

**The Elephant in Ro(o)me.
Italy's Foreign Policy Change and U.S. Pressures on China**

Lorenzo Termine and Gabriele Natalizia

Corresponding Author

Lorenzo Termine – European University Institute

e - mail: lorenzo.termine@eui.eu

mailing address: Via dei Roccettini, 9 – 50014 San Domenico di Fiesole (Italy)

ORCID ID: 0000 - 0003 - 3565 – 5261

Co - Author

Gabriele Natalizia – Sapienza Università di Roma

e - mail: gabriele.natalizia@uniroma1.it

mailing address: P.le Aldo Moro, 5 – 00185 Rome (Italy)

ORCID ID: 0000 - 0001 - 6372 - 7758

Funding

Lorenzo Termine's and Gabriele Natalizia's research for this article received support from the MOFA Taiwan Fellowship Program, through which the authors served as Visiting Scholars at the European Union Centre in Taiwan, National Taiwan University between July and September 2025. Lorenzo Termine's research was also supported by the European University Institute's Early-Stage Researchers fund (DIVE-IND project).

Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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Abstract

Despite growing interest in Italy's foreign and security policy, existing scholarship has largely downplayed the role of external pressures – particularly by the United States – in shaping foreign policy change. This study combines theoretical reflection and empirical analysis to address this neglected dimension. Through a review of the literature, it argues that U.S. pressure remains an underexplored yet crucial explanatory variable for Italy's international behaviour. This shortcoming is particularly evident in Italy's post-2019 engagement with China and its expanding security footprint in the Indo-Pacific between 2021 and 2025 in the wake of other European countries. Empirical evidence points clearly to Washington's pressure as a key driver of policy change. These cases reveal a pattern of alignment that cannot be sufficiently explained by domestic-level variables alone – external inputs must be accounted for. By stressing the role of foreign pressures, the article sketches a revised understanding of alliance dynamics as tools of management over secondary states. It also highlights how systemic pressures impact less powerful countries. Finally, the Italian case underscores the need for mid-range theories that better integrate structural variables, capturing the interplay between international incentives and domestic adaptation.

Keywords: Italian foreign policy, external pressures, United States, China, Indo-Pacific

Introduction

Italy has periodically undertaken foreign policy changes that appear eccentric when assessed through the lens of its immediate national interests, reflecting its structural condition as a secondary power embedded in asymmetric alliance relationships. These choices have often entailed significant political costs and uncertain long-term returns, and they tend to recur during periods of heightened international instability.

Historical episodes – including Italy's participation in the German-led campaign against the Soviet Union in 1941 or the deployment of troops to post-invasion Iraq in 2003 – illustrate how alignment pressures from a dominant ally can override short-term calculations. However, such forms of alignment occur even more frequently below the threshold of direct military involvement – as in the case of Italy's support for Germany's position during the 1906 Algeciras Conference, despite prior understandings with France and the absence of any direct Italian interest in Morocco, or its acceptance of U.S. cruise missiles in Comiso in the early 1980s, a decision that reinforced perceptions of Italy's subordinate role within the alliance and sparked significant domestic contestation.

Most recent political science explanations of Italian foreign policy (IFP) change remain anchored in domestic variables, or interpret it as the outcome of interactions between

internal dynamics and external constraints. In contrast, systemic explanations – particularly those grounded in the theory of asymmetric alliances – remain largely underdeveloped.

This analytical gap is especially problematic in the current phase of renewed great power competition (GPC), which is reshaping the strategic environment in which Italy and Europe operates. Such contexts usually reduce the room for manoeuvre of secondary powers, which are often structurally incapable of providing for their own security in the face of growing external threats (Cesa 2007) although there may be ambitions for strategic autonomy (Irrera 2024).

Against this backdrop, Rome has begun to revisit the traditional ‘three circles’ of its foreign policy (Diodato and Marchetti 2023). Within this evolving strategic landscape, Italy has progressively aligned itself with the United States on China and has embarked on what observers have described as an ‘Indo-Pacific tilt’ (Termine and Natalizia 2025).

This emerging trajectory has attracted increasing attention among scholars and policy analysts, as reflected in recent academic publications (Abbondanza 2024; Termine and Natalizia 2025), reports (Mazziotti di Celso 2024; Termine 2025a; Pugliese and Dell’Era 2025; Piasentini and Iannone 2025), and policy commentaries (Casarini 2023; Zampieri and Ghermandi 2024). Yet a conclusive explanation of the underlying drivers behind this shift remains elusive.

Building on these developments, this article pursues a twofold objective. Theoretically, it advocates a renewed focus on external constraints – particularly those exerted by dominant allies – as an explanatory variable in the study of IFP change. Without claiming to provide a final review of an inherently fragmented literature, it identifies and systematises its most recurrent explanatory patterns. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates by highlighting three major shortcomings: the dominance of institutional and normative approaches, the marginalisation of systemic variables, and the absence of mid-level theorising capable of linking international pressures to domestic-level responses.

