

Italy-Japan Relations in the 21st Century: Like-Minded Countries Amidst Global Challenges

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The shifting strategic setting behind the recent Japan-Italian rapprochement

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This policy paper briefly reviews recent bilateral relations between Japan and Italy and goes on to propose a few new steps that the two should take over the next decade, in view of the rapid transformation of strategic landscape, derived from three capitals, Beijing, Moscow and Washington D.C.

The rapprochement between Japan and Italy

Relations between Japan and Italy has rarely been so spectacular as today. The Italian foreign ministry issued its own contribution to the European Indo-Pacific strategy, in January 2022. The two countries have been made strategic partners to each other since January 2023. They set out an action plan to boost bilateral cooperation, June 2024, while concluding an Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA), a little later, with an eye on Reciprocal Access Agreement (RAA), to soothe military cooperation. In parallel, the An Italian aircraft carrier went through the Indo-Pacific region to Japan, last August, with its frigates sailed to Japan one after another, while its air force exerted joint exercises – all in the spirits of the rule of law and the freedom of navigation. Together with the United Kingdom, these two signed the GCAP International Government Organisation treaty, with which to produce next generational fighter jets. These are on top of all the improvements of overall relations between the EU and Japan, inclusive of now fully operative EPA and SPA, since 2018 and 2024 respectively. I would be allowed to call these as Japan-Italian rapprochement.

I should qualify at this point the otherwise splendid amelioration of our ties. It is coincided with the successive G7 presidencies, led by the two prime ministers, Kishida and Meloni. Now it is over. We even don't know if G7 continues to operate, under the Trump presidency. Japan may not reciprocate the dispatch of Italian aircraft carrier/frigate ships with its vessels sent to the Mediterranean Sea, except a training fleet. On the other side the Italian zeal may have come largely from the ministry of defense or, more specifically, its navy. There has been no foreign ministerial meeting between the incumbents, as opposed to a few meetings of defense ministers. Nonetheless we should welcome the improved state of bilateral relations as it is. One could contrast these days with the approach by the Compté government, which culminated with the participation in the BRI scheme.

The shifting strategic landscape

We are in an extraordinary era. The Trump administration 2.0 floods us into chaos, with everyday surprises. Journalists, diplomats and IR experts are deprived of sleep. The most deplorable miseries go to the Palestine, Ukraine, and probably many more to come.

While we cannot ignore the eye-catching events these days, a longer-term look at the trans-

formation of the entire strategic setting is badly needed. I would here identify three sources of strategic transformation: Beijing, Moscow and Washington DC.

First on China. The tide in Europe has changed in August 2016, as to its approach to PRC, when the German company Kuka was bought by a Chinese company. It alerted the German and European elites about the sensitivities over the investment into basic infrastructure as well as strategically important industrial sectors. In a year since then, the European Commission under Juncker proposed the restrictions on investment, which was adopted another year later by the council of ministers, in 2018. The crackdown against the Uyghur people intensified since the bombing incident in 2014, while the fierce oppression to the democratic upsprings in Hong Kong started in 2019. With the COVID-19 and the disinformation exercises over it, China's reputation was seriously dented. The Sino-American confrontation served as the final push: Europe never agreed to the US entirely but realised the risks involved in the purely commercial approach to China, now aware of the nature of its regime as a systemic rival, not just an economic partner. It is no coincidence that the French, UK, EU, Dutch, German and Italian initiatives for Indo-Pacific strategies or vision were pronounced towards or since that time.

Second, the full-scale Russian aggression against Ukraine since 2022 shocked many, and revitalized the West, if for a short period of time.

At the same time, it created a peculiar dynamism, as far as our ties are concerned. Japan started to stress the integrity or inseparability of security between the East and the West. It was not without reasons. We are surrounded by three nuke-armed dictatorial neighbours, one of them increasingly militarily capable, and profoundly revisionistic and expansive. If we allow a country to change the status quo unilaterally and violently, it might well send a wrong signal to another. We cannot afford taking lightly what happened in Europe.

It is somewhat in the tradition of Japanese diplomacy. PM Yasuhiro Nakasone voiced against the re-deployment of SS20 in the Far East, diverted from the European front, at the Williamsburg G7 summit in 1983, he was in effect advocating for the East-West inseparability of security. It is in the same spirits that PM Kishida repeated the question: Is today's Ukraine tomorrow's East Asia? In 2022 and beyond.

In my view, if there is any general lesson derived from the Russian invasion of Ukraine, it would be like this: three factors, i.e. long-standing dissatisfaction with the status quo, the ability to change it and the deepening of dictatorship, if combined, could lead to such a reckless invasion.

Needless to say, from Beijing's perspective, Taiwan is merely an internal affair, and the 'status quo', which appears to be de facto independent, is seen as unacceptable. Furthermore, China's military build-up has been spectacular. Its military expenditure has increased by a factor of 40 over the past 30 years. The annual increase in military spending is faster than the rate of economic growth. Its military expenditure is about half that of all Asia and five times that of Japan. It has expanded qualitatively, from missiles (especially medium-range) to aircraft carriers, submarines and fifth-generation fighters.

In addition, since becoming General Secretary in 2012, Xi Jinping has concentrated power in his personal hands, and went on to mend the rule, entering into his third term in 2022. Some close watchers say, it is the birth of an emperor, not simply an extension of the terms. The top Stand-

ing Committee and Politburo members are now filled with Xi supporters. Difficulties in dealing with him became so visible to the European leadership, when Charles Michel, the then European Council president, and Ursula von der Leyen, the Commission president, had a video summit, and quarreled, with Xi in early April 2022.

Xi probably has a peculiar obsession with Taiwan. His duties as party secretary of Fújiàn covered Taiwan. He also appears to have a self-consciousness to rival or even surpass his predecessors like Máo Zédōng and Dèng Xiǎopíng, who achieved the feat of reunifying the country – Tibet and Hong Kong, respectively -- in the history of the Chinese Communist Party. It is hard to lower our guard in such circumstances.

Here, the shock coming from Moscow was made connected with the prior concerns with Beijing. Amid the revival of the West, Europe, I believe Italy too, realized the logic. It is my take that these formed the background against which the hitherto strategic communicative, if not purely rhetorical, exercises of the Indo-Pacific turned into a real political focus point: a number of European actors established their own strategies or visions or guidelines and dispatched vessels to the region. This is the strategic environment against which the Japan-Italian rapprochement has been made possible.

Third, however, the situation changes rapidly, as another shock wave derived from Washington D.C. destroys the foundation, day by day.

The Trump administration 2.0 adopts an anti-West, anti-NATO, anti-EU, anti-Ukraine stance, and anti-free-trade, to the detriment of the entire post-war political structure. When it reaches out to Moscow while distancing from, if not (yet) abandoning Kyiv, it is on the brink of betrayal, as is increasingly sensed in Berlin, Paris and London.

It remains to be seen how this turns out globally. When the Trump 2.0 blows the wind easternly, it may not as harsh as in the West. Many things are uncertain but it keeps adopting a hard approach towards China for the time being. As the new administration is busy with the middle east and Europe, East Asia is off the target for now. All these temporarily give a breathing space for the other side of Eurasia. It needs to be added hastily that there is a real risk of Trump the tripartist, inclined to strike deals with authoritarian counterparts, Xi and Putin.

Whatever it does to East Asia in the near future, the new administration already seriously damaged the notion that the security in the East and the West has been made inseparable. The rapidly shifting strategic setting has probably shaken the very foundation, on which the European actors, including Italy, are engaged with East Asia, via their respective Indo-Pacific strategies and visions.

What should be done?

In the face of the politico-military giant that lost mind, and with some reasonable assessment that roughly a half of the US electorate continues to behave like now, it is far from sure the rest of the west can manage the situation.

Yet, politics is an art of the possible. We cannot afford leaving the situation at the mercy of MAGA. Europe has already taken decision to increase its military expenditure massively, which is welcome. Japan had expanded its own expenditure to 150% as compared to three years ago, and

soon to double by 2027. As far as Japan-Italian relations is concerned, we could think of some concrete steps to take in this domain too, while there is no miraculous measure to make.

First, we ought to make use of the Trumpian orientations. Nothing can be sure about the current US administration, but it is for the moment maintaining the hard stance towards China, showing the continuous engagement in the Indo-Pacific.

According to a Agenzia Nova report (4 March 2025), the Italian foreign ministry's ambassador Andrea Romussi has an eye on AUKUS. Why not? Japan will take part in the second pillar of military related technological cooperation: big data, cyber, quantum technology, AI etc. As we are strategic partners to develop a joint fighter, we could bring Italy in, too, so as to sooth the transatlantic conflicts and to tangibly benefit from technological cooperation.

In parallel with it, second, we could establish our own 2+2 ministerial forum, involving both foreign and defense ministers on both sides. It would engage foreign ministry which looks a little hesitant so far, broaden our support basis.

