



Why France and Italy Should Engage the Indo-Pacific Together

Paco Milhiet and Emanuele Ballestracci



RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and with due credit to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

Why France and Italy Should Engage the Indo-Pacific Together

By Paco Milhiet and Emanuele Ballestracci

SYNOPSIS

The June 2026 Antibes summit between France and Italy delivered concrete outcomes on defence, energy and immigration. However, the Indo-Pacific was conspicuously absent from the agenda, remaining largely unexplored for Franco-Italian cooperation. With Europe's two most capable navies, closely aligned strategic priorities, and parallel bilateral development in the region, the two countries have the assets to build a structured Indo-Pacific co-engagement. Such a partnership could foster wider EU-ASEAN engagement.

COMMENTARY

On 25 June 2026, France and Italy held an intergovernmental [summit](#) in the Mediterranean city of Antibes. The meeting brought together ministers from nine portfolios. It was convened within the framework of the [Quirinal Treaty](#), signed in 2021 to deepen bilateral cooperation between the two countries. The summit produced concrete agreements in several areas: defence, nuclear energy, space, migration, and Mediterranean policy. However, one subject was conspicuously absent from the Antibes agenda: the Indo-Pacific, a region that remains unexplored for Franco-Italian cooperation – and one that future summits would do well to address.

Allies by Necessity

The Antibes summit marked the first Franco-Italian intergovernmental meeting in over six years. Relations between Paris and Rome have been strained by recurring tensions – over [illegal immigration](#), [industrial competition](#), and the [deployment of troops](#) to Ukraine. The personal relationship between France's President Emmanuel

Macron and Italy's Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, characterised by [mutual animosity](#), has done little to ease these frictions.

Yet the Treaty has been instrumental in fostering deeper cooperation and in setting clear short- to long-term priorities. In Antibes, both leaders emphasised areas of convergence rather than dwelling on disagreements: [substantial](#) economic ties, a new [security roadmap](#) for 2026–2031, and a joint task force on irregular migration and drug trafficking.

While the Franco-Italian rapprochement owes as much to external pressure as to genuine convergence, this European alignment opens new avenues for engagement with other regions beyond the traditional euro-transatlantic framework – most notably the Indo-Pacific.

The EU's Indo-Pacific Problem

The EU launched an Indo-Pacific [strategy](#) in September 2021 but has since faced structural obstacles that limit collective [European action](#). EU member states frequently pursue competing national agendas in the region, generating confusion among regional partners about Europe's strategic priorities and capacity to act as a unified [actor](#). These internal divisions are compounded by Europe's continued dependence on the United States for security, creating a vulnerability to policy shifts that may not align with its interests.

Moreover, recent geopolitical developments, such as the war in Ukraine and instability across the Middle East, have further [diverted](#) European political attention and defence resources away from the Indo-Pacific. The EU's considerable economic and normative weight will prove insufficient so long as it lacks the strategic agency to act independently in the region.

While adopting a fully unified European position remains a complex undertaking, enhanced bilateral and minilateral cooperation within the EU offers promising avenues for broader regional engagement and greater strategic clarity. In this regard, the Franco-Italian partnership in the Indo-Pacific presents considerable assets that should not be overlooked.

The Case for Wider Franco-Italian Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

France and Italy pursue two complementary approaches in the Indo-Pacific region. Paris' engagement rests on its status as a resident power and its assertive promotion of European cooperation in the region. Italy, though not a resident power, has expanded its regional footprint through trade, defence procurement, and naval deployments. Its engagement remains “[quiet](#),” driven largely by private-sector activism and its [Mediterranean enlargement strategy](#). Italy also benefits from the absence of a colonial past in Asia, which bolsters its image as a reliable partner.

At the security level, Paris and Rome have the two most capable navies in the EU, with a proven record of collaboration in regional security operations ([Atalanta](#),

[Aspides](#)), further emphasised by successive deployments of the carriers [Cavour](#) in 2024 and [Charles de Gaulle](#) in 2025.

Politically, Italy's [Indo-Pacific objectives](#) rest on pillars that closely mirror French priorities: upholding the primacy of international law and regional stability; advancing a broad conception of the Indo-Pacific that links Italy's expanded Mediterranean vision with France's sovereign presence in the Indian and Pacific Oceans; and strengthening bilateral relationships with ASEAN and regional states committed to a rules-based international order.

Where ASEAN Fits In

This alignment between French and Italian priorities finds its most tangible expression in a shared commitment to regional multilateralism – one that necessarily entails stronger ties with ASEAN and support for its centrality in the Indo-Pacific architecture. This ambition has already taken concrete institutional form when the EU and ASEAN elevated their relationship to a [Strategic Partnership](#) in 2020.

Enhanced cooperation between the two blocs would also reduce vulnerability to unilateral pressure from China and the United States, thereby fostering a more balanced multilateral framework. In this sense, the "[coalition of independents](#)" envisioned by President Macron at the Shangri-La Dialogue in 2025 could evolve into a durable "Euro-ASEAN way".

Beyond this multilateral vision, Rome and Paris have also been building bilateral momentum with ASEAN partners. On the Italian side, a series of high-level visits illustrates this trend: then Thai Prime Minister [Srettha Thavisin](#) and Singapore President [Tharman Shanmugaratnam](#) both travelled to Rome in 2024, followed by Malaysian Prime Minister [Anwar Ibrahim's](#) visit in 2025, marking an unprecedented deepening of [Italo-Malaysian](#) ties.

For France, since the start of his second term, Macron has visited four Southeast Asian capitals: [Bangkok](#) for the APEC summit in 2022, followed by Hanoi, Jakarta, and Singapore during his 2025 [regional tour](#). Moreover, Vietnamese leader To Lam's 2024 state visit upgraded ties to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, and Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto was the guest of honour at Bastille Day in 2025.

A structured Franco-Italian dialogue therefore appears as a meaningful step towards a more coherent and credible EU posture in the Indo-Pacific. Such a framework would enable France and Italy to translate their parallel ASEAN commitments into genuinely joint action by coordinating their positions, aligning development priorities, and speaking with greater weight in a region where European fragmentation has too often diluted European ambition.

Symbolically, [France](#) and [Italy](#) were granted ASEAN Development Partner status on the same day, 9 September 2020; a convergence that has yet to translate into coordinated action but may well point to a shared destiny. The time has come to

move beyond parallel engagement and advance jointly toward the next stage of their relationship with Southeast Asia and the wider Indo-Pacific.

Dr Paco Milhiet is a Visiting Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University. Emanuele Ballestracci is a Junior Research Fellow at the Turin World Affairs Institute (T.wai) and a freelance consultant.

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798

Please share this publication with your friends. They can subscribe to RSIS publications by scanning the QR Code below.

