

Italian-Australian Relations: The Untapped Potential of Two Global Partners

by Gabriele Abbondanza and Simone Battiston

ABSTRACT

Italy and Australia share a long history of bilateral relations, the same worldview and network of global partners, and similar challenges in a variety of areas. To address them, they coordinate their international efforts with allies and partners within multilateral frameworks, at the partial detriment of direct bilateral cooperation. The 75th anniversary of diplomatic relations, which falls on this year, warrants an appraisal of the areas and the ways in which bilateral ties can be strengthened. Specifically, five key areas display significant potential for greater cooperation: i) shared international goals; ii) trade; iii) defence; iv) scientific cooperation; and v) people-to-people links. At the same time, three complementary developments could address both the untapped potential in terms of cooperation and the few but noticeable barriers hindering closer ties. These are: a) a new strategic partnership; b) the design of compatible Indo-Pacific strategies; and c) the joint membership of relevant multilaterals. Lastly, a number of planned initiatives could help to achieve these goals.

Italy | Australia | Bilateral relations | Italian foreign policy | Italian military policy

keywords

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by Gabriele Abbondanza and Simone Battiston*

Introduction

Italy and Australia share a long history of bilateral relations and a growing trend towards multilateral cooperation. Internationally, they are both “Global North” liberal democracies, embedded in a rich network of international organisations (the United Nations, the G20 and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, among others), treaties, alignments and alliances aimed at strengthening international law and the liberal order. Regionally, they play a major role in their respective regions, namely Europe and the so-called “Enlarged Mediterranean” (*Mediterraneo allargato*) in Italy’s case,¹ and the Indo-Pacific – with a particular emphasis on the South Pacific – in Australia’s case.²

Bilaterally, relations are very cordial and growing in a variety of fields. While, for decades, Italian-Australian relations revolved around Italian migration to Australia,³ in more recent times both public and private ties have outgrown traditional fields of engagement based on societal links. The year 2024 marks the 75th anniversary of formal diplomatic relations, a significant milestone that therefore warrants a new appraisal of Italian-Australian relations.

¹ Fabrizio Coticchia and Matteo Mazziotti di Celso, “Still on the Same Path? Italian Foreign and Defence Policy in the Enlarged Mediterranean”, in *Mediterranean Politics*, 10 January 2024, DOI 10.1080/13629395.2023.2294252.

² Rory Medcalf, “An Australian Vision of the Indo-Pacific and What It Means for Southeast Asia”, in Daljit Singh and Malcolm Cook (eds), *Southeast Asian Affairs 2019*, ISEAS, September 2019, p. 53-60.

³ Bruno Mascitelli, “Italy and Australia: A Relationship Made and Unmade by Immigration”, in *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 69, No. 3 (2015), p. 339-355, DOI 10.1080/10357718.2014.950628.

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In the light of this important occasion, and considering the goals and challenges that Rome and Canberra share, this paper appraises how to strengthen bilateral relations. Following this introduction, it concisely retraces Italian-Australian relations through time. Next, it explores the untapped potential for cooperation in five key areas: i) shared international goals; ii) trade; iii) defence; iv) scientific cooperation; and v) people-to-people links. The following section assesses some of the known obstacles to closer ties. Against this backdrop, it advances the case for a strategic partnership, which can be further supported by compatible Indo-Pacific strategies and the joint membership of relevant minilaterals.

1. Italian-Australian relations

Broadly speaking, relations between Italy and Australia have much evolved since Italy became a unified state in 1861 and Australia became a federation in 1901.⁴ Most of the two countries' points of contact revolved around Italian migrants across various waves in the 20th century. These elements eventually made the Italian community one of the most established and integrated in Australia.⁵ While much has been written on migration-related matters concerning the past few decades,⁶ considerably less has been published on contemporary bilateral relations. The latter have grown in quantity and quality throughout the 21st century, and can be grouped into four broad categories: social, political, economic and strategic.

Social ties are multifaceted and derive from a variety of elements. These include the significant presence of the Italian heritage in Australia (according to the 2021 census, 4.4 per cent or 1.1 million Australian residents declared Italian ancestry), the tiny yet dynamic Australian community in Italy (around 1,700 people permanently living in Italy), two-way tourism, language learning, cultural exchanges and modern migratory flows.⁷ Despite the above, socio-cultural relations can be further expanded, as explained later in this paper.