Third and last, the Japan-Italian joint action program sets out an intellectual dialogue and networking amongst experts. We could start from stablishing a committee of sages, intellectuals, to explore the other promising terrains so as to further consolidate our already enhanced cooperation.

While Japan stands by Ukraine and Europe, it cannot move from the Indo-Pacific. Italy must be busy with its own preoccupations but cannot ignore the politico-economic centre of gravity shifting to that region. The strategic landscape has radically changed but some of these factors are constant. If we cannot escape from the persistent realities, we are obliged to cooperate to each other.

The past in the present: Italy-Japan relations through history

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While it may be far-fetched to trace the present back to the past in order to consider the current policy options of Italy and Japan, it cannot be denied that the history of the bilateral ties offers interesting insights into the current interaction between the two states. Decades of interaction have helped to build a solid bond of mutual trust between the two countries, based on shared values and interests. This paper analyses two key moments in the bilateral relationship in modern and contemporary times (namely, the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1866 and the reconfiguration of the bilateral ties in the aftermath of the Second World War), aiming to highlight the similarities in the way Italy and Japan have reacted to the constraints imposed by the international system and to consider the potential for future cooperation.

In the mid-Nineteenth century, when the Treaty of amity and commerce (1866) institutionalized the diplomatic relations between the two countries, Italy and Japan faced similar challenges. Firstly, they were both in the midst of crucial nation-building processes heavily affecting their future. In Italy, the decades-long struggle for independence of the Risorgimento culminated in the unification of the country (1861). In Japan, the Meiji Restoration (1868) ushered in a period of reforms that transformed the archipelago from a feudal country with an agrarian economy and a peripheral position in the international system into a modern state that could aspire to become a “great power”. The timing of the two modernizing projects made of Japan and Italy two “late-comers”, joining late the ranks of the states that had already begun the process of industrialization. Thus, not surprisingly, as Richard Samuels stressed, both countries’ agenda prioritized the chasing of security and prestige.¹ In an international environment dominated by imperialism, to ensure survival through military and economic strengthening was essential for both Japan and Italy. Defense buildups and economic development were understood as a crucial move to bridge the gap with the European great powers and enhance the reputation of both countries. In the long term, the establishment of international power took the form of an imperialistic drive at the expense of Africa and East Asia, respectively. In the second place, Italy and Japan were united by complementary commercial needs. Italy, for which sericulture was a fundamental economic activity, had been struggling since 1854 with pebrine, a devastating infection that had affected almost all the sericulture producing areas of the peninsula. Italian entrepreneurs became interested in the Japanese silkworm egg market, after the pebrine epidemic spread to the rest of Europe. For Japan, on the other hand, Italian demand was an important source of income: it is estimated that in the 1870s Italy came to absorb up to 80% of Japanese exports.²

1 R. J. Samuels, *Machiavelli's Children. Leaders and their Legacies in Italy and Japan*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003, pp. 21-96.

2 C. Zanier, *Semai: setaioli italiani in Giappone 1861-1880. Interpretare e comunicare senza tradurre*, Padova: CLUEP, 2006, p. 134.

A number of indicators confirm how positive the interaction between the two countries was and how different it was from that of the other European powers at this fundamental moment in Italy-Japan relations. The 1866 Treaty of amity and commerce, while including some of the provisions of the unequal treaties imposed on Japan since the opening of the country (e.g., the opening of the ports of Kanagawa, Hakodate, Nagasaki), was less asymmetrical. The Iwakura Mission (1871-1873), whose aim was to present the credentials of the new Japanese government and to gain first-hand knowledge of the Western political, economic and legal institutions, chose Italy as one of its destinations. The tour in the peninsula was a long and articulated one, visiting several Italian cities from 9th of May to 3rd of June 1873. Finally, the Italian Vettor Pisani was the first foreign ship to have the honor of being visited by Meiji Emperor in 1881, the same Emperor eternalized by the famous portraits of the painter and engraver Edoardo Chiossone (1833-1898), one of the several Italians invited in Japan as “experienced foreigners” (literally “hired foreigners”, *oyatoi gaikokujin*) during the Meiji period (1868-1912).³

At the Paris Peace Conference (1919-1920), Japan and Italy sat together at the winners’ table. Indeed, their position was different in many respects as the rejection of the racial clause proposed by the Japanese delegation would confirm, and yet they shared similar concerns vis-à-vis the other three (United States, United Kingdom, France) of the “Big five” powers who had a decisive say on the international settlement after the First World War. In 1920, the Rome-Tokyo air-raid, an extraordinary feat achieved by two Italian pilots, reaffirmed the close ties between the two countries. One year later, Italy was an important stage of Prince Hirohito’s tour in Europe (1921).⁴ Despite the different outcomes of the modernization and industrialization processes, the two states were following parallel paths once again. In the beginning of the twentieth century, Italy and Japan experienced for the first time the potential and the pitfalls of mass-politics and liberalism. In both countries, the electorate was expanded with the introduction of male universal suffrage, and parliamentary politics became a reality, albeit within well-defined limits. The peak of liberalism coincided with the age of Giolitti in Italy and “Taishō democracy” and “Shidehara diplomacy” in Japan. This period was soon to disappear, but it left an important institutional legacy that would positively contribute to the post-1945 democratic reconstruction.

Unfortunately, the two countries also ended up sharing the same nefarious path that led to the authoritarian turn and revisionism. The coup de grâce for liberal democracy was the March on Rome in Italy (1922) and the Manchurian Incident (1931) in Japan, which led to the final subordination of civilian power to military power and the establishment of an authoritarian regime. In both cases the move away from democratic institutions was accompanied by the repudiation of the principles of liberal internationalism. The perceived gap between what Japan and Italy deserved and the power and influence they had in the international system was the trigger for their parallel drive to revision the existing global order. With the decisive contribution of Germany, this destructive deal was enshrined in the Tripartite Agreement (1940). The fascination for fascism, and the ideological ties resulting from it, were an important part of the bilateral relationship during the “dark valley” period (1931-1945).⁵ It was in this period that the Italian Institute of culture in Tokyo was established (1941) and cultural exchanges intensified.

3 A. Tamburello, “L’apertura delle relazioni ufficiali”, in A. Tamburello (ed.), *Italia-Giappone: 450 anni*, Roma-Napoli: Istituto Italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente; Università degli Studi di Napoli “L’Orientale”, 2003, vol. 2, pp.85-7.

4 L. Beretta, *Hirohito in Italia: diari*, Moncalieri: Centro interuniversitario di ricerche sul viaggio in Italia, 2013.

5 R. Hoffmann, *The Fascist Effect. Japan and Italy. 1915-1952*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015.

1945 marked a new beginning for Japan and Italy, which once again faced similar challenges. For the two defeated countries, covered in rubble and blamed by the international community for the outbreak of the Second World War, the priority was to rebuild their economies and return to the international stage as credible players. In the world rigidly divided into blocks, this also meant guaranteeing the security of one's own territory, without jeopardizing the possibility of a rapid recovery of the economic system. Once again, the two countries made similar choices: by opting for alignment with the United States, they were able to maximize the advantages of their peculiar geographical location and ensure peace and prosperity for their populations. Situated at the edge of East Asia, very close to the USSR and the newly established Democratic People's Republic of North Korea (1948) and People's Republic of China (1949), Japan was a crucial element in the containment of Communism in the region. Italy, for its part, was strategic both for its central location in the Mediterranean Sea and its Eastern border, largely overlapping with the "iron curtain". A parallel process of redefinition of the national identity took place in both countries in the aftermath of the Second World War. The newly formed Italian Republic based its existence on the democratic values of anti-fascism, the Resistance and the repudiation of war as a means of resolving international disputes. Japan made democracy and pacifism, institutionalized in Article 9 of its post-war constitution (1947), the basis of its revival.

By the 1960s, Italy and Japan had achieved the strategic priorities identified in the aftermath of the Second World War: rebuild power and wealth in the challenging environment of the bipolarized international system. Both allies of the United States were in the midst of their respective economic miracles. The Olympic Games in Rome (1960) and Tokyo (1964), and the celebrations of the Italian national Jubilee (1961) and the Meiji Centennial (1968) became the showcases through which the two countries displayed their achievements to national and international audiences. In both jubilees, the official commemorative agenda proposed a self-congratulatory narrative linking the ideal starting point of modernization (Risorgimento and Meiji Restoration) to the arrival point, namely the impressive economic growth that the two countries were experiencing.⁶

Although there has been no shortage of occasional frictions, the relationship between the two states has been positive overall and fruitful during the Cold War era: political dialogue developed at the highest level and the volume of trade progressively increased. Initiatives in the cultural field intensified, thanks to the valuable activity of the Japanese Cultural Institute (inaugurated in Rome in 1962) and the reconstituted Italian Cultural Institute, reopened in Tokyo in 1959 after being destroyed by aerial bombings during the Second World War. A constant flow of scholarships and grants has allowed generations of scholars from the two countries to come into contact. This created a real transcontinental academic community that is a further and important source of mutual trust in the unstable international environment the two countries are surrounded by at the moment.