Empirically, while recognising the intervening value of domestic factors the article argues that Italy’s China policy and Indo-Pacific engagement is best understood as a response to sustained Washington’s pressures amidst competition with Beijing. This hypothesis is tested through qualitative analysis of primary sources and a series of interviews with senior officials from the Italian government, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Defence, aimed at identifying the main drivers behind Rome’s *démarches*.

The article unfolds as follows. Section 1 reviews the dominant interpretive strands in the literature on Italian foreign policy change, with particular attention to their tendency to privilege domestic-level explanations. Section 2 outlines the main

theoretical expectations concerning asymmetric alliances under conditions of great power competition. Section 3 traces Italy's disavowal of Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with China while Section 4 researches Rome's expanding security engagement with the Indo-Pacific between 2021 and 2025, following other European states. The conclusion reflects on the strategic implications of Italy's China and Indo-Pacific policies and sketches future avenues of research.

Competing Explanations for Italy's Foreign Policy Shifts

Adopting a classical rationalist perspective, this article defines foreign policy as the external pursuit of national interest by states operating within an anarchic international system (Morgenthau 1948). The causes of its change remain debated. The existing scholarship offers a range of explanations, broadly grouped into three categories: those privileging domestic-level dynamics, those adopting integrative frameworks across levels of analysis, and those emphasising systemic-level factors. Since the end of the Cold War, international relations theory has undergone a 'domestic turn' (Kaarbo 2015), gradually marginalising structural variables in explanations of foreign policy change.¹ This analytical reorientation – privileging internal dynamics over systemic pressures – has been mirrored in the literature on IFP.

Early studies on IFP engaged with a broad range of explanatory factors. Attinà (1972) and Gori (1978) examined the foreign policy-making process in democratic states such as Italy. The former assigned a decisive role to the Parliamentary Committee on Foreign Affairs, while the latter analysed how political parties' control of Foreign Ministry influenced policy. In contrast, Panebianco (1977) advanced a two-level game approach, arguing that changes in IFP resulted from both the structure of the international system and domestic constraints, such as the party system and the political costs and benefits associated with specific foreign policy stances. Other scholars foregrounded external variables. Graziano (1968) linked Italy's Atlantic and European commitments to Cold War dynamics, particularly the Soviet threat and dependence on U.S. support. Building on this, Santoro (1991) identified the structural asymmetry in Italy–U.S. relations as a key independent variable shaping Italian foreign policy – an arrangement that guaranteed national security while allowing limited regional autonomy.

Notably, this early body of scholarship progressively shifted toward domestic-level explanations just as a profound redistribution of international power took place after 1989 (Colombo 2025). It is within this context that major shifts in Italy's foreign policy

¹ This article does not engage with the vast literature on IFP produced within the field of the history of international relations.

were largely interpreted through domestic lenses. This new scholarship can be subdivided into three main strands.

The first strand investigates the role and motivations of political leadership in driving shifts in IFP. Diodato and Niglia (2019) and Brighi (2024) highlight the centrality of leadership styles, portraying foreign policy choices as closely linked to the political outlook, cognitive frames, and symbolic performances of individual leaders such as Silvio Berlusconi. Similarly, Coticchia and Davidson (2019) examine how political leaders – such as Matteo Renzi – justify foreign interventions to domestic audiences, particularly by framing military missions as peace operations.

A second strand emphasises the role of culture in enabling or constraining foreign policy change. Ignazi, Giacomello and Coticchia (2012) argue that shifts in Italy's military behaviour after the Cold War have been shaped by a consolidated cultural aversion to war, fostering a preference for multilateralism and non-combat roles. Rosa (2016) and Ruffa (2016) similarly highlight strategic culture as a mediating factor, suggesting that Italy's strong adherence to multilateralism and humanitarianism has shaped the use of national force.

A third domestic strand focuses on the influence of institutional and political variables. Andreatta (2008) links party system fragmentation to the instability and short-termism of Italian governments, which often results in inconsistent or reactive foreign policy shifts. Davidson (2008) interprets Italy's involvement in the Iraq War as a vote-seeking strategy pursued by the Berlusconi government to consolidate domestic support through foreign alignment. Hanau Santini and Baldaro (2025) underscore the impact of ideological preferences, arguing that party identity and value orientations shape foreign policy priorities, particularly under ideologically driven governments. Coticchia and Davidson (2018) emphasize the limited influence of radical parties on IFP, highlighting how institutional constraints, fragmented responsibilities, and the predominance of executive discretion structurally limit parliamentary oversight in Italy's international conduct. A correlated body of literature adopts Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) and emphasises individual agency, institutional routines, and intra-governmental bargaining as mediators between external pressures and policy outcomes. Coticchia and Moro (2020), for instance, analyse Italy's post-Cold War military operations through the lens of bureaucratic politics and political communication, showing how elite narratives and domestic consensus-building shaped intervention choices. Similarly, Diodato and Niglia (2017) adopt a two-level logic to investigate Italy's external action, stressing how leaders navigate between international expectations and internal constraints through continuous adjustment and framing. Building on this perspective, Ceccorulli, Coticchia, and Gianfreda (2022) attributes the Conte I government's migration and defence policies to how the fragmented executive filtered shifting international pressures.