With few exceptions,⁸ political ties between Rome and Canberra slowly tightened from the 1990s onwards. This was in part due to the presence of Italian members

⁴ Gianfranco Cresciani, *The Italians in Australia*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

⁵ Dino Ruzzene and Simone Battiston, *Italian-Australians: From Migrant Workers to Upwardly Mobile Middle Class. A Study of Occupational Mobility among Australians of Italian Background, 1971-2001*, Macleod, Italian Australian Institute at La Trobe University, 2006.

⁶ For a comprehensive review, see Gabriele Abbondanza and Simone Battiston (eds), *Italy and Australia*, cit.

⁷ See Bill Kent, Ros Pesman and Cynthia Troup (eds), *Australians in Italy. Contemporary Lives and Impressions*, Melbourne, Monash University Publishing, 2010; Stephen Castles, "Italians in Australia: The Impact of a Recent Migration on the Culture and Society of a Postcolonial Nation", in *Center for Migration Studies Special Issues*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (May 1994), p. 342-367, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2050-411X.1994.tb00771.x>.

⁸ Such as the "frigate saga", a much-debated international tender, at the end of which the Australian government selected an unproven British design for its next-generation frigates over operational Italian and Spanish ones, despite the contrary view of many Australian defence specialists.

of parliament elected in the offshore electoral district of Asia-Africa-Oceania-Antarctica, the reciprocal inclusion in the two countries' Working Holiday Visa schemes, the activism of skilled diplomats on both sides and recent high-level meetings between Italian and Australian prime ministers and politicians, among others.⁹ Even so, in this case too there is untapped potential.

Economically, trade flows grew between 2000 and 2019 (+75 per cent) although at a slower pace than that of Italy's European peers, with the exclusion of the United Kingdom (+51 per cent). To wit, in the same time frame, two-way trade with France grew by 132 per cent, with Germany by 137 per cent, and with Spain by 191 per cent. According to official data, bilateral trade in 2023 was worth 6.06 billion euros (Italian exports to Australia: 5.24 billion euros, Italian imports from Australia 0.82 billion euros).¹⁰ As discussed below, there is room for improvement in this area as well.

In terms of strategic cooperation, broadly understood, Rome and Canberra have elevated the significance of their relationship in some areas, while others have followed an opposite trend. Defence procurement falls in the latter category, as Australian imports from Italy had a combined value of just 0.408 billion US dollars in the 2000-2023 period, as opposed to imports from the UK (0.695), France (1.423), Germany (1.806) and Spain (2.734), despite the complementarity of what Italy exports and Australia imports in terms of defence systems (see below).¹¹ Conversely, bilateral scientific ties are strong and growing, and comprise world-class projects and thousands of highly-impactful joint scientific publications.¹² In both of these areas, there is potential for stronger collaboration.

In essence, Italian-Australian relations have undeniably strengthened throughout the 21st century. Still, there are numerous fields that would benefit from closer ties, and even sectors that are enjoying positive trends display noticeable levels of untapped potential. Starting from these considerations, the following sections assess how cooperation could be lifted in the most prominent areas, prior to advancing three broader proposals.

2. The untapped potential for cooperation

Official relations between Rome and Canberra, as well as both joint public-private and private collaborations, can be strengthened while addressing shared politico-

⁹ Robert Pascoe, "A Historical Overview of Italian-Australian Bilateral Relations", in Gabriele Abbondanza and Simone Battiston (eds), *Italy and Australia. Redefining Bilateral Relations for the Twenty-First Century*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, p. 25-48, DOI 10.1007/978-981-99-3216-0_2.

¹⁰ Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *InfoMercati Esteri: Australia*, updated 13 June 2024, p. 40-41, https://www.infomercatiesteri.it/public/ime/schede-sintesi/r_119_australia.pdf.

¹¹ SIPRI, *Arms Transfer Database*, 2024, <https://armstransfers.sipri.org>. Please note that the value in euro of one Australian dollar is, as of 11 July 2024, 0.62 euro.