6 N. Lanna, "Nations in a Showcase: A Comparative Perspective on the Italian National Jubilee (1961) and the Meiji Centennial (1968)", *Asiatische Studien/Études Asiatiques*, n.75:2 (2021), pp. 235-254.

Japan and Italy: the potential of a growing defence partnership

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Despite the geographic distance, Japan and Italy are remarkably similar countries. Both are maritime nations, with highly diversified economies that make some of the world's top exporters. Both are poor in natural resources, depending on imports of raw goods that are processed into high-value goods destined for the export market. As such, both countries rely on the free and unhindered flow of seaborne trade through the oceans and the world's most important choke points. Both Italy and Japan are facing rather dire demographic trends, with very low fertility rates and high median ages, compounded by persistent economic stagnation.

Defence industrial cooperation

Until recently, there was little direct cooperation between the countries' defence establishments, especially at the industrial level. Indeed, most of Japan's international cooperation in this field focused on its U.S. ally⁷, with comparatively little involving any other partner nations. Meanwhile, throughout the Cold War Italy, with its defence industry, was a leading player in a number of intra-European defence cooperation programmes, including in the combat aircraft domain, like the Panavia Tornado and Eurofighter. Furthermore Italy, like Japan, has also been a major buyer of U.S.-made defence equipment, either as off-the-shelf acquisitions or components for national or indeed cooperative programmes.

When the Italian, Japanese, and UK governments jointly announced the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP) in December 2022, Tokyo and its defence technology and industrial base (DTIB) were officially projected into a level of international cooperation on a high-level defence programme they have never experienced before. Indeed⁸, among the three partner countries Japan stands out as the one with the least amount of experience on defence cooperative programmes such as GCAP, whereas Italy and the UK can benefit from decades of cooperation, including on the aforementioned Tornado and Eurofighter programmes. In fact, these programmes have served to bring the Italian and UK DTIBs closer together, developing a common culture of cooperation, reciprocal understanding, and deep ties between defence contractors, who have had to work closely to deliver products to the respective armed forces. On the other hand, Japan will have to start this process mostly from scratch: on a bilateral levels with each of the two partners, but also on a trilateral level.

7 Johnstone and Cook (2024) <https://www.csis.org/analysis/building-mutually-complementary-supply-chain-between-japan-and-united-states>

8 Calcagno and Ravazzolo (2025) <https://www.iai.it/en/pubblicazioni/c04/new-partnership-among-italy-japan-and-uk-global-combat-air-programme-gcap>

Today, Italy and the UK's defence industries are closer than ever because of GCAP and positive prior experiences, but it is arguable that GCAP as we know it today would not have happened without the longstanding relationship between London and Rome on matters of defence industrial cooperation. In this regard, GCAP has the potential to create an increasingly solid relationship between the Italian and Japanese DTIBs as well as the respective Ministries of Defence (MoDs). Some signs pointing to these trends are already evident. First of all, Rome and Tokyo have elevated their relationship to a full-fledged Strategic Partnership in January 2023. The recent 2024-2027 action plan is testament to how the two partners intend to develop even closer relations, including by:

- » Institutionalising a yearly “Japan-Italy Foreign Ministry Strategic Dialogue”
- » Holding a regular politico-military dialogue (in addition to the military-to-military dialogue already in place since 2012)
- » Exploring further avenues for bilateral cooperation and joint activities in the field of defence and security
- » Continued participation of Japan Air Self-Defence Force personnel at the International Flight Training School in Italy⁹

Operational cooperation

In recent years, Italian governments and the armed forces have put a renewed focus on the Enlarged Mediterranean (Mediterraneo Allargato) as the country's main area of strategic interest¹⁰. This geographic concept (see Figure 1) is still rather loosely defined, though it can be approximated to stretch from the Gulf of Guinea, across the Mediterranean and the Red Sea, to the north-western Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf, including the Black Sea and all littoral countries in between. This region is a crucial hub for global seaborne trade and also characterised by a high degree of instability as a result of the numerous unsettled revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region (i.e. Syria, Libya, and Yemen), the Israeli-Palestinian and Ukraine conflicts, and civil strife in Sudan and Eritrea, just to name a few of the most visible. Trade routes crossing the Mediterranean have also been affected by piracy in the Gulf of Guinea and, most notably, around the Horn of Africa. As a result, a large share of seaborne trade of consumer goods, raw materials or fossil fuels travelling between East Asia and Europe has to traverse some of the most volatile maritime regions, making the safeguarding of free and unhindered navigation through the North-Western Indian Ocean and the Red Sea a crucial enabler for world trade and, therefore, the global economy. The Houthi attacks on commercial shipping starting in late 2023 have been a stark reminder of how even a relatively unsophisticated military force can threaten freedom of navigation in a crucial choke point such as the Red Sea.

⁹ https://www.governo.it/sites/governo.it/files/Japan-Italy_Action_Plan_2024-2027_0.pdf

¹⁰ Zampieri and Ghermandi (2024) <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publication/rethinking-italys-enlarged-mediterranean-176932>

Figure 1 - The Enlarged Mediterranean (Source: ammiragliogiuseppedegiorgi.it)



The importance of the waters surrounding the Horn of Africa is further exemplified by the density of foreign military bases that have been built in Djibouti in the last decade. While French presence has been constant since the colonial period, U.S. troops only established a foothold following the September 11 attacks in 2001. Japan established its base in the country in 2011 in order to help bolster maritime security and contrast Somali-based piracy¹¹, followed by Italy in 2013, and China in 2017. For Japan, its base in the East African country was the first built overseas since the end of the Second World War, while for China it was its first ever outside of China. Such interest by the two greatest East Asian economic and military powers in this region, which from an Italian perspective overlaps with the eastern reaches of the Enlarged Mediterranean, demonstrates how crucial its security is considered to be at a global level.

From a Japanese perspective, distant as Djibouti might be from the country's mainland, commitment to this base – even at a time when piracy is not as salient a threat as it was in the previous decade – is clearly part of a strategy to enhance the country's footprint as a security provider without eliciting pacifist sensitivities at home. In fact, through the years the Japanese Maritime Self-Defence Force has taken part in numerous naval activities with Western partner navies and has built a strong relationship with the EU's permanent operation in the area, EUNAVFOR Atalanta.

While the U.S. and UK were carrying out their strikes as part of Poseidon Archer in January 2024, the Japanese¹² and Italian¹³ governments announced their support for the initiative but did not join it. At the same time, neither had joined operation Prosperity Guardian, a defensive effort aiming to assist commercial shipping transiting the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden. However, while

¹¹ Kamata (2023) <https://thediplomat.com/2023/04/why-does-japan-have-a-military-base-in-djibouti/>

¹² https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/release/pressite_000001_00094.html

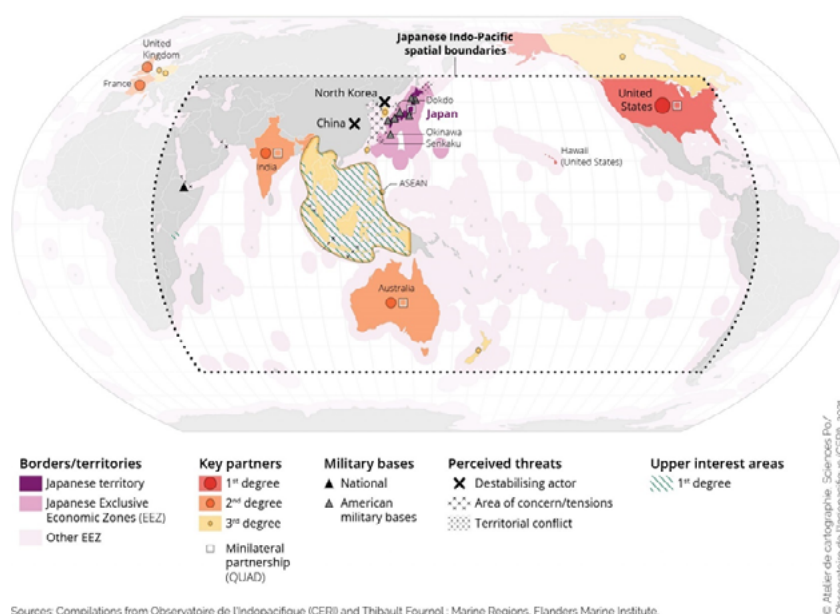
¹³ <https://www.governo.it/en/articolo/statement-palazzo-chigi-houthi-attacks-red-sea/24741>

Italy was working at the EU level to establish what became operation Aspides (of which it remains a leading contributor today even in the face of waning interest by other EU allies), Japan in the end opted to keep a more cautious role – even though participation to Prosperity Guardian was at least taken into consideration.¹⁴

While the Indo-Pacific as a geographic region has different interpretations, the Japanese approach to its boundaries is among the most expansive, stretching to the Red Sea on its western side (see Figure 2). By overlaying the Enlarged Mediterranean and this geographic representation of the Indo-Pacific it is clear that, from a maritime point of view, the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, the Persian Gulf and the north-western Indian Ocean represent a major overlap between the two concepts.