Although domestically driven and two-level explanations dominate the literature on Italian foreign policy, a third body of structurally oriented contributions has also emerged. Most of these focus on the causal relationship between status- or prestige-seeking behaviour and foreign policy change. Carati and Locatelli (2017) interpret Italian foreign policy as shaped by status-seeking logics, suggesting that participation in multilateral military operations often serves the symbolic aim of elevating Italy's international standing. From a different angle, Stefanachi (2023) highlights the pursuit of prestige as a central concern of Italian elites, arguing that foreign policy shifts occur when windows of opportunity arise to enhance Italy's international standing.

By contrast, only a limited number of contributions attribute foreign policy change directly to shifts in the global environment – such as power redistribution, alliance dynamics, or emerging threats – that constrain or enable Italy's foreign policy options. Among them, Alessandro Colombo has recurrently advanced a more explicitly structural perspective in the IAI-ISPI Yearbook (e.g. Colombo and Greco 2012), attributing changes in Italy's international posture to a global redistribution of power – marked by declining U.S. leadership – and the growing salience of regional security dynamics. More recently, Natalizia and Morini (2020) and Natalizia and Mazziotti di Celso (2025) attributes the more competitive stance toward Russia and the expansion of military deployments to rising U.S. requests for burden-sharing.

Navigating Constraint: Secondary Powers in an Era of Great Power Competition

Italy's post-2019 relationship with China and its expanding security role in the Indo-Pacific call for renewed analytical scrutiny – one that reintroduces external constraints as key explanatory variables. This perspective not only sheds light on the exceptional nature of Italy's recent foreign policy changes but also situates them within broader alliance dynamics between major and secondary powers.²

This article's analytical framework starts from the basic assumption that although international anarchy is an inescapable condition (Waltz 1979), its constraining effects may be mitigated when a state accumulates overwhelming material capabilities and prestige, and exhibits a willingness to lead (Gilpin 1981). This dominant power might supply public goods and thus reduce insecurity and uncertainty, fostering systemic stability (Kindleberger 1973). As long as the distribution of power remains steady and no rising challenger seeks to revise the existing order, systemic constraints tend to loosen – particularly for secondary powers that do not challenge the status quo (Lemke 2002; Termine 2025b).

² This article draws from Power transition theory the notion of secondary power and understands it as every country other than the dominant and the rising challenger. Albeit basic, the concept is here useful to characterize the systemic pressures the secondary nations are subject to.

By contrast, the onset of GPC – defined as “a permanent, compulsory, comprehensive, and exclusive contest for supremacy [...] among those states considered to be the major players in the international system at a given time” (DiCicco and Onea 2023, 295) – intensifies the effects of anarchy, especially for weaker actors. In such contexts, strategic constraints sharpen, and the room for manoeuvre of secondary narrows considerably.

Alliances perform multiple functions in this strategic environment: they serve as mechanisms for signalling resolve – deterring adversaries through credible commitments to joint military action (Mattes 2012); as instruments for capability aggregation in response to common threats or strategic objectives, such as defending or revising the international order (Snyder 1997); and as tools of management, enabling dominant powers to shape, monitor, and constrain the behaviour of their allies (Schroeder 1976).

This function becomes particularly salient in asymmetric alliances during periods of GPC, when disparities in capabilities allow major powers to exert political and strategic influence over their junior partners. A dominant state may form new alliances to signal others’ willingness to align with it, or leverage existing ones to extract additional resources from their members (Walt 1987).

Yet among secondary powers, stronger and weaker countries may experience very diverging expectations under intensifying GPC. Strategic expectations from dominant allies shift accordingly – in line with the classical Thucydidean logic: “the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must.” While weaker secondary powers, limited in both capabilities and influence within alliances, are typically expected to align closely and avoid autonomous or adventurist policies (Lobell *et al.* 2015), stronger secondary powers face broader and more demanding expectations (Schweller 1998; Snyder 1997). The latter are not merely ‘price takers’ of structural imperatives. They retain agency to shape their strategic environment, and may act as stabilisers or disruptors of regional status quos through diplomatic, economic, military, or ideational means (Carranza 2017). Indeed, great powers often demand from them not just loyalty, but substantive shifts in strategic posture – including material contributions to systemic stability and greater regional or functional responsibilities. Although secondary powers primarily operate within their regional theatres, where their agency is most effective (Buzan and Wæver 2003), dominant allies may also encourage them to project influence out of area, especially to share the burdens of strategic competition (MacDonald and Parent 2011).

