

The Indo-Mediterranean: Mapping the Geopolitics of the India-Italy Strategic Partnership

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Introduction

On 20 May 2026, in a joint op-ed titled A Strategic Partnership for the Indo-Mediterranean, published across various Italian and Indian media outlets, the Indian and Italian leaders, Narendra Modi and Giorgia Meloni, welcomed “the emergence of the Indo-Mediterranean.”¹ This raises two issues. Firstly, the paradigm shifts that have brought India and Italy to a common adoption of an Indo-Mediterranean strategic framework. Secondly, the nature of their Indo-Mediterranean partnership.

In 2021, Vas Shenoy spoke of “the seeds... for the creation and development of a new, expanded Indo-Mediterranean” in the context of Modi’s discussions with Mario Draghi, the Italian Prime Minister, during which the two leaders announced a Strategic Partnership on Energy Transition and a Statement of Intent on Textiles Cooperation.² These “seeds” have since flowered with the advent of the Meloni administration in late 2022, when Italian and Indian strategic convergence over the Indo-Mediterranean directly informs their burgeoning defence and economic partnership. It also reflects their strong mutual support for economic and digital corridors across the Indo-Mediterranean.

Paradigm Shifts

Strategic paradigms often overlap and shift. The 1980s arrival of the “Asia-Pacific” was a *Pacific Rim* initiative launched by Australia, Japan and the US, which led to the creation of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in 1989. China joined in 1991, but India was excluded. The 2010s arrival of the “Indo-Pacific” marked a westward shift, bringing the Indian Ocean into the geographical frame and India into the political one. As a term, the “Indo-Mediterranean” has entered strategic discourse in recent years, as noted in 2021 by the previously cited Vas Shenoy.

Geographically, the Indo-Mediterranean represents a further westward shift from the Indo-Pacific. Literally, the Indo-Mediterranean could be understood as spanning the whole Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean from Singapore to Gibraltar. In practice, it has been seen as running from the Eastern Mediterranean to the Arabian Sea, from Italy to the west coast of India, as “strategic space in the making.”³ As Ambassador Gurjit Singh put it, India and Italy are “partners in peninsularity”.⁴ Their peninsular locations, Italy’s extending into the Mediterranean and India’s into the Indian Ocean, enable their mutual projection and thereby their mutual encounter. Geopolitically, their strategic neighbourhoods have expanded and now overlap across the Indo-Mediterranean. India has moved

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westwards across the Red Sea and the Mediterranean towards Italy, while Italy has moved eastwards across the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea towards India. Italy's Ambassador to India, Antonio Bartoli, has commented that "there is a common space that we could call Indo-Mediterranean, that is the link between two vital basins for our respective nations".⁵

India: Extending Westwards beyond the Arabian Sea

India's adoption of the term Indo-Mediterranean reflects its strategic push westwards. During the 1990s, India's existing "immediate neighbourhood" focus within South Asia was overlaid with an "extended neighbourhood" outreach, initially eastwards towards South-East Asia.⁶

The Look West policy announced in 2003 was economics-oriented towards the Gulf. Modi's Act West reformulation has embraced security cooperation in the Gulf and a wider application elsewhere in the Middle East.⁷ This Middle East outreach took India to the shores of the Mediterranean, where close defence ties with Israel, established in the 2000s, have accelerated under Modi, the first Indian Prime Minister to visit Israel in 2017. In 2023, India's Adani Group acquired a 70% stake in Israel's Haifa port, a designated Mediterranean anchor for IMEC, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor. Modi's visit in November 2025 brought an MoU on Defence Cooperation.

India's naval projection has been "westward-bound" this century.⁸ Indian naval thinking has consequently shifted. The 2015 Indian Maritime

Security Strategy (IMSS) expanded India's area of "primary interest" (identified as the Indian Ocean in the 2007 IMSS) to include the Red Sea (a "secondary" interest in the 2007 IMSS), while the Mediterranean (absent from the 2007 IMSS) was added as an area of "secondary" strategic interest.⁹ This was accompanied by a maritime posture (like Italy's) to safeguard choke points and strategic conduits in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, an extended naval theatre of operations first seen with anti-piracy deployments commencing in 2008 and strengthened in 2023, in the wake of Houthi disruption, with Operation Sankalp "safeguarding India's maritime interests."¹⁰

India has extended its "extended neighbourhood" into the Mediterranean. India's Minister for External Affairs, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, emphasised in 2022, "I want to drive home the point that where the Mediterranean is concerned, it is a region of growing interest to us.... in the last few years.... there has been very visible intensification of those ties."¹¹ Geoeconomics is also on display. At the India Mediterranean Business Conclave, Jaishankar argued that "Mediterranean ports and maritime routes have long facilitated East-West trade", that "our task is to make history work positively in the contemporary era", and that, consequently, "we want to deepen our engagement with the Mediterranean region."¹² Moving across the Eastern Mediterranean, India has developed close security ties with Cyprus and Greece, which were consolidated during Modi's 2025 visits, with an Indo-Mediterranean rationale, tacitly, to counter close defence ties between Turkey and Pakistan. Last, but certainly not least, India has developed

close ties with Italy following Meloni's visit to India in 2023.