Figure 2 - The Japanese approach to the Indo-Pacific (source: SciencePo)

Indo-Pacific seen from Japan, 2021



This region has an outsized role in international shipping thanks to the presence of three critical choke points (the Suez Canal and the Bab-el-Mandeb and Hormuz straits) and the instability that surrounds them. As strategic competition between states is on the rise, and freedom of navigation is more under threat than at any point since the end of the Cold War, like-minded countries like Italy and Japan stand out as natural partners. At the same time, the Enlarged Mediterranean and the Indo-Pacific are becoming more of a continuum than two distinct theatres.

Against this backdrop, Italy has thus made considerable efforts to increase its military footprint in the Indo-Pacific in recent years, with a significant spike since the GCAP partnership was announced. Indeed, in 2024 the Italian Navy deployed a carrier strike group (composed of the ITS Cavour aircraft carrier and ITS Alpino, a frigate) as well as ITS Montecuccoli (an off-shore patrol vessel/light frigate), and ITS Amerigo Vespucci (training ship), to the Indo-Pacific, making port calls in Japan. Meanwhile, the Air Force staged one of its most complex operations since the Sec-

¹⁴ https://www.mofa.go.jp/press/kaiken/kaikenwe_000001_00016.html

ond World War as it took part in the Pitch Black (Australia) and Rising Sun (Japan) international exercises, deploying F-35 and Eurofighter aircraft together with a C-130J transport, three KC-767 tankers, and a Gulfstream E.550 Conformal Airborne Early Warning (CAEW)¹⁵. While Italian interest into the region started before Japan's involvement in what later became GCAP, the strategic significance of this programme has certainly contributed to pushing the MoD in Rome to deploy unprecedented resources to Japan. Along with France and the UK, Italy is one of only three European countries able to commit forces at this scale in both the air and sea domains, a fact that was not lost on Tokyo at a time when it seeks to diversify its defence partnerships beyond just the U.S. in an increasingly multi-polar world¹⁶.

Looking ahead

From a defence and security perspective, Japan and Italy are clearly heading into a period of close relations unprecedented in the last 80 years. GCAP is a significant catalyst, but it is developing under a set of favourable circumstances that will in all likelihood accelerate this process. Italy's defence establishment is becoming increasingly aware of how the Enlarged Mediterranean is overlapping with the Indo-Pacific in terms of security concerns, as demonstrated by its military deployments to the latter. Japan seems equally as aware of the overlap, though we are yet to see a comparable effort in terms of deployments to the Enlarged Mediterranean.

Given the longstanding internal constitutional and political constraints, whether Japan is ready to take a more active role in the safeguarding of freedom of navigation – for instance against the Houthi threat – remains an open question. Nevertheless, there seems to be room for more cooperation with the Italian armed forces in terms of training, exercises and interoperability. From an air force perspective this will be facilitated by GCAP and the resulting links, but will have to be sustained actively in other domains with regular

An especially relevant point common to both countries is that a program like GCAP is going to lead Rome and Tokyo, two of the leading F-35 customers and historically some of the closest U.S. allies, to reducing their dependence from US defence technology – at least in the field of air combat. The current U.S. administration's messaging to traditional allies has often been volatile and at times somewhat hostile, meaning that both Tokyo and Rome have a clear interest in maintaining a good relationship with Washington and limiting any negative fallout that might result from GCAP. This puts both countries on a remarkably similar footing.

Finally, Japan and Italy share a pacifist tradition, though to different degrees and with different nuances. While Italy has been a major exporter of military equipment for decades, Japan is only now approaching this market as a newcomer (Clark, 2025). Given the level of reciprocal trust that is being built in the GCAP context, there may be ample opportunities for the Japanese and Italian DTIBs to pitch products to the counterpart's MoDs. Indeed, against this backdrop Italy (and of course the UK) may be in an advantageous position compared with other European countries. In fact, there are signs that such a shift is already under way with exploratory talks regarding a maritime patrol aircraft based on a Japanese design and a jet trainer based on an Italian design.

15 Itamilradar (2024) Italian wings in flight to Japan <https://www.itamilradar.com/2024/08/05/italian-wings-in-flight-to-japan/>

16 Wilkes (2024) <https://dominotheory.com/italian-navy-makes-a-splash-in-japan/>

Italy's Strategic Engagement with Japan: the semiconductor sector

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In 2023, Italy and Japan upgraded their relationship to a strategic partnership, marking a significant milestone in their bilateral diplomacy and reaffirming Italy's commitment to the liberal international order alongside Japan. Japan's strategic relevance for Italy continues to grow, especially in an era of global political uncertainty. Furthermore, Japan is a crucial partner for Italy in the Indo-Pacific, a region that is becoming increasingly central to global economic and security affairs. Looking ahead, Japan's major investments in the semiconductor sector are positioning it as one of Asia's key centers of technological innovation. These strengths complement Italy's ambitions for digital transformation and industrial modernization, opening new opportunities for collaboration in high-tech industries.

Italy and Japan: a growing economic partnership

Italy and Japan maintain close coordination within the G7 and G20 frameworks on all priority issues of the international agenda. This collaboration encompasses areas such as international security, climate change, and regional cooperation in the Indo-Pacific, aligning with the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy and Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific Initiative. Moreover, in the last two years, economic relations between Italy and Japan have risen to new heights. Compared to 2022, Italy's exports to Japan in 2023 increased by 9.4% going up to 1687 billion yen, while Japan's exports to Italy rose by 22.1% for a total of 851.8 billion yen¹⁷.

In 2023, the Italian Minister of Economic Development and Made in Italy signed with the Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI) of Japan a joint document on economic, industrial and technological cooperation. The objective to strengthen economic relations between Italy and Japan through the promotion of collaborations between companies and startups in the fields of next-generation technologies - such as AI, semiconductors, and quantum technologies, as well as energy, infrastructure, and biotech, lies at the heart of the document.¹⁸ In addition, a public-private workshop was held to discuss cooperation on semiconductors as part of future Italy-Japan cooperation.¹⁹

Against this backdrop, Italy's deepening engagement with Japan in the semiconductor sector is closely aligned with the European Union's broader strategy to enhance technological cooperation with Tokyo. In 2023, the EU and Japan signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on

¹⁷ 'Trade of Goods and Services between EU member states and Japan 2023', EU-Japan Center for Industrial Cooperation, April 2024.

¹⁸ 'Joint Statement between the Minister of Economy, Trade, and Industry of Japan and the Minister of Enterprises and Made in Italy of the Italian Republic' <https://ambtokyo.esteri.it/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/20231212003-1.pdf>

¹⁹ METI Minister Nishimura Holds Meeting with H.E. Mr. Adolfo Urso, Minister of Enterprises and Made in Italy of the Italian Republic, METI, 23 December 2023, https://www.meti.go.jp/english/press/2023/1212_002.html

semiconductors to strengthen EU–Japan collaboration across several dimensions, including the establishment of an early warning mechanism for semiconductor supply chain disruptions, joint research and development initiatives, the promotion of advanced skills in the semiconductor industry, and greater transparency regarding state subsidies in the sector.

Further consolidating Italy’s partnership with Japan, on June 14, 2024, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni met with Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida on the sidelines of the G7 Summit. The meeting marked a significant step in bilateral relations with the adoption of an Action Plan that defines the strategic priorities for Italy–Japan cooperation over the 2024–2027 period. The plan outlines seven key areas of collaboration: defense, economy and trade, aerospace, renewable energy, culture, and the movement of people. Notably, economic and technological cooperation are once again positioned at the heart of this renewed strategic partnership.

Japan’s Role in the Semiconductor Sector

To understand Italy’s strategic engagement with Japan, one should look to recent national developments in the semiconductor sector. Japan’s positioning to revitalize the country’s semiconductor and artificial intelligence industries is aimed at regaining its chip leadership. Although Japan’s dominance in the global semiconductor market declined after the late 1980s—when it accounted for over 50% of global production—Japan remains a key player in the semiconductor supply chain and is actively implementing policies to boost domestic production and regain a leading position.