Under great power competition, the most recurrent risks associated with alliances – abandonment and entrapment (Snyder 1984) – become more acute. On the one hand, secondary powers face the prospect of abandonment if they disregard the expectations of their dominant ally, potentially undermining access to security guarantees. To mitigate systemic challenges, preserve strategic support, and safeguard or enhance their

position within the international order, such states are often compelled to adjust their conduct in ways that bring them into closer alignment with their greater ally (Castillo and Downes 2020). On the other hand, they may be entrapped into supporting costly policies that do not align with their core national interests, due to a perceived imperative to preserve alliance cohesion.

Evidence 1: Italy's Disavowal of Belt and Road Cooperation with China

Italy's interest in China's expanding trade, financial, investment, infrastructural projects predates the 2019 MoU, beginning around 2014 with the signing of the 2014–2016 Action Plan for Economic Cooperation between Italy and China (State Council of the PRC 2014) during PM Matteo Renzi's visit to Beijing, when he urged Chinese firms to invest in key Italian sectors like energy and infrastructure (South China Morning Post 2014) and relaunched the Italy-China Business Forum. Premier Li Keqiang's visit led to €10 billion in deals, focusing on ports and telecoms (Hsu 2014). Under Gentiloni (2016–2018), ties remained strong. ChemChina's €7 billion acquisition of Pirelli was partly funded by the Silk Road Fund (Casarini 2017), used for strategic takeovers. Italy eased Chinese investments in assets like Vado Ligure's port, though concerns over tech transfer and reciprocity grew (Insisa 2023). In 2017, Italy joined the AIIB and signed a new Action Plan (2017–2020). These efforts aimed to attract FDI after the Eurozone crisis (Termine and Lomonaco 2019), positioning Trieste as a China-Europe hub (Mohan *et al.* 2024) and avoiding marginalization amid regional infrastructure shifts (Fardella and Prodi 2017). In this, Italy's approach echoed broader EU trends (Casarini 2019).

The March 2019 MoU (Government of Italy and Government of PRC 2019) sounded qualitatively different. By signing a public, bilateral document during Xi Jinping's state visit to Rome, Italy became the first G7 country to formally associate itself with China's signature geoeconomic initiative. While the MoU was framed by Italian diplomats within multilateral guidelines and referred to EU standards, its symbolism – particularly in the context of escalating U.S.–China rivalry – was impossible to overlook. Accompanying the MoU were twenty-nine additional agreements, divided into institutional and commercial categories, which underscored the breadth and ambition of Sino-Italian cooperation. Nineteen of these were institutional in nature and signed between public entities on both sides. Among the most notable were agreements concerning port infrastructure. The Port Authorities of Trieste and Genoa entered into collaborative frameworks with the state-owned China Communications Construction Company (CCCC). These accords were complemented by a broader agreement between Italy's Ministry of Infrastructure and Transport and China's Ministry of Transport focused on maritime connectivity. A notable partnership was struck between Snam and the State Grid Corporation of China in the energy sector, as well as collaboration between Ansaldo Energia and Chinese firms. The steel and

manufacturing sector was represented by an agreement involving the Italian company Danieli. Finally, there was financial, agricultural, healthcare, and media collaborations.

Around the same time, Italy's approach to 5G infrastructure evolved rapidly. The process began in 2018, when the Ministry of Economic Development launched a pre-commercial 5G trial in five cities, allowing participation from both telecom operators and technology providers. Huawei, in partnership with Vodafone, won the contract for Milan, while also collaborating with Telecom Italia and Fastweb in Bari and Matera. At that stage, security concerns remained marginal,³ and the prevailing sentiment within the coalition between M5S and the League favoured engagement with China.

The reaction from Washington was immediate and sustained. The Trump administration's broader confrontational stance toward China, framed as 'strategic competition', now shifted its attention on Italy. In March 2019, Garrett Marquis, spokesperson for the U.S. National Security Council (NSC), publicly warned that Italy's endorsement of the BRI would not "bring any sustained economic benefits to the Italian people, and it may end up harming Italy's global reputation in the long run" (Sevastopulo et al. 2019). NSC tweeted against the MoU⁴ as well as Marquis added that there was "no need for Italian government to lend legitimacy to China's infrastructure vanity project" in his Twitter account (Wolfe 2019). U.S. Ambassador to Italy Lewis Eisenberg echoed similar concerns in public statements and behind closed doors (Mohan *et al.* 2019),⁵ emphasizing the risks that BRI posed to Italy's critical infrastructure and its Atlantic commitments (The Strait Times 2019). New York Times revealed that Trump administration officials pressured members of the League to disown the deal and then-MAGA champion Steve Bannon warned against China's "British East India Company model of predatory capitalism" (Horowitz 2019).