¹² Italian Embassy in Australia website: *Scientific Diplomacy*, <https://ambcanberra.esteri.it/en/?p=94>.

economic, strategic and social interests. More specifically, Italian-Australian relations can be promoted across five main areas, all of which are explicitly of interest to both countries.¹³

2.1 Shared international goals

Starting from *shared international goals*, official documents attest the two countries' vital interests in the upholding of international law and the liberal order. Further, both countries are formal allies of the United States, Italy through the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and Australia through ANZUS, the trilateral treaty that also involves New Zealand. Additionally, the two countries are major components of a global network of international organisations and bilateral partnerships which intertwine and comprise what is commonly known as the "liberal international order".¹⁴

Rome and Canberra share the same international goals, the same allies and partners, and both are concerned about the revisionism espoused by Russia and China. They seek steady and substantial forms of cooperation in *multilateral frameworks*, that is alongside allies and/or partners and relevant regional and international organisations such as the G20, the UN, the World Trade Organisation, and many others. However, *bilateral ways* of pursuing shared goals are less common, possibly due to the legacies of what used to be a very cordial but non-strategic relationship until not long ago. Against this backdrop, there are two main ways in which stronger bilateral ties could complement cooperation efforts in multilateral fora.

First, Italy is pivoting to the Indo-Pacific through economic, security and normative means, alongside its own area of primary interest, namely the "Enlarged Mediterranean", which overlaps the Indo-Pacific's western quadrant.¹⁵ This macro-region is Australia's own geopolitical and geoeconomic landscape, and Canberra is highly involved in promoting its development and stability. Therefore, joint initiatives in the Indo-Pacific are arguably a main ground for enhancing both bilateral ties and common interests. The planned stop of the Italian *Cavour* carrier strike group in Northern Australia, to join the "Pitch Black" exercise, is one of the many examples of how this could take shape.¹⁶

¹³ See Italian Embassy in Australia website: *Italy and Australia*, <https://ambcanberra.esteri.it/en/?p=29>; Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade website: *Italy Country Brief*, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/node/109835>.

¹⁴ Italian Ministry of Defence, *White Paper for International Security and Defence*, July 2015, http://web.archive.org/web/20220203181922/https://www.difesa.it/Primo_Piano/Documents/2015/07_Luglio/White%20book.pdf; Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *2017 Foreign Policy White Paper*, November 2017, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/node/133684>.

¹⁵ Gabriele Abbondanza, "Italy's Quiet Pivot to the Indo-Pacific: Towards an Italian Indo-Pacific Strategy", in *International Political Science Review*, 8 September 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1177/01925121231190093>.

¹⁶ Australian Air Force, *Exercise Pitch Black Participants*, 11 July 2024, <https://www.airforce.gov.au/node/452>.

Second, Australia has lost its key partner (the UK) within the EU due to Brexit. As the EU remains Australia's third-largest trading partner, it is vital for Canberra to develop closer ties with it, as the existing EU-Australia Framework Agreement is insufficient and the negotiations for a bilateral trade agreement somewhat struggle to move forward. In this complex scenario, Italy could leverage both its intra-EU influence (second largest manufacturing country, third largest economy) and its cordial relations with Australia to advance common interests – understood as their broad support to a liberal international order which is increasingly threatened – in the economic sphere too.¹⁷

2.2 Trade

The second area which would benefit from closer bilateral ties is two-way trade. Despite being two major world economies (Italy's GDP ranks 9th and Australia's 13th globally), bilateral trade levels are far below those of comparable European countries. According to Australia's latest data, two-way trade in goods with Italy stands at around 10.5 billion Australian dollars, less than that with France (12.6) the United Kingdom (14) and Germany (21.6). Trade in services is in even worse shape at just 1.9 billion Australian dollars, considerably less than that with France (3), Germany (6.7) and the United Kingdom (17.2).¹⁸

These data are surprising given the two economies' remarkable complementarity. In essence, Italy exports processed/final products (Australia's main imports) and Australia exports raw materials/resources (a significant part of Italy's imports). More specifically, Italy's 2nd largest import item is crude petroleum (which is Australia's 9th largest export item), its 5th largest import item is precious and non-ferrous metals (all of which figure as Australia's top exports), and its 6th largest is natural gas (Australia's 3rd largest export item).¹⁹ Conversely, Australia's 3rd largest imports are cars (Italy's 5th largest export item), its 9th largest imports are medicaments (Italy's 1st export item), its 12th largest imports are engineering machinery (all of

¹⁷ Andrea Benvenuti, "The Australian Interest in the European Union and the Italian Interest in the Asia-Pacific", in Gabriele Abbondanza and Simone Battiston (eds), *Italy and Australia. Redefining Bilateral Relations for the Twenty-First Century*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, p. 189-212, DOI 10.1007/978-981-99-3216-0_8. Additionally, and complementing the above points, the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the new significance of digital diplomacy (also known as virtual diplomacy and eDiplomacy). This new and more direct manner of conducting foreign relations could undoubtedly be put to use to support closer ties between Rome and Canberra, complementing the inevitably longer procedures involving face-to-face meetings. The authors wish to thank former Australian Ambassador to Italy, Margaret Twomey, for her insights into digital diplomacy concerning Italy-Australia relations.