Italy: Extending Eastwards Beyond the Mediterranean

The Mediterranean is Italy's starting point and immediate neighbourhood, giving rise to the old Roman view of the Mediterranean as *Mare Nostrum*, "Our Sea." The Roman Empire not only controlled the Mediterranean but also held power in the upper Red Sea, at times pushing down to Yemen and the gates of the Indian Ocean. From that Red Sea position, a flourishing trade with India was established. The colonial period saw Italian colonies spread across the Eastern Mediterranean (Albania, Libya, Dodecanese), the Red Sea (Eritrea), and the Indian Ocean (Somalia). In the 1990s, the concept of a "Wider/Extended Mediterranean" (*Mediterraneo allargato*) arose in Italian naval circles, accompanied by a maritime posture (like India's) to safeguard choke points and strategic conduits: in the Persian Gulf in the early 1990s, since 2008 in the Gulf of Aden with the *Atalanta* operation, and since 2024 in the Red Sea with the *Aspides*.

Meloni extended the *Mediterraneo allargato* concept in her Press Statement with Modi in March 2023, "when we talk about the wider Mediterranean, we must consider that it extends all the way here", i.e. over the Arabian Sea to India.¹³ India's ambassador, Vani Rao, reciprocated, "We welcome Italy's wider Mediterranean strategy... in which India is a key player."¹⁴ Meloni's Italy has taken an active role beyond the Mediterranean, with high-level visits and links established with Eritrea, Saudi Arabia,

Djibouti and the Gulf countries, as shown when Meloni attended the Gulf Cooperation Council Summit in 2026 as a privileged invitee. Most significantly, Italy has deepened its cooperation with India, in an accelerating and explicit Indo-Mediterranean partnership.

An Indo-Mediterranean Partnership.

In this "Indo-Mediterranean era", Italy's and India's policies have shifted from parallel "resonance" to strategic "convergence".¹⁵ Jaishankar's strategic logic is simple: "it makes eminent sense to connect what Italy is doing in the Mediterranean with what India is doing in the Arabian Sea for mutual benefit."¹⁶ As Italy increasingly operates in the Indian Ocean, it cannot ignore India; and as India increasingly operates in the Mediterranean, it cannot ignore Italy. Italy plays a "growing role in India's maritime and defence calculus", and vice versa.¹⁷

Under Modi and Meloni's leadership, India-Italy cooperation has surged across trade, defence and emerging technologies, amid mutual talk of their "Indo-Mediterranean strategic axis."¹⁸ A Strategic Partnership was announced during Meloni's visit to India in 2023. The following year, the joint Italy-India Strategic Action Plan 2025-2029 opened with Indian and Italian affirmations of "awareness of the unparalleled potential" of their Strategic Partnership.¹⁹ This Strategic Partnership was formally elevated to a Special Strategic Partnership, marking a "new era" announced during Modi's 2026 visit to Italy.²⁰ Modi captured the personal warmth between the two leaders by presenting Meloni with a bag of 'Melody' toffees from the Indian firm Parle upon his arrival in Rome;

Meloni video-posted it on X under the nickname “Team Melodi”, making it an instant viral meme! Their evident camaraderie underpinned their equally strategic deals.²¹

Jaishankar emphasises maritime strategic logic; “India, as part of its Indo-Mediterranean... our maritime interests... bring the two countries closer.”²² Maritime cooperation has been evident since 2023, with India’s Navy exercising with the Italian Navy in the Mediterranean and Italy’s Navy exercising with India’s Navy in the Arabian Sea. The joint carrier-to-carrier exercises between India’s INS Vikramaditya and Italy’s ITS Cavour in October 2024, off the west coast of India, were a particularly potent and substantive moment of bilateral maritime cooperation and seapower projection. Both navies participated in the Bright Star Exercise 2025, held off Alexandria, involving other Indo-Mediterranean actors. In 2026, both countries agreed to establish a Maritime Security Dialogue focused on their shared Indo-Mediterranean space.