A series of high-level *démarches* unfolded throughout 2018 and 2019.⁶ U.S. Vice President Mike Pence and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo (U.S. Department of States 2019) making very clear that joining BRI would undermine NATO cohesion. In 2018 American pressures halted the 2017 Italy-China cooperation agreement for the International Space Station (Pompili 2020). VP Pence, in his October 2018 speech on China at the Hudson Institute – and again during summit meetings in Asia the following month – warned against China's "constricting belts" and "one-way roads," stating that they would drown BRI partners in a "sea of debt".⁷ Secretary Pompeo reinforced the charge of "debt-trap diplomacy" during visits to Europe and Central America, warning

³ Nil according to the Italian Ministry of Economic Development. See <https://shorturl.at/xMZ0Q>.

⁴ See <https://x.com/WHNSC45/status/1104402719568203776>.

⁵ In late 2019 Ambassador Eisenberg even talked directly with the president of the Trieste Port Authority to ask "what benefits China had brought" (Oriani 2022).

⁶ It is worth mentioning that the BRI MoU was in the pipeline for months according to then-Economic Development Minister Luigi Di Maio, to the point that they almost signed it during his visit to Beijing in November 2018 (Horowitz 2019).

⁷ See remarks here: <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-vice-president-pence-2018-apec-ceo-summit-port-moresby-papua-new-guinea/>.

that the BRI is a dangerous Chinese attempt “to buy an empire” (Russell and Berger 2019, 7).

U.S. concern had two main dimensions. First, symbolic: Italy’s decision to sign the MoU conferred international legitimacy on the BRI at a time when Washington was attempting to mobilize Western opposition to Chinese strategic initiatives. Being the first and only G7 country to endorse the BRI was perceived as a significant rupture in image of transatlantic unity and a reason for significant “American frustration” (De Maio 2020). Second, material as two major fears followed in U.S. foreign policy establishment. First, ports such as Trieste and Genoa, which held strategic importance for European logistics and transshipment routes (Mohan *et al.* 2024). Second, technological infrastructures such as the national 5G network and semiconductors (Friis and Lysne 2021). At the time, the Trump administration was mounting a broader campaign against BRI (Dell’Aguzzo and Diodato 2022) as well as Huawei and Chinese 5G suppliers. Italy was identified as a critical battleground in the effort to prevent Chinese penetration in Europe, thus becoming target for greater engagement to “secure alignment” (Ghiretti 2021a) and was included in the national security advisors’ trip to Europe (Lippman 2020).

The shift in Italian evaluation of the BRI MoU and Huawei’s 5G bid came very soon. The expansion of Italy’s Golden Power regulation in 2019 and again in 2020 granted the government enhanced powers to scrutinise and block foreign involvement in strategic infrastructure, particularly in telecoms (Volta 2025). In July 2020, the Golden Power was used to block Telecom Italia from partnering with on a major tender for 5G core networks in both Italy and Brazil (Pollina 2020). That same year, the Italian government vetoed 5G procurement deals between Fastweb and Huawei, on the grounds that Huawei would be the sole provider – a configuration deemed incompatible with national security guidelines (Pollina 2020; Fonte and Pollina 2020). This marked the first explicit intervention to block Chinese technology in 5G deployment from the Italian government, a new executive led by the very same PM as the previous. In 2021, during the G7 summit in Carbis Bay, Prime Minister Draghi publicly took a hard stance on China (Reuters 2021) and acknowledged the need to “carefully examine” Italy’s position on BRI (Government of Italy 2021). A member of both Conte governments explicitly referred to U.S. exhortations as the driving push to devitalize and terminate the BRI MoU (Interview #8).

Following “several American visits to the ports of Genoa and Trieste, both ports reconfigured future collaborations with their Chinese counterparts” (Pugliese, Ghiretti and Insisa 2022, 1046). Trieste’s integrated railways hub to be built in collaboration with the China Communications Construction Company (CCCC) in Servola did not proceed any further (Galelli and Ghiretti 2023), with “conspiracists saying it depended on hidden intentions to stop the dialogue opened with China by the president of the Port Authority” (Il Piccolo 2020) and later attributed to space constraints (Pugliese, Ghiretti and Insisa 2022). Furthermore, the US administration opted for blacklisting

and sanctioning Chinese companies, including CCCC, in summer 2020, which made engagement with the company “no longer economically advantageous” (Ghiretti 2021b, 7). Eventually, German HHLA acquired the controlling stake in the intermodal platform.