¹⁸ Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Australia's Direction of Goods and Services Trade – Calendar Years from 1989 to Present*, last updated in May 2024, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/node/122222>.

¹⁹ Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Osservatorio economico: Statistiche relative all'import/export di merci italiane*, updated in June 2024, <https://www.infomercatiesteri.it/osservatorio-economico-intercambio-commerciale-italiano-mondo.php>.

which figure as Italy's top exports), and its 21st largest import items are plastic articles (Italy's 11th export item).²⁰ What emerges from this brief overview of the two countries' imports and exports is that the prominent complementarity of their international trade profiles ought to be exploited more.

The Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC), an open access data platform created in 2011, compares the economic characteristics and trade flows of the Italian and the Australian cases. It highlights where Italy holds a comparative advantage over Australia and vice versa – which confirms the data outlined above – while concurrently pointing to the two economies' degree of complexity and therefore emphasising the strategic profitability of closer commercial relations.²¹

The need to exploit the untapped potential of Australia-Italy trade is effectively supported by diplomats, members of parliament and other politicians with a special interest in either country, Italy's chambers of commerce and trade agencies and Australia's trade commissions, Italy's multinationals operating in Australia and Australia's direct investments in Italy, as well as numerous entrepreneurs. Notwithstanding this substantial network, there are some elements hindering stronger trade relations – explored in section 3.

2.3 Defence

Italy and Australia are two countries with a significant role in global defence matters, albeit for different strategic, geographical and historical reasons. The Royal Elcano Institute, whose well-known military indicator uses a weighted sum of military assets combined with states' international deployments and overseas bases, ranks Italy 8th and Australia 11th globally.²²

Moreover, the two countries share the same strategic challenges in terms of vital sea routes that are threatened by maritime crimes, terrorism, piracy and violations of freedom of navigation and overflight, with key hotspots being Bab el-Mandeb and the Strait of Hormuz in the case of Italy, and the South China Sea and the Strait of Malacca in Australia's case. More to the point, as mentioned earlier, Italy's primary sphere of interest (the "Enlarged Mediterranean") and Australia's (the Indo-Pacific) overlap in the western Indian Ocean, which highlights how comparable challenges can take place in areas that are directly relevant to both. Similarly, both countries attempt to address irregular migration through stern policies, based on externalisation and with the involvement of the navy and other branches of the armed forces.

²⁰ Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Australia's Trade in Goods and Services 2023*, last updated in May 2024, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/node/151169>.

²¹ Observatory of Economic Complexity (OEC): *Australia/Italy Trade*, <https://oec.world/en/profile/bilateral-country/aus/partner/ita>.

²² Elcano Royal Institute, *Global Presence Ranking*, <https://www.globalpresence.realinstitutoelcano.org/en?dimension=military&countries=380&countries=36&years=2023>.

However, despite a context which is conducive to strategic cooperation on common security issues – especially though not exclusively in the Indian Ocean, where their areas of interest overlap – Italy and Australia do not collaborate extensively in this respect. Notwithstanding recent multilateral cooperation in Iraq and Afghanistan,²³ Italy's defence cooperation with France, Germany, the United Kingdom, the United States and Japan is much stronger, as is Australia's defence cooperation with the United States, Japan and the United Kingdom. As before, the overlap in the two countries' key partners should not go unnoticed.

One effective way of boosting defence cooperation and interoperability is joint participation in major naval expositions and large military exercises. The two countries' presence in the IMDEX defence exhibition and the Indo-Pacific International Maritime Expo in 2023, and their joint drills with Japan in August-September 2023 and in Australia's own "Pitch Black" exercise in July-August 2024 – the latter featuring the deployment of Italy's *Cavour* carrier strike group – are prominent illustrations of how to lift defence cooperation to higher levels in the coming years,²⁴ and ought to be replicated in the future.