Japan’s current industrial strategy seems to echo the economic development approach of the postwar era, as described by the pioneer work of Chalmers Johnson in MITI and the Japanese Miracle.²⁰ Back then, Japan’s Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI) orchestrated industrial policy and fostered public-private collaboration to spur rapid technological advancement. Today’s semiconductor revival demonstrates a return to that model—government-led but market-oriented—with the state acting as a catalyst for strategic innovation and industrial competitiveness. A significant difference with the past is, however, the role played by politicians – rather than bureaucrats – in the restructuring process of Japan’s economic security strategy. Precisely, this awakening in Japanese politics recognises today the growing relevance of geopolitical and economic challenges – prime among which China’s assertiveness in the tech sector – shaping Japan’s economic statecraft²¹

To this extent, in June 2021 Japan’s METI, announced an ambitious plan for the semiconductor national industry envisioning four main strategies to boost Japan’s semiconductor capacity: 1) the formation of a partnership with the United States; 2) the development of a government-supported R&D center for advanced chip research, the Leading-edge Semiconductor Technology Center (LSTC); 3) the establishment of new chip manufacturing fabs to make legacy devices; 4) a commitment for government-led subsidies for domestic chip manufacturing.²² The flagship initiative of the government semiconductor’s program remains nonetheless the Rapidus Corporation, founded in 2022 as a consortium of eight Japanese hi-tech giants—Sony, Toyota, NEC, NTT,

20 Chalmers Johnson, (1982), *MITI and the Japanese Miracle. The Growth of Industrial Policy, 1925-1975*. Stanford University Press.

21 Akira Igata & Brad Glosserman, (2021), ‘Japan’s New Economic Statecraft’, *The Washington Quarterly*, 44:3, 25-42.

22 Sujai Shivakumar, Charles Wessner, and Thomas Howell, ‘Japan seeks to revitalize its semiconductor industry’, CSIS Report, August 2023.

SoftBank, Kioxia, Denso, and Mitsubishi UFJ. With government support exceeding ¥330 billion (approximately \$2.5 billion), Rapidus aims to produce 2-nanometer next-generation logic semiconductors, in collaboration with IBM and supported by academic institutions. As stated by the Public Relations Office of the Government of Japan, Japan is currently pursuing a ‘game-changing’ technology and ecosystem for semiconductors to achieve mass production by increasing collaboration with overseas partners and by relying on speed and customization through technology and production²³ In February 2025 Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba’s Cabinet approved a bill designed to allow the government to invest in Rapidus. And if the bill passes Parliament, the government will be authorized to issue public bonds to secure the financial resources necessary to support measures aimed at ensuring stable production of cutting-edge semiconductors at Rapidus through March 2031.²⁴

The bill follows other initiatives introduced by the Japanese government to deal with broader geopolitical tensions and supply chain vulnerabilities. Already in May 2022 Japan had approved the Economic Security Promotion Act (ESPA) which established four main pillars guiding Japan’s strategy in economic security: a stable framework for ensuring supply of key products; non-disclosure of patents; government-founded R&D projects to strengthen critical technologies and pre-screening high-risk equipment to secure ‘core’ national infrastructures (electricity, gas, oil, telecom, etc.).²⁵

Japan’s policy in the semiconductor industry reflects a broader shift toward techno-nationalism and industrial resilience. With continued dominance in semiconductor materials and tools, Japan aims to cement its role in the global chip ecosystem. Tokyo’s economic security agenda and sudden race into technological advancement is however, caused by a mix of different factors. First and foremost, China’s tech advancements throughout ad hoc strategies and policies such as Made in China 2025, the New Generation AI Development Plan or China’s strategic approach to the metaverse, as well as Beijing’s subsidies to national champions in the fintech sector. Likewise, the recognition that technological competition forms part of a larger but nearly impossible challenge to overcome: the US – China rivalry over advanced technology. Working closely with like-minded partners and allies, the United States, and more recently, the European Union and its member states, rests therefore, a key priority for Japan to ensure its image as a reliable partner in Asia and beyond.

Looking ahead: Italy-Japan cooperation in the semiconductor industry

As global technological competition intensifies, semiconductors have become a strategic asset at the core of states’ national interest. In this context, Italy and Japan are both well positioned to advance a mutually beneficial partnership in the semiconductor sector—one that not only supports Italy’s and Japan’s national economic priorities but also reinforces efforts to deal with growing uncertainties at the international level.

Down the road, both countries face similar challenges: reducing dependency on vulnerable supply chains, responding to the growing pressure of U.S.–China technological decoupling, and building

23 ‘Japan’s Pursuit of a Game-Changing Technology and Ecosystem for Semiconductors’, The Government of Japan, 1 March 2024.

24 ‘Cabinet approves bill to fund Rapidus semiconductor production’, *The Japan Times*, 7 February 2025.

25 See for instance ‘Act on the Promotion of Ensuring National Security through Integrated Implementation of Economic Measures’, Japanese Law Translation, <https://www.japaneselawtranslation.go.jp/en/laws/view/4523/en>

autonomous capacity in areas critical to the digital transition. Japan's state-led yet market-driven strategy—anchored in strong industrial policy and investment in innovation ecosystems—offers a valuable point of reference for Italy. Meanwhile, Italy's strategic interest in 'reindustrializing' key sectors, boosting digital sovereignty, and attracting high-tech investment provides ground for deepening the bilateral cooperation.

A compelling model for such collaboration already exists with the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP)—a trilateral partnership between Italy, Japan, and the United Kingdom for the co-development of next-generation air defense technologies. GCAP has demonstrated how countries with complementary (military) capabilities can join forces on highly complex, security-relevant technologies through coordinated investment, knowledge-sharing, and joint production.²⁶ The trust and coordination established in GCAP could therefore provide a solid precedent for replicating similar frameworks in the technological field.

To what it concerns Japan, one of the most significant examples of trilateral cooperation in the semiconductor sector is what former Japanese Minister of Economy, Trade and Industry Nishimura referred to as the 'semiconductor iron triangle' between Japan, Taiwan, and the United States.²⁷ But given that the most significant geoeconomic and geopolitical risks identified by Japanese firms— a potential escalation of tensions over Taiwan (64.3%), tighter trade regulations imposed by China (58.2%), and increased U.S. restrictions on China (57.3%)—are all concentrated in the Asian region, proactive coordination beyond Asia and especially with like-minded partners in Europe remain essential.²⁸ Applying a GCAP-style model to the semiconductor sector could also unlock new opportunities for joint research and industrial collaboration across regions. For instance, the establishment of bilateral R&D centers, technology incubators, or shared innovation hubs between Italy and Japan could strengthen both countries' positions in the global chip value chain, at least, enhancing opportunities for like-mindedness in technological innovation. A distinctive element of the Italian semiconductor ecosystem lies indeed in the research phase, which benefits from the presence of several leading 'centers of knowledge' in microelectronics, developed through university-driven efforts and strong partnerships with industry.²⁹

Italy, for its part, brings to the table significant expertise in sectors such as microelectronics, automation, photonics, etc. In addition, Italy stands out as one of Europe's leading countries in terms of the number of enterprises specialised in electronic components and boards according to Eurostat data released in 2022, reflecting its pivotal role in shaping the continent's technological future.³⁰ Strengthening public-private cooperation and encouraging Italian SMEs and startups to collaborate with Japanese counterparts could create innovation clusters rooted in both countries' industrial ecosystems. Lastly, Italy's integration into the EU Chips Act provides a unique platform for scaling such bilateral efforts at the European level, ensuring alignment with broader EU strategic autonomy objectives.

26 Elio Calcagno and Gaia Ravazzolo, (2025), 'From Tempest to GCAP, from bilateral relations to a trilateral partnership', in *The New Partnership among Italy, Japan and the UK on the Global Combat Air Program (GCAP)* in Alessandro Marrone (eds.), Istituto Affari Internazionali.

27 'Interview/ Japan-Taiwan-U.S. forming 'semiconductor iron triangle': Ex-Japan minister', CNA, 6 May 2025, <https://focustaiwan.tw/politics/202505060007>

28 Shiro Armstrong, Mireya Solís and Shujiro Urata, (2025), *Economic Security and New Industrial Policy*. *Asian Economic Policy Review*, <https://doi.org/10.1111/aepr.12502>

29 Maria Rita Pierleoni, (2023), 'L'industria globale dei semiconduttori e il ruolo dell'Italia', Note Tematiche, Ministero dell'Economia e delle Finanze, Dipartimento del Tesoro, pp.1-56.

30 'Microelectronics & Semiconductors', The National Unit for Investment Attraction, <https://www.investitaly.gov.it/en/sectors/microelectronics-semiconductors>

Finally, one should not underestimate the normative dimension of the Italy–Japan partnership, as both countries have a stake in shaping a global semiconductor order rooted in fair competition and innovation. As such, this bilateral cooperation not only serves industrial objectives but also contributes to the strategic alignment of this like-minded partnership, including through the G7 and EU–Japan frameworks.

The US Japan alliance and the second Trump Administration.

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The Trump's foreign and security strategy has contributed to erode the credibility of the US commitment toward the Liberal International Order and its strategic and normative pillars. He has pressured for burden sharing, imposed sanctions and signalled a disdain for the security interests of allies and partners. Normatively, it has shown a tendency to align with autocratic powers, while accepting to sacrifice the interests of other democracies, in the name of an alleged right of great powers to a sphere of influence.