Throughout 2022 and 2023, diplomatic interactions regarding China and BRI intensified. Italy joined U.S.-backed initiatives such as the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII), a G7 alternative to the BRI, as well as the IMEC project by India, China’s ramping regional rival. As soon as he arrived in Rome, this was the “first question” that the newly-nominated US ambassador to Italy Jack Markell asked the Italian authorities (Verderami 2023).

Ultimately, Italy’s discreet withdrawal in December 2023 reflected these layered pressures. As Insisa (2023, 1) notes, the decision was the outcome of a “long, laborious, yet ultimately successful diplomatic process,” aligning Italy with the transatlantic consensus without provoking open retaliation from Beijing.

Evidence 2: Italy’s Security Intervention in the Indo-Pacific

A parallel pattern of externally-driven alignment can be observed in Italy’s growing security engagement in the Indo-Pacific. Traditionally peripheral to Italian strategic thinking, the Indo-Pacific emerged between 2021 and 2025 as a theatre of increasing activity, marked by naval deployments, defence cooperation, and political signalling. A recent contribution based on preliminary elite interview-based (Termine and Natalizia 2025) revealed the plethora of causal and intervening variables behind the phenomenon and how U.S. pressures were perceived as the overarching determining factor. Before, digging into empirical data, context is again needed.

In contrast to Italy’s traditional neglect of the Indo-Pacific, France, the United Kingdom, and Germany had already begun to lay the groundwork for a more pronounced regional presence years earlier. These European powers, albeit with distinct historical legacies and strategic postures, progressively framed their engagement in the Indo-Pacific as a response to shifting global power configurations and growing strategic interdependencies (Biba and Strating 2025). France, with its overseas territories and exclusive economic zones in the region, was the earliest and most active European stakeholder (Meijer 2021). Its 2019 Indo-Pacific strategy presented the region as a central arena for preserving a rules-based order. French naval deployments, such as the Jeanne d’Arc tours, were not only operational but also communicative acts designed to signal commitment and strengthen minilateral cooperation with partners like Japan, Australia, and India (Pajon 2024). The United Kingdom, similarly, framed its re-engagement through the 2021 “Global Britain” Integrated Review and the deployment of the HMS Queen Elizabeth carrier strike group to the Indo-Pacific. British passages in contested maritime domains served not

only to reaffirm London's status as a global actor, but also to display solidarity with Washington's security architecture in the region (Wilkins 2024). Germany's approach was more hesitant but no less significant. Berlin's 2020 Indo-Pacific Guidelines avoided overt containment language but underscored Germany's interest in maritime security and supply chain resilience. The 2021 deployment of the frigate *Bayern* to Asia, the first in nearly two decades, was interpreted by analysts as a judicious alignment with Washington over China's regional behaviour (Wunderlich and Luo 2024).

Against this backdrop, Italy opted for a wait-and-see approach until 2021 but then incrementally stepped up its Indo-Pacific security engagement. While reluctant to provoke Beijing – combined with the demise of the BRI MoU it was too much for bilateral relations – Rome responded with calibrated multi-sector alignments (see Table 1). Notably, the Cavour Strike Group's 2024 deployment – with participation in multilateral exercises and port calls in Japan and India – coincided with major diplomatic milestones, such as the G7 Foreign Ministers' Communique endorsing a free and open Indo-Pacific. The G7 countries, led by Italy in 2024, affirmed that “maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait is indispensable to international security and prosperity” and supported Taiwan's participation in international organizations. The statement also expresses strong concern over tensions in the East and South China Seas, opposing “any unilateral attempt to change the status quo by force or coercion” as well as China's expansive maritime claims.⁸ Beyond military deployments, strategic defence-industrial engagements such as the GCAP partnership with Japan and the UK and arms exports to regional partners enriched Italy's regional footprint. All these initiatives signalled Rome's integration into the evolving security architecture promoted by the U.S. and its allies in the Indo-Pacific.

