrategic value, calling for multifaceted interactions and adding new dimensions to state-to-state relations. Historically, trade between Asia and Europe has always been there, but only in the last few years we have realised that it can be easily hampered, with consequences that reverberate in the depth of our economic and social fabric. This is when a number of "Indo-Pacific strategies" have started being elaborated in the West.

Following the example of some member states, the European Union issued its own strategic outline in 2021, acknowledging the relevance of the Indo-Pacific for its security and well-being. Two years afterwards, and in an international environment shaken by two appalling conflicts, Europe continues to be deeply dependent on the security of sea lines of communication through the Indian Ocean.

This is even more true for Italy, an export-oriented country placed at the centre of the historically turbulent region of the Mediterranean. As underlined by President Meloni in her address to Raisina Dialogue in Delhi, earlier this year,² Italy looks at the Indo-Pacific from a very specific angle: that of the enlarged Mediterranean. The enlarged Mediterranean concept goes beyond the traditional borders of "Mare Nostrum". Indeed, rather than a separate entity,

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the Enlarged Mediterranean forms a geostrategic unit with the Indian Ocean, through the Arab Sea, the strait of Bab el Mandeb, from the Red Sea to Suez. And Italy, with its geography as its destiny, sits in the very centre of the Mediterranean Sea and acts as a natural bridge towards the Indo-Pacific.

Since long our country has invested in the security of the chokepoints at the conjunction between the enlarged Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. This is why it is the second largest contributor to the naval missions EUNAVFOR Atalanta (in the Gulf of Aden) and European-Led Maritime Situation Awareness Mission EMASoH (in the Strait of Hormuz). In parallel, it has deepened its bilateral relations with many countries of the Indo-Pacific and partnered with the main regional international organisations.

The case of India is emblematic.

The strategic partnership between Italy and India, established during the meeting between Prime Minister Meloni and Prime Minister Modi in March, aims at fostering economic and commercial cooperation, connectivity and security as three mutually-reinforcing pillars.

Bilateral trade has surged from 9 billion Euros in 2019 to nearly 15 billion Euros in 2022. This growth is evident in the exchange of goods and services, with Italian machinery, automotive products, and luxury goods finding a growing market in India, while Indian products, like aluminium, steel, and iron, contribute to the supply chain for Italian manufacturing.

Looking ahead, three key drivers are expected to shape the bilateral commercial partnership:

1. Ongoing negotiations between the European Union and India regarding free trade, investment protection, and geographical indications agreements.
2. Further integration of supply chains with a focus on diversification in both industries and markets, considering the growth trends of India.
3. Collaboration between Italy and India in third-party markets, with a particular emphasis on Africa.

Infrastructure development, both physical and digital, is a priority for India, including in view of the deeper integration of its productive system in the global value chains that the country is pursuing. Italy can play a significant role in contributing to technological development and innovation in this context. In terms of digital connectivity, the Blue Raman submarine cable project, set to link Italy and India, is expected to be completed in the near future, offering enhanced digital connectivity.

Both with extensive coastlines, Italy and India play pivotal roles in maritime affairs. Their shared commitment to enhancing maritime connectivity forms a solid foundation for significant trade collaboration. Italy's world-class ports, including Genoa and Trieste, would complement India's main ports in Mumbai, Chennai, and Kolkata, becoming critical nodes for the exchange of goods and raw materials, further strengthening their economic ties.

The launch of the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) during the G20 summit in New Delhi opens up further perspectives for the future, as Italian and Indian ports are poised to become key terminals of this corridor.

IMEC has the potential to become a cornerstone of Europe's Indo-Pacific strategy, carrying a wider strategic significance beyond its economic implications. Italy and India have the interest and the capability for actively engaging in the corridor, collaborating on projects and initiatives aimed at promoting economic development and ensuring environmental sustainability in maritime transport. This collaboration was also discussed during the Global Maritime Summit held in Mumbai, with a focus on enhancing the efficiency and environmental impact of shipping.

But both trade and connectivity (and all the more ambitious projects like IMEC) thrive in a safe and stable international environment. This is why security is an indispensable part of the equation. Italy and India have translated this understanding in a renewed cooperation in the defence sector, recently embodied in the Agreement on Co-operation in

the Field of Defence, signed in October. The maritime dimension will be central in the relaunched cooperation, as the two peninsulas share similar concerns in terms of maritime surveillance, route security and countering underwater threats.

Today's fragmented international scenario requires a balanced approach to trade and connectivity, keeping in mind the lessons of our recent past. Italy is working to shape healthy trading relations from the enlarged Mediterranean towards the Indo-Pacific, benefitting all the actors involved and generating positive spill-overs on a larger scale. It is also actively engaged in cooperating with like-minded partners in order to contribute to global stability, peace and security. The strategic partnership with India, a leading actor of the region and one of the most promising economies at the global level, will remain a key driver in this direction.

Endnotes

- ¹ Mark Leonard, *The Age of Unpeace. How Connectivity Causes Conflict*, Penguin, 2021
- ² <https://www.governo.it/en/articolo/president-melonis-speech-raisina-dialogue-conference/21957>