Japan, as articulated below, is likely to be spared from the worst effect of this approach. Moreover, Tokyo does not consider any radical change in its security approach feasible. It is therefore likely to continue its strategy based on the three pillars of consolidation of the alliance, expansion of its own resources and security role, expansion of minilateral partnerships. This will entail an effort to replicate the success of late Prime Minister Abe in creating a favourable relationship with the US President during Trump's first term. However, despite the likely resilience of the alliance to the new "Trump shock", the decline of the US global and regional influence, the acceleration of great power competition and the destabilization of the Liberal International Order, as well as the other US led alliances constitute serious elements of concern for Japan.

Trump and the international order.

The return of Donald Trump at the White House had a radical impact on US foreign policy. While many commentators and analysts tend to define President Trump as "erratic and un-predictable", the main tenets of his approach to foreign policy have proved to be recognizable and relatively constant.

The first element of continuity is what Walter Russell Mead has defined as "Jacksonianism".³¹ The main element of this approach is the deep disdain for the liberal progressive elite, presented in antithesis to the American "common people". Domestically this approach targets policies aimed at fostering inclusion and diversity, in terms of foreign policies this leads to radical re-interpretation of what the Liberal International Order and the American role within it.

For "Wilsonian" administrations like Obama or Biden working to consolidate the Liberal International order was both in the best interest of the United States, conducive of global stability as well as coherent with a moral commitment to promote democracy and liberal values. For the Trump administration the Liberal International Order (LIO) is the intellectual and political product of progressive, "woke" elites, who work (and spend taxpayers' money) to change the world according to their values, while overlooking the interests of the American "common man". For this reason, the Trump administration, has targeted multilateral organizations to US institutions working in the realm of democracy promotion or international development. Jacksonian nativism is also

31 Walter Russell Mead, "The Jacksonian revolt: American populism and the liberal order". *Foreign Affairs*, 96 (2), 2017, p. 2-7.

associated with Trump's approach to economic policies, who focuses on protectionism, tariffs and aversion towards multilateral free trade agreements.

The second key element is "amoral transactionalism": the idea that all U.S. commitments are negotiable in pursuit of short-term economic or political gains. This means that U.S. commitments in the context of alliances such as NATO or the U.S.-Japan alliance are not considered certain or essential for the consolidation of a U.S.-led liberal order and global stability. On the contrary, U.S. commitment is viewed as contingent on short-term gains. This approach led the Trump administration to put more pressure on allies than on adversaries to quickly resolve complex issues such as North Korea's nuclear program or Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

A third element is Trump's admiration for autocratic leaders, from Vladimir Putin, Viktor Orban, Mohammed Bin Salman and Kim Jong-un. On the one hand, this leads to considering their preferences and their interests as entirely legitimate, despite often being contrary to the most basic norms of the current international order, as non-aggression, democratic self-determination and respect of human rights. On the other hand, this leads to a tendency to overlook the interests and the principles promoted by democratic allies and partners.

The most relevant outcome of this approach is probably the attempts to negotiate a peace agreement regarding Russia's war against Ukraine, in which the Trump administration has so far made clear that it does not consider Kyiv's interests as relevant, it has displayed a tendency to align with the Kremlin's policy positions, it has excluded Europe from the negotiations and it has prioritized the need to achieve a quick rather than the long term stability of the region.

Trump's new National Security Team.

The crucial difference with the 2017-21 period seems to be related to the degree of the control that the President and its closer advisors exercise on foreign policy as well as on the broader narrative regarding the relationship between the United States and the rest of the world.

The first Trump administration was characterized by the presence of the so called "adults in the room", experienced officials broadly belonging to a conservative position, but not necessarily strictly associated with a Trumpian view of the world. Examples were Secretary of Defence James Mattis, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo or National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster. This moderated the most radical instincts of the President. Their influence also reduced the "narrative coherence" of the administration, who could simultaneously promote a strongly Trumpian and nativist approach on trade or migrations, while at the same time adopting much more conventional approaches on alliance management and security policies, especially in the Indo-Pacific region.³²

The second Trump Administration is largely staffed by loyalists, officials who are much more strongly aligned with the Trumpian ideological approach as Secretary of Defence Pete Hegseth, the National Security Advisor Mike Waltz, or the Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard. They are likely to promote a much more coherent and much more radical interpretation of "Trumpism" in foreign affairs.

32 Fabrizio Coticchia, Matteo Dian, and Francesco Moro. *Reluctant Remilitarisation: The Transformation of Defence Policy and Armed Forces in Germany, Italy and Japan*. Edinburgh University Press, 2023.

Japan: still the exception?

The debate on Trump 2.0 in Japan does not have the same pessimistic tones that are emerging in Europe, where many key leaders have started to openly argue in favour of “strategic autonomy”.

This can be explained by many factors. Firstly, the previous Japanese experience with Trump was much more positive if compared to other US allies, largely due to the ability of Prime Minister Abe and his team to establish a close tie with the President. This ultimately led to the spare the Japan from the treatment reserved to other allies, characterized by uncertain commitment, bitter disputes over burden sharing and host nation support funding, and imposition of tariffs. The Japanese influence was so significant that the Trump administration adopted the “Free and Open Indo-Pacific”, a product of the Japanese strategic thought, as a key concept to formulate its approach to the region.

Even during the Abe era, however, Japan could not be spared by some of the effects of the Trumpian approach, as the sudden and uncoordinated change of policy towards North Korea in 2018, with negotiations in which the Japanese interests were not necessarily taken into consideration, or the withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

The second decisive factor in shaping Japan’s perception is the awareness of the indispensability of the US power and commitment to face the threat posed by China. The continuing expansion of the PLA’s budget and capabilities, coupled with aggressive intentions displayed towards Taiwan and in the South China Sea have led Tokyo to substantially dismiss any possibility to consider any degree of “strategic autonomy”.

Finally, the Trump administration has made clear that it considers China as the key challenge to US primacy. This has led some of the most authoritative voices in the Administration, as Elbridge Colby, the Under Secretary of Defence for Policy, to advocate for a “Strategy of Denial” marked by a clear prioritization of the US defence policies towards the competition with China.³³ On the one hand this is a long-term process started with Obama’s Pivot to Asia, previous administration did not promote a dramatic withdrawal from the European theatre and the scaling back of the US commitment to other alliances and partnerships. While this approach appears deeply troubling for NATO members, but also for South Korea, it recognizes Japan’s role and centrality and the necessity to strengthen the US-Japan alliance.

Japanese security policies and Trump 2.0.

Given these premises, the Japanese security strategy continues to rely on the three fundamental axis that characterized the Abe era: the consolidation of the alliance; the expansion of the Japanese budget and the functional role of the Japanese Self Defence Forces (JSDF); the deepening of minilateral forms of cooperation with likeminded partners.

On the first pillar, the main initiative is to continue working toward the creation of a joint U.S.-Japan headquarters, with the aim of strengthening coordination, command, and control. On the second pillar, the JSDF has continued to strengthen its capabilities and regional role along the

33 Colby, E. A. (2021). *The strategy of denial: American defense in an age of great power conflict*. Yale University Press.

lines defined in late 2022 by the National Security Strategy and the National Defence Strategy, which include, among other objectives, reaching 2% of GDP in defence spending by 2027, acquiring counter-strike capabilities, and increasing the capacity for rapid deployment in case of contingencies involving Japan's remote islands. On the third pillar, Tokyo continues to invest in minilateral initiatives, including the Quad, AUKUS, and bilateral relations with Australia and ASEAN members such as the Philippines and Singapore, as well as European states such as the United Kingdom, Italy, and France.

This reality makes the management of the relationship between Ishiba and Trump is central for Japan's security policies in the next years. Even before Trump, Ishiba argued in favour of a more equal US-Japan alliance, which he compared to the US-UK special relationship, somehow anticipating the requests of burden sharing of the new Administration.³⁴

The first bilateral meeting, held at the White House on the 7th February, can be considered a success, since the two leaders reconfirmed their commitment their vision for a Free and Open Indo Pacific and announced investment in the US by Nippon Steel, which were halted by the Biden administration.

This has not prevented the President to complain in the following weeks about the uneven and unbalanced relationship with Japan. This has prompted a polite but firm answer by Prime Minister Ishiba and Chief Cabinet Secretary Hayashi, who underlined the value of access to bases in Japan but also the new and growing Japanese role in jointly promoting security and deterrence. Moreover, Hayashi has responded to requests to reach 3% of GDP in military expenditure, that is up to the Japanese people and their democratically elected representatives to decide on defence expenditures.³⁵

A solid alliance in a turbulent world?

While the US-Japan alliance is likely to remain solid, Japan's policy makers have many reasons for concern, associated to the decline of the US influence and credibility in the region as well as the broader unwillingness to preserve the core pillars of the LIO.

Threats against Canada and Greenland reflect a concerning disregard for territorial integrity and the rule of law, coupled with a tendency to legitimize great power control over regional spheres of influence—an approach likely welcomed in Moscow and Beijing.