U.S. exhortations were conditional to the outcome. Since the 2019 London summit, and even more so at the 2022 Madrid meeting, the North Atlantic Council emerged as the primary platform through which Washington promoted a coordinated Indo-Pacific involvement (Interview #1; #3; #8). Beneath that level, practical tasks were handled by the Partnerships and Cooperative Security Committee, the body in charge of all Individually Tailored Partnership Programmes – such as those involving the Indo-Pacific 4 (Australia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and New Zealand) (Interview #9). Yet, much of the high-level planning and coordination initiated by the U.S. took place in another multinational forum: the Multinational Strategy and Operations Group (MSOG) (Interview #10). In the 2021 and 2022 sessions the U.S. openly proposed cooperation on Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) and formally encouraged partners to join. Interestingly, a senior diplomat indeed confirmed that from 2021 onwards, the U.S. approach toward its allies shifted – from urging them to refrain from specific engagements with China (such as BRI, 5G, infrastructure, or dual-use technologies) to actively encouraging participation in Indo-Pacific initiatives (Interview #1). This shift in approach is confirmed by analyses of the Biden

⁸ See full text here: <https://tinyurl.com/4w8d5fvw>.

administration's Indo-Pacific strategy (Lee 2024; Heng 2025) and primary documents (U.S. Department of Defense 2022). These recommendations were processed through the Foreign Affairs-Defense coordination table, where diplomats softened the initiatives (Interview #10). This was a particularly sensitive time: Italy was looking to exit the Belt and Road Initiative memorandum, and both Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and President Sergio Mattarella had official visits to China planned for 2024 (*ibid.*). Broadly speaking, the Italian defense-policy circle was determined to avoid passing through certain zones and to steer clear of moves that could provoke China (Interview #11). The result was the series of deployments from 2023 on.

It must be noted that Italy's engagement was not backed by robust domestic demand or strategic consensus. Institutional fragmentation, limited interministerial coordination, and the absence of public debate on the Indo-Pacific indicate that these moves were not organically generated. Rather, they reflect a pattern of elite-led adaptation to shifting systemic incentives (Termine and Natalizia 2025). The causal weight of U.S. pressure is further confirmed by the limited explanatory power of alternative hypotheses. National prestige, while cited as a secondary driver, was often articulated in terms consistent with alliance signalling – being “present where others are” rather than projecting autonomous leadership. Defence industry interests, though significant, followed rather than preceded security deployments. Economic stakes in the Indo-Pacific remained modest, and public support was limited.

Conclusion

The presented evidence (see Table 1) cumulatively supports the argument that the decisions to disavow the BRI MoU and later pivot to the Indo-Pacific cannot be fully understood without theoretically and empirically integrate sustained, multifaceted, and escalating U.S. pressure. To be sure, external factors have not been wholly neglected as a handful of works have mentioned them in their account of Italy's relationship with China (i.a., Dossi 2020; Pugliese 2020; Pugliese, Ghiretti and Insisa 2022; Insisa 2023). However, it is striking how not a single scientific work has theoretically and empirically centred external variables to research recent Italian foreign policy behaviour around China and the Belt and Road. This is even more curious if we consider the number of above-cited primary sources pointing at U.S. pressures as the smoking gun and even the counter-pressures exerted by national “industrial sectors”, “cultural environments”, “universities”, and “foundations” to remain in the BRI (Verderami 2023). This is not of course to say that U.S. pressures were not mediated by domestic constraints – the dynamics around the Foreign Affairs-Defense table stands as opposite evidence – or filtered by societal consolidated perceptions of the U.S. and their relevance – possibly the very diverse nature and timing of French and German intervention in the Indo-Pacific suggests.

[TABLE 1 HERE]

This article sought to address that gap by foregrounding the role of systemic variables, particularly in the context of renewed great power competition. These mechanisms operated as instruments of expectation-setting and behavioural conditioning, reinforcing Italy's responsiveness to U.S. preferences even in the absence of formal coercion. However, the striking absence of American pressures as an independent, determining factor should call for three subsequent broader reflections.

First, alliance dynamics involving Italy may be re-conceptualised not merely as aggregators of power, but as hierarchical tools of management secondary allied states. Second, systemic pressures tend to become more visible and consequential during periods of structural transition, when the international distribution of power is in flux and dominant actors attempt to enforce or renegotiate the rules of the order, making secondary states playground of rivalries. Third, the Italian case underscores the need for renewed theoretical efforts. For instance, domestic factors apparently shaped the intensity and the modes of Italy's Indo-Pacific engagement which could result in interesting theory-driven studies. Future research on IFP may integrate structural variables into mid-range theories of foreign policy change to better capture the complex interaction between systemic incentives – especially under GPC – and domestic adaptation.