On the other hand, defence procurement is not following the same upwards trajectory, which is surprising for two main reasons. Australia is one of the world's top importers of weapons and defence systems. According to SIPRI's latest data, in the 2000-2023 period Australia ranked 5th globally for arms' imports (total value of 22.545 billion US dollars), with its main imports being military aircraft, warships, missiles, sensors, armoured vehicles, engines and naval weapons, which will soon be boosted by US-built nuclear-powered submarines under the AUKUS agreement.²⁵ Second, Italy is one of the world's major exporters. According to the same source, Italy was the 7th largest arms exporter globally in the same time frame (combined value of 17.022 billion dollars), and its main exports are often compatible with Australia's imports. Despite these prominent developments, Australian imports of Italian defence systems has been negligible, with a total value of just 0.408 billion dollars for the 23-year period (1.8 per cent of Australia's imports).

This is a perplexing condition, and a stronger acknowledgement of the unexpressed value of Italian-Australian defence relations – as per the recommendations outlined in section 3 – would benefit both countries and would contribute to strengthen bilateral ties more broadly.

2.4 Scientific cooperation

Scientific, technical and academic cooperation between Italy and Australia is strong and has been experiencing an ongoing upwards trend for the past 40

²³ Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Italy Country Brief*, cit.

²⁴ Aaron-Matthew Lariosa, "Italian Navy to Ramp up Indo-Pacific Engagement in 2024", in *Naval News*, 10 January 2024, <https://www.navalnews.com/?p=53068>.

²⁵ SIPRI, *Arms Transfer Database*, cit.

years. This is due to a number of elements, including the vibrant community of academics working in each other's country (mostly Italian nationals in Australia), the emergence of internet-based technologies facilitating long-distance collaborations, numerous agreements between universities, institutes and private centres, and two dedicated agreements between Rome and Canberra, struck in 1975 and 2017, which paved the way for stronger cultural and scientific collaboration.

Indeed, Italy's embassy in Australia reports that yearly joint publications rose from a few dozens in 1993 to more than 4,000 in 2022, according to Elsevier-Scopus data.²⁶ It also highlights the fields in which collaborative efforts are stronger, namely biomedical sciences, physics and astronomy.²⁷ Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade too openly notes the country's scientific cooperation with Italy, highlighting in particular the collaboration in the field of space exploration.²⁸

According to Scimago's (Scopus) 2024 International Science Ranking (ISR), Italy and Australia are two major global players in the scientific world, ranking 8th and 10th by number of scientific publications, respectively.²⁹ Moreover, while the two countries' scientific profile is comparable, there are some differences which could pave the way for even closer cooperation. By way of example, Italy has a stronger impact in biochemistry, genetics, physics and astronomy,³⁰ whereas Australia has a more prominent scientific record in nursing and the social sciences (collectively).³¹ New forms of scientific, academic and/or technical collaborations, be them publicly-supported or privately-driven, could arguably turn these differences in a complementarity to be exploited in the areas highlighted by this paper, as well in other ones.

Relatedly, Italy can also ease Australia's participation in world-class EU research and funding frameworks. Furthermore, scientific cooperation can be promoted in different ways, including larger public funds, stronger cooperation between public and private centres, a combination of "bottom-up" and "top-down" policy approaches, and support to dedicated associations such as the Association of Italian Researchers in Australia (ARIA).³²

²⁶ Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Italy Country Brief*, cit.

²⁷ Italian Embassy in Australia, *Scientific Diplomacy*, cit.

²⁸ Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Italy Country Brief*, cit.

²⁹ Scimago, *International Science Ranking*, <https://www.scimagojr.com/countryrank.php>.

³⁰ Scimago, *Italy*, <https://www.scimagojr.com/countrysearch.php?country=IT>.

³¹ Scimago, *Australia*, <https://www.scimagojr.com/countrysearch.php?country=AU>.

³² Ilaria S. Pagani and Tiziana Torresi, "Italian-Australian Scientific and Research Cooperation", in Gabriele Abbondanza and Simone Battiston (eds), *Italy and Australia. Redefining Bilateral Relations for the Twenty-First Century*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, p. 241-265, DOI 10.1007/978-981-99-3216-0_10.

2.5 People-to-people links

The fifth area that would benefit from closer ties between Italy and Australia revolves around people-to-people (P2P) links, whose wide scope can be summarised into two categories for analytical purposes: migration and culture.