The ambiguity emerging from the White House on key regional security issues, from the Korean peninsula to Taiwan is also deeply troubling for Tokyo.

In the Korean peninsula, Trump might recognize the nuclear weapons status of North Korea, without any significant concession by Pyongyang, while at the same time undermining the al-

34 Shigeru Ishiba on Japan's New Security Era: The Future of Japan's Foreign Policy. Hudson Institute. Washington DC, 25 September 2025 <https://www.hudson.org/politics-government/shigeru-ishiba-japans-new-security-era-future-japans-foreign-policy>

35 NHK World, Trump nominee: Japan should spend at least 3% of GDP on defense. 5 March 2025 https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/20250305_37/

liance with Seoul.³⁶ This would accelerate the already possible process of proliferation in South Korea. In turn it would damage the bilateral relations between Seoul and Tokyo, adding to the instability following Yoon's attempt to impose martial law and the following period of institutional stalemate.

On Taiwan, the Trump administration has emphasized both the need for Taipei to increase the burden sharing and it has sought extract some short-term advantage, asking TSMC and other companies to move their manufacturing in the US. Furthermore, the lack of emphasis on the solidarity between democracies has deprived President Lai Ching-te of one of the most important factors of legitimacy in its quest to preserve Taipei autonomy and self-determination.

Overall, even if the US-Japan alliance might emerge as relatively unscathed from the second Trump era, the decline of US influence, the erosion of the US-led liberal international order, Trump's tendency to bully allies and align with autocratic powers are sources of serious concern for Japan.

36 Secretary of Defence Pete Hegseth has called North Korea "a nuclear state" in January 2025. The President has repeatedly defined Pyongyang "a very powerful nuclear power". Alannah Hill, Shreyas Reddy Trump calls North Korea a 'nuclear power,' hours after taking oath of office. NK News January 21, 2025 <https://www.nknews.org/2025/01/trump-calls-north-korea-a-nuclear-power-hours-after-taking-oath-of-office/>

The EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy and Implications for Japan-Italy Relations

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The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific (EUSIP), issued in October 2021, represents the Union's main comprehensive political framework for advancing cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.³⁷ Spanning across seven priority areas, including trade, security and defence, green transition, and connectivity, it outlines the key objectives and serves as guiding terms of reference for Brussels' engagement in the region. A consensus document, it reflects the growing interest of the twenty-seven Member States. While obviously not all Member States share the same level of aspirations and capacities, the broad scope of the Strategy allows individual European countries to use it as an anchor for their own national strategies, tailor it to their specific needs and interests, and focus on whatever preferred partners and areas they wish.

Italy's growing footprint in the Indo-Pacific and recent strengthening of its bilateral relations with Japan is a good illustration of the symbiotic nature of the 'Team Europe' approach to the region. Although not among the initial actors behind the strategy, Rome has embarked on its own quiet pivot driven by national economic and security considerations, achieving remarkable progress notably in the field of security and defence cooperation.³⁸ Among others, the dispatch of its navy ships, as well as joint defence industrial initiatives such as the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP), attest of the great potential Italy can play in fulfilling Europe's ambitions and strengthening security ties with like-minded Indo-Pacific partners. As much as the EU serves as a multiplier of national interests in the field of trade and economic security, Member States are indispensable to the implementation and operationalization of its security agenda.

The purpose of the EU's Indo-Pacific Strategy

The EU's tilt towards the Indo-Pacific is rooted in a recognition of the growing strategic importance of the megaregion, both in terms of its economy, technology, and demography, but also as a centerstage of the shifting global balance of power. The first phase of Europe's awakening can be roughly traced back to 2016, a year marked by multiple groundbreaking developments including the arrival of the US President Donald J. Trump to power, or the Brexit referendum. It is also in 2016 that the EU became more aware of the 'China challenge', with scandals over the implementation of the 5G network in Europe and suspicions of espionage practices by major Chinese state-owned technology providers among other. The formulation of a more skeptical position vis-à-vis Beijing in the EU's 'Strategic Outlook' in 2019, describing China as a 'diplomatic partner, economic

37 European Commission, *The EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, September 2021, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/jointcommunication_2021_24_1_en.pdf

38 Abbondanza, Gabriele, "Italy's quiet pivot to the Indo-Pacific: Towards an Italian Indo-Pacific strategy", *International Political Science Review*, Vol 45, No 5, 2024

competitor, and systemic rival’, marks a paradigm change in Brussels’ approach to Asia.³⁹ As China becoming less trusted, the attention shifts towards strengthening cooperation with those who can be trusted, such as Japan, the Republic of Korea (ROK), or Australia.

The need to position itself as a player, rather than merely a playground, in the mounting US- China strategic rivalry is a lasting challenge for Europe. To achieve that, the Strategy tries to promote a ‘third way’, by emphasizing the importance of multilateral cooperation, prosperity and inclusive growth, but also practical engagement in connectivity, and digital transition, and good governance, much to the liking of most small and middle-sized countries in the Indo-Pacific, which have been struggling with the same strategic dilemma.⁴⁰ At the same time, it doubles down on deepening bilateral ties with ‘like-minded’ countries, with Japan, the ROK, but also India, at the forefront. The impressive upgrade of EU-Japan ties since the formulation of the Strategic Partnership in 2019 stands out in this context, sometimes referred to as the ‘golden era’ in the bilateral relationship.⁴¹ Indeed, the EU- Japan Economic Partnership alone creates de facto one of the largest free trade zones in the world, amounting to 35% of global GDP. It also provides much-needed avenues to discussing critical topics such as economic security and supply chain resilience. Various subsequent thematic agreements promoting cooperation in quality infrastructure and sustainable connectivity, green transition, or the digital domain kept adding substance to the evolving partnership. The conclusion of the Security and Defence Partnership in November 2024 represents the last and most strategically significant political milestone.⁴²

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was a true watershed moment in the EU’s engagement in the Indo-Pacific, coining down the now-mainstream recognition of the interconnect-edness between the Euro-Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific security.⁴³ Strategic alignment between Moscow and Beijing in that context accelerated the need to strengthen security cooperation among US allies in both regions, be it at the bilateral levels, with the EU, or within the NATO framework, adding a cross-regional dimension to the expanding ‘lattice-like’ security architecture in the Indo-Pacific. Finally, the return of President Donald Trump to the White House in 2025 and the uncertainty over the US security guarantees opens a new chapter – and new opportunities – for the EU and its regional partners, especially Japan.⁴⁴ Strengthening security and defence cooperation is an utmost priority, with emphasis on boosting mutual defence industrial bases and technological capacities, innovation capital, and economic security, as key prerequisites to maintaining their competitiveness and strategic leverage.

39 European Commission, *EU-China – A strategic outlook*, March 2019, <https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2019-03/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf>

40 Borrell, Josep, *What the EU can do in and with the Indo-Pacific*, Groupe d’Etudes Geopolitiques, June 2021, <https://geopolitique.eu/en/2021/06/22/what-the-eu-can-do-in-and-with-the-indo-pacific/>

41 De Ruyt, Jean, “The golden era of EU-Japan relations dawns”, *Politico*, February 2023, <https://www.politico.eu/article/european-union-indo-pacific-the-golden-era-of-eu-japan-relations-dawns/>

42 European External Action Service, *Security and Defence Partnership between the European Union and Japan*, November 2024, <https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2024/EU-Japan%20Security%20and%20Defence%20Partnership.pdf>

43 Simon, Luis, “Bridging US-led Alliances in the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific: an Inter-theatre Perspective”, CSIS Briefs, May 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/bridging-us-led-alliances-euro-atlantic-and-indo-pacific-inter-theater-perspective>

44 Pejsova, Eva, “Bound by Uncertainty: What Future for EU- Japan Security Cooperation?”, CSDS Policy Brief, November 2024, <https://csds.vub.be/publication/bound-by-uncertainty-what-future-for-eu-japan-security-cooperation/>

Italy as part of ‘Team Europe’

Italy has been among the late-comers to the EU’s Indo-Pacific adventure. Albeit absent in the initial drafting phase of the Strategy, which was steered by France, Germany and the Netherlands, Rome warmly welcomed the initiative, pledged commitment to the agenda and underscored its alignment with the various priority areas.⁴⁵ It is only in March 2025 that the Italian Foreign Affairs Committee publishes a report on the Indo-Pacific, potentially laying the ground for a future national strategy.⁴⁶ The report recognizes the importance of the region as a functional extension of the Enlarged (or ‘Global’) Mediterranean, combining maritime security, economic security, critical material supply chain, a technological competition, justifying Italy’s strategic concerns and priorities. That said, even without a strategy, Rome has been remarkably active in the region, especially precisely in maritime security, defence industrial and technological cooperation.