Defence cooperation has deepened, reflecting their Defence Cooperation Agreement signed in 2023. This represents a determined effort to move beyond the Augusta Westland helicopter issue, the order cancelled by India in 2014 following a bribery scandal involving the Italian company Augusta. Fincantieri secured contracts in December 2025 to fit heavyweight torpedoes to India’s Scorpene submarines, which “fits into a broader Indo-Mediterranean security strategy.”²³ Leonardo (which had taken over Agusta) and Adani agreed in February 2026 to collaborate on the production, maintenance and phased indigenisation of advanced AW169M and AW109 TrekkerM

helicopters for the Indian military. In April 2026, the Indian and Italian Defence Ministers signed the *Military Cooperation Plan 2026-2027*.²⁴ A Defence Industrial Roadmap was announced during Modi’s visit to Rome in May 2026, along with a Joint Declaration of Intent on Strengthening the Bilateral Defence Industrial Cooperation.

Italian and Indian politicians emphasise similar themes. Italy’s President, Sergio Mattarella, in his official greetings to his Indian counterpart, President Droupadi Murmu, on India’s Republic Day in January 2026, stressed their “converging interests, beginning with the protection of a rules-based international order, the peaceful pursuit of security and stability along the Indo-Mediterranean arc.”²⁵ In a similar vein, Jaishankar argued in May 2025, at the National Day Reception for Italy, that “in and across the Indo-Mediterranean, as peninsular nations, India and Italy share maritime interests and a commitment to ensuring freedom of navigation and shipping.”²⁶

Likewise, Italy’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, Antonio Tajani, argued, “We share the same concerns as natural maritime powers. In the whole Indo-Mediterranean region, we both promote the principles of freedom of navigation.”²⁷ At the India Maritime Week in November 2025, Italy’s Deputy Minister of Infrastructure, Edoardo Rixi, argued that “India and Italy share a common vision of the sea... we are natural partners in the broader Indo-Mediterranean region... we shape new geopolitics of the seas.”²⁸ Their geopolitics of the sea is a Mahanian focus on seapower and chokepoint security across the Indo-Mediterranean. Geo-economics is also on the cards. Modi explained in his Press Statement in May 2026, in Rome, “as

maritime powers, close cooperation between India and Italy in the field of connectivity is only natural;” to be applied across the Indo-Mediterranean through economic and digital corridors.²⁹

Indian and Italian diplomats have embraced Indo-Mediterranean terms of reference for their strategic partnership. Bartoli, Italy’s Ambassador to India since July 2024, argued that “we are both peninsulas projected into the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. These seas are increasingly interconnected and part of a single Indo-Mediterranean space.”³⁰ Vani Rao, India’s Ambassador to Italy since April 2024, likewise considered that “the Indo-Mediterranean... represent one vast maritime and geographical space in which we share common strategic interests” with Italy.³¹ Bartoli argued that, on the geopolitical front, “Italy and India share common interests, but also joint challenges in the Indo-Mediterranean Sea [which] require our joint efforts to ensure a free, open, and prosperous Indo-Mediterranean” (FOPIM?).³² This is a deliberate echo of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) formulation used further east, with a common challenge to China present in both the FOIP Indo-Pacific and FOPIM Indo-Mediterranean formulations.³³

Both Bartoli and Rao attended the Track 1.5 Indo-Mediterranean Initiative, announced at the India Forum 2024 in Rome, which was co-chaired by Vas Shenoy, appointed as the Indian Chamber of Commerce Representative in Italy in November 2023, and Senator Giulio Terzi di Sant’Agata, President of the India-Italy Parliamentary Friendship Group.³⁴ Shenoy and Sant’Agata agreed that the India-Italy partnership serves as

“champions for the Indo-Mediterranean.”³⁵ Both Bartoli and Rao attended the workshop Indo-Mediterranean: Italy and India, a Special Relationship, held in November 2024 by Rome’s Med-Or Foundation and New Delhi’s Strategic and Defense Research, “with a particular focus on maritime security and the Italian and Indian naval cooperation, the IMEC corridor project.”³⁶

Economic Corridors

The India-Italy partnership makes geo-economic sense, given their self-perceived role as the two main pillars or anchors of the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), which runs from Mumbai to Trieste. This underpinned their Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation in ports, logistics and infrastructure, signed during Modi’s visit to Italy in May 2026.