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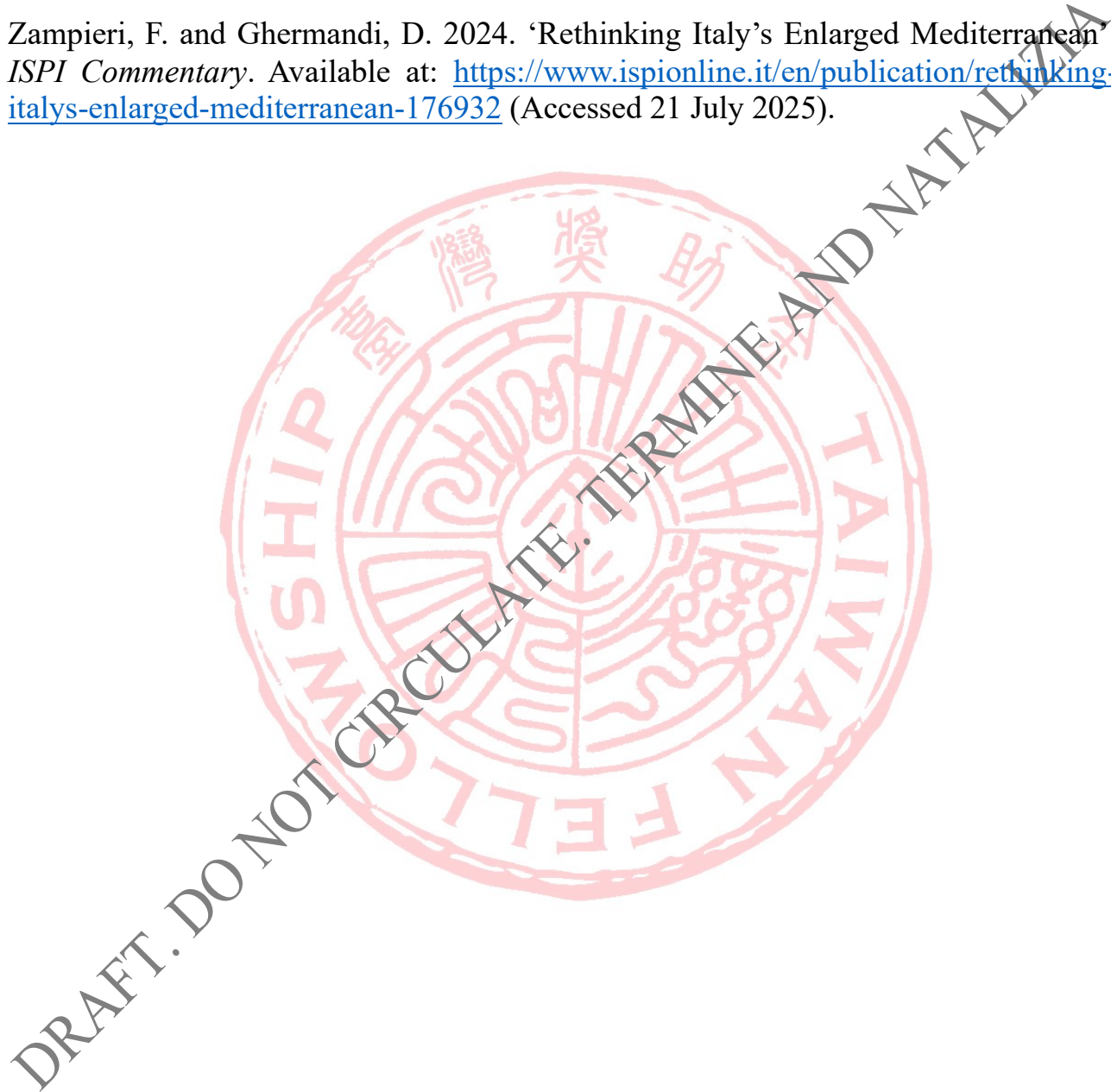


Table 1. Italy's Alignment with U.S. on China

Category	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Italy-China Bilateral Relationship	Golden power bans against Huawei	Re-examination of BRI MoU	Ban of technology transfer to China (robotics)	Termination of BRI MoU; New government-imposed golden power on Chinese holder of Pirelli	Violation screening for Chinese holder of Pirelli; Golden power on Chinese buy-back over shipbuilding company Ferretti	Government-imposed exclusion of Chinese holder from direction of Pirelli
Indo-Pacific Military Collaboration		Training of Japanese pilots at IFTS	Naval Exercise with JMSDF	Komodo 2023	Bilateral military drills with US, India, Japan; CMF; Pacific Dragon; Pitch Black; RIMPAC; Rising Sun; UN Monitoring of North Korea	Komodo 2025; Pacific security maritime exchange and UN monitoring of North Korea
Indo-Pacific Military Deployments				PPA Morosini	CS Cavour; Frigate Alpino; PPA Montecuccoli; Air Force Indo-Pacific Jump	Frigate Marceglia
Indo-Pacific Defence Collaborations		Frigate Contract to Indonesia, then frozen; Fincantieri-Daewoo Collaboration for ROK carrier	New agreements with India and Japan Official launch of GCAP	Strategic Partnership with Japan; Defense Cooperation MoU with India and joining S&T pillar within India's Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative Leonardo returns to India	2 PPAs Contract to Indonesia	Talks to sell decommissioned CS Garibaldi to Indonesia