Among the most visible initiatives have been the deployments of Italian navy ships to the region. By sending its offshore patrol vessel ITS Francesco Morosini in 2023, a full Carrier Strike Group (CSG) in 2024, or with the ongoing deployment of the ITS Antonio Marcegaglia, Italy has joined the select club of European countries – namely France, Germany and the Netherlands -regularly plying through Indo-Pacific waters. The purpose of Italian (and other European) naval presence remains the same: enhancing ties and interoperability with regional partners through visit and joint exercises, reassuring the US and its allies of Europe’s commitment to regional security, and promoting the freedom of navigation. Needless to say, they also serve the pragmatic purpose of showcasing Italian naval industry and technology, with the prospect of attracting future buyers and investors.⁴⁷ The presence of Member States’ navies in the region is most appreciated by Brussels, as it provides an operational underpinning to its security partnerships and adds credibility to its engagement.⁴⁸

Another promising area where Italy could bring value to the EU’s Indo-Pacific outlook is connectivity. The new European Commission has been doubling down on the implementation of its Global Gateway initiative, dormant since its inception in 2019. During his recent trip to Rome in March 2025, the EU commissioner for International Partnerships Jozef Sikela stressed the many convergences between Italy’s Mattei Plan for the success of the EU’s Global Gateway and their potential to boost Europe’s economic security and business opportunities.⁴⁹ Indeed, Italy has been a leading player in the Enlarged Mediterranean region, stretching out to the Middle East, the East Coast of Africa and Western Indian Ocean region, which is considered its ‘primary area of strategic interest’.⁵⁰ Italy also plays a key role in EU’s anti-piracy operation ATALANTA, Red Sea operation ASPIDES, and the European maritime security initiative in the Strait of Hormuz (EMASOH). Its interest in stability

45 Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation of Italy, *The Italian contribution to the EU Strategy for the Indo-Pacific*, January 2022, <https://worldjpn.net/documents/texts/FOIP/20220120.01E.html>

46 Rossi, Emanuele, “Italy’s Indo-Pacific Committee charts the country’s strategic course, Decode39, March 2025, <https://decode39.com/10241/italy-s-indo-pacific-committee-charts-the-country-s-strategic-course/>

47 Pugliese, Giulio and Dell’Era, Alice, “Italy’s Security Engagement in Northeast Asia: Drivers and Outlook”, EUI Policy Paper, 2025, <https://cadmus.eui.eu/server/api/core/bitstreams/30fb9fb9-c800-50f3-97fa-d2c4db05ab1c/content>

48 Pejsova, Eva, “EU’s naval presence in the Indo-Pacific: what is it worth?”, HCSS Report, March 2023, <https://hcss.nl/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/03-Eva-Pejsova-European-naval-role-in-the-Indo-Pacific.pdf>

49 “Global Gateway: Commissioner Sikela in Italy to reinforce EU’s external engagement”, 26 March 2025, https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/news-and-events/news/global-gateway-commissioner-sikela-italy-reinforce-eus-external-engagement-2025-03-26_en

50 Battaglia, Marco, “Here’s the Italian Defence Strategy for the Mediterranean”, Decode39, June 2022, <https://decode39.com/3569/italian-defence-strategy-mediterranean/>

and established presence in the region could be leveraged to spearhead cooperative projects with interested Indo-Pacific partners – especially Japan and India - in the field connectivity, investing in port and communications infrastructure or supply chain logistics.

Opportunities for Italy – Japan relations

Japan stands out as a to-go partner for Italy in the Indo-Pacific. The bilateral relation has always been solid, sealed also by a shared historical experience with the WWII and post-War integration into the Western block of industrialized countries. In 2023, the two countries decided to elevate their relationship to a ‘Strategic Partnership’, and agreed on an ‘Action Plan’ in 2024, which lays out a roadmap for enhancing cooperation in defence and security, trade and economic security, as well as science, technology and innovation.⁵¹ Within the G7, the two countries have been co-ordinating positions on key issues, reaffirming their attachment to the promotion of a free, open and rules-based international order, support to Ukraine and stability in the Indo-Pacific, as well as strengthening supply chain resilience.⁵²

In terms of security and defence, the most significant achievement is undeniably the Global Combat Air Programme (GCAP), which remains the most advanced example of defence industrial co-operation between Europe and Japan to date. Announced in 2022, GCAP brings together British BAE Systems, Italian Leonardo and Japan’s Mitsubishi Heavy Industries to build the next generation fighter jet, set to replace Japan’s Air Self Defence Forces’ fleet by 2035. The programme has generated considerable traction and could be potentially expanded once the design phase is concluded to other countries. Japan has reportedly approached India, and Australia and Canada already showed interest to join the initiative in light of the decreasing reliability of the United States.⁵³ Down the road, GCAP could serve as basis to deepening collaboration on related advanced military capabilities in the spheres of AI, quantum technologies or electronic warfare, further enhancing technological compatibility and interoperability among partners.

To be sure, the story is ongoing and certainly does not end with GCAP. Italy and Japan signed their first Agreement on the transfer of defense equipment and technology already in 2017.⁵⁴

In 2024, the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA), guaranteeing a reciprocal supply and service provision between the armed forces of the two countries, adds Italy on Japan’s restrict list of closest security and defence partners, along with the US, Australia, France or the United Kingdom.⁵⁵ In a recent sign of flourishing bilateral ties, Rome is considering to purchase the Japanese Kawasaki P-1 maritime patrol aircraft for the Mediterranean.⁵⁶ At the operational

51 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, *Japan-Italy Action Plan*, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/100805858.pdf>

52 Busetto, Arielle, “Apulia G7 puts Italy-Japan cooperation in the spotlight”, JapanForward, June 2024, <https://japan-forward.com/apulia-g7-puts-italy-japan-cooperation-in-the-spotlight/>

53 “Australia and Canada consider partnering in GCAP future fighter programme as US policy weaken long-time alliance”, Global Defence News, April 2025, <https://armyrecognition.com/news/aerospace-news/2025/focus-australia-and-canada-consider-partnering-in-gcap-future-fighter-program-as-us-policy-changes-weaken-longtime-alliances>

54 Japan Ministry of Defence, *White Paper on Japan’s Security and Defence*, 2019, https://www.mod.go.jp/en/publ/w_paper/wp2019/pdf/DOJ2019_4-2-5.pdf

55 Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, “Signing of the Agreement between the Government of Japan and the Government of the Italian Republic Concerning Reciprocal Provision of Supplies and Services between the Self-Defense Forces of Japan and the Armed Forces of the Italian Republic”, November 2024, https://www.mofa.go.jp/erp/we/it/pageite_000001_00675.html

56 Kington, Tom, “Italy looks to fighter friend Japan for a new maritime patrol plane”, Defense News, March 2025, <https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2025/03/28/italy-looks-to-fighter-friend-japan-for-a-new-maritime-patrol-plane/>

level, both countries also regularly engage in joint military exercises as part of Italy's deployments to the region.

In general, cooperation in innovation, research, and development of new technologies features high the bilateral agenda, which is also reflected in an agreement on economic, industrial and technological cooperation in 2023. Here again, ongoing initiatives under the framework of the EU – Japan Digital Partnership Agreement (DPA), provide a plethora of avenues and opportunities. Italy has been especially active in the field of Artificial Intelligence (AI), through its AI, Data and Robotics Association (ADRA), promoting joint research on semiconductors, or contributing to EU-Japan work on data governance and digital connectivity, trying to pierce the Japanese market and showcase its technological excellence.⁵⁷ Given the utmost importance of new technologies today, the dynamic domestic environments of both countries, as well as the current positive momentum in Italy – Japan relations, we may expect to see more joint projects and initiatives in the future.

Conclusion

Italy's growing outreach to the Indo-Pacific and increasing cooperation with Japan in recent years is one concrete manifestation of Europe's ongoing tilt towards the region. The adoption of the EU Strategy in 2021 laid down Brussels' ambitions and sent a message to regional partners about its determination to play a role in Indo-Pacific security. By doing so, it provided an overarching political framework for its Member States to advance their own national interests, paving the way for the development of their own strategies, and resulting in a multilayered 'Team Europe' approach. The current emphasis on strengthening cooperation in strategically sensitive areas such as security and defence gives even more importance and leeway to national capitals. Aware of its limitations as a security actor, Brussels recently adjusted its rhetoric, portraying itself as a 'smart security enabler', thus acknowledging the key role of its Member States' expanding military presence and interactions with like-minded partners.⁵⁸ Of course, an appropriate coordination is a must. But overall, given the current volatile global security context, bilateral cooperation remains the most efficient channel to boost Europe's actorness and credibility in the Indo-Pacific.

57 *Report on the public-private stakeholders workshop ahead of the 2nd EU – Japan Digital Partnership Council meeting*, April 2024, <https://eprd.pl/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/REPORT-DP-EU-Japan-FINAL.pdf>

58 Borrell, Josep, ShangriLa Dialogue speech, June 2024, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/shangri-la-dialogue-speech-high-representative-josep-borrell-security-asia-pacific-region_en

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