History from the past informs the present, as Tajani notes that “Italy and India have been for ages two natural terminals in the common Indo-Mediterranean area, tied by an intense exchange of trade.”³⁷ More specifically, the Ambassador to India, Antonio Bartoli, noted that “Rome and India were already trading two thousand years ago... the future Indo-Mediterranean corridor IMEC, for goods and data, is a modern re-edition of an ancient route.”³⁸ As Italy’s Special Envoy for IMEC, Antonio Talò explained, IMEC was “a vision directly connected to the concept of the Indo-Mediterranean: a geopolitical reading based on seas and connections” linking India and the Mediterranean.³⁹

Deliberately invoking the earlier Roman-period trade system, Italy labels IMEC *la via del cotone*, “The Cotton Road/Route.” As Jaishankar noted

in November 2023, “what, Senator, you call the Cotton Road, which in many ways is like a revival return of history.... we are very happy to see Italy there.”⁴⁰ This Cotton Road invocation also ties into the Cotton Route 3-year project, which focuses on older links and was funded in 2015 by India’s Ministry of External Affairs. This was undertaken as a “counter” to China’s Maritime Silk Road (MSR) initiative announced in 2013, which also invoked historical flows along the old Silk Route from China to the Roman Empire.⁴¹ New Delhi and Rome’s immediate and strong support for IMEC has been dubbed a “Cotton Route alliance between Italy and India to counterbalance China.”⁴²

IMEC was launched in September 2023 at the G-20 summit in New Delhi. Two corridors were proposed. The first was a relatively simple *eastern* maritime corridor from Mumbai to the Gulf (UAE). The second was a more complex *northern* corridor through the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, to the Israeli port of Haifa, from which maritime routes to Italy (Taranto and Trieste) and France (Marseilles) extend. To serve the overland route from the Gulf to the Mediterranean, a railway transit network was proposed to supplement established road routes.

Both Italy and India are strong supporters of IMEC.⁴³ Modi explained that IMEC “is going to become the basis of world trade for hundreds of years to come, and history will always remember that this corridor was initiated on Indian soil.”⁴⁴ Similarly, at the 2024 Rome Mediterranean Dialogue, Meloni noted, “Italy played a key role in launching this initiative within the G-20 and it intends to remain at the forefront.”⁴⁵ IMEC serves

as a counterweight to China’s Maritime Silk Road (MSR), which also crosses the Indian Ocean into the Mediterranean. India has boycotted the MSR, while Meloni’s government quickly withdrew from it on taking power in 2022.

Digital Corridors

Digital infrastructure is another area for Italy-India cooperation, exemplified by the Europe-Africa-India Digital Corridor linking Italy (Genoa) to India (Mumbai). Tajani noted that “connectivity is becoming an increasingly strategic dimension of our cooperation. A significant example is the Blue & Raman submarine cable project.”⁴⁶ Italy’s telecommunications giant Sparkle is installing undersea cables across the Mediterranean to Haifa as part of the BlueMed wing, with a Raman wing envisaged extending down the Red Sea from Aqaba and across the Arabian Sea to Mumbai, where Sparkle signed a “strategic” partnership agreement with the Indian company Airtel in September 2024.⁴⁷ Reflecting its importance to Italian digital strategy, the Meloni government took a controlling 70% share in Sparkle in April 2026. The Blue-Raman scheme is counterpoised by China’s Pakistan and East Africa Connecting Europe (PEACE) initiative; planned from Gwadar in Pakistan across to Djibouti, up the Red Sea to Egypt and then the Mediterranean. This is part of China’s Digital Silk Route (DSR) initiative, which concerns both India and Italy.

Conclusion: Looking Forward

The India-Italy strategic partnership looks set to deepen further across the Indo-Mediterranean. With India and Italy less sure of US support under

Donald Trump, and with their common concerns over China remaining evident, the strategic logic for the India-Italy partnership, mutual support, is all the more relevant. India may be the bigger partner, but both benefit.

Defence technology transfers should increase under the *Defence Industry Roadmap* agreed in 2026. Fincantieri's Landing Platform Dock expertise offers another area for collaboration with India, enabling greater Indian maritime reach across the Indian Ocean. Similarly, military exercises should increase, given India and Italy's growing deployments into each other's strategic backyards. Their 2023 Defence Cooperation Agreement awaits further, but eminently achievable, development into a Logistics Support Agreement, similar to those that India and Italy both enjoy with Japan.

Trade is likely to increase under the EU-India

Free Trade Agreement, signed in January 2026, with the Modi-Meloni summit in May 2026 setting a bilateral trade target rising from €14 billion in 2025 to €20 billion by 2029. With regard to IMEC and the Digital Corridor, the Mediterranean (Italy's sphere) and Arabian Sea (India's sphere) wings of both projects are well established. However, first the Gaza conflict in late 2023 and then the Gulf War disruption of the Strait of Hormuz during 2026 have complicated the construction of IMEC's Land Rail Corridor running across the Arabian Peninsula to exit at Haifa, as well as the Digital Corridor's Aqaba-Haifa link. This is compounded by Houthi disruption of the Red Sea, first in sympathy with Hamas/Gaza in 2023 and then in sympathy with Iran in 2026. Middle East volatility makes completion of these linking landbridges all the more important, but all the more hostage to fortune outside Italy and India's control.

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