In terms of migration relations, the presence of Italy-born residents in Australia is fast ageing and declining in absolute terms, and contemporary Italian migration is remarkably different from its earlier iterations. The latter now mainly comprises young and skilled migrants temporarily moving to Australia, much like it happens in other European and North American countries, a condition that is facilitated by reciprocal agreements allowing for favourable conditions to obtain temporary visas.³³ In this respect, recent research argues for a number of ways with which to improve social ties, including stronger support for the Italian community abroad, given its bridging role with Italian authorities, and better policies and assistance for those facing significant challenges, as the severe restrictions to travel imposed during the Covid-19 pandemic painfully attested.³⁴ Australian migration to Italy, on the other hand, is much smaller, yet it has produced a vibrant community mostly located in Northern and Central Italy. Here too, there are issues that hinder both greater numbers of Australian migrants and the broader success of those who already reside in Italy, including linguistic barriers, the lack of flexibility in the job market, bureaucracy and others which could be partially solved through specific agreements.³⁵

Second, although socio-cultural relations are significant, there is much scope for improvement. To begin with, while Italian culture is well-known and appreciated in Australia, Australian culture is much less familiar among Italians, which is due to a number of socio-cultural and historical reasons.³⁶ More to the point, while there are remarkable exceptions, Italian relations with Indigenous Australians are limited to non-State actors and in need of public support and greater awareness to develop more.³⁷ Conversely, language remains one of the most effective cultural

³³ Among the several, working holiday visas (WHV) and skilled visas are prominent examples.

³⁴ Simone Battiston, "Italians in Australia in the Twenty-First Century", in Gabriele Abbondanza and Simone Battiston (eds), *Italy and Australia. Redefining Bilateral Relations for the Twenty-First Century*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, p. 49-80, DOI 10.1007/978-981-99-3216-0_3.

³⁵ Giulia Marchetti and Loretta Baldassar, "Australians in Italy in the Twenty-First Century", in Gabriele Abbondanza and Simone Battiston (eds), *Italy and Australia. Redefining Bilateral Relations for the Twenty-First Century*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, p. 81-111, DOI 10.1007/978-981-99-3216-0_4.

³⁶ Gabriele Abbondanza, "Time for a Strategic Partnership: The Scope for International Cooperation between Italy and Australia", in Gabriele Abbondanza and Simone Battiston (eds), *Italy and Australia. Redefining Bilateral Relations for the Twenty-First Century*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, p. 155-187, DOI 10.1007/978-981-99-3216-0_7.

³⁷ Francesco Ricatti and Matteo Dutto, "First Nations Sovereignty: Towards a Decolonial Approach to Italy-Australia Relations", in Gabriele Abbondanza and Simone Battiston (eds), *Italy and Australia. Redefining Bilateral Relations for the Twenty-First Century*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, p. 113-136, DOI 10.1007/978-981-99-3216-0_5.

linkages between Italians and Australians, also thanks to Australians' interest in learning Italian. Here, too, dedicated research stresses the importance of ongoing support to language as a time-tested mean of cultural exchange, especially through larger funds, renewed awareness among policymakers, new language-focused initiatives, schools and university departments, and specific policies for all of the above.³⁸ Lastly, acknowledging how socio-political phenomena impact on the two countries would help to further enhance bilateral cooperation.³⁹ As mentioned earlier, there are specific diplomatic tools that can streamline and promote all of these recommendations (see section 3).

2.6 Some obstacles

There are specific reasons that help to explain why the many recommendations that have been outlined in this paper have not been implemented yet, which are here grouped in three categories. The first one is rooted in the two countries' bilateral history and can be expressed as the lack of a "sense of urgency" in promoting bilateral relations, compared to countries that are conventionally regarded as strategically more important, such as France, Germany and the United States for Italy, or the United Kingdom, the United States and Japan for Australia, for example.

Second, there are inevitable differences in how the two countries function (Italy is a republic and an EU member, Australia is a constitutional monarchy and is not part of a comparable supranational entity), and the geopolitical focus they have. Italy's relations traditionally focus on Europe, the Middle East and Northern Africa, the Sahel and the Horn of Africa, as well as North America. By contrast, Australia's relations are focused on the South Pacific, East Asia and the Anglosphere more in general. In short, the interest in each other's region is a more recent development.

The third set of reasons concerns more specific commercial and investment issues, as openly acknowledged by both Rome and Canberra. On the one hand, Italy explicitly seeks greater protection against counterfeit luxury products and for regional and traditional specialities, an easier recognition of Italian qualifications, more stable efforts concerning oil and gas explorations, more favourable visa policies, and others. On the other, Australia has mentioned the weak growth rates of the Italian economy, its slow bureaucratic and judiciary systems, the frequent change of governments, the low levels of Italian imports of Australian goods, and Italy's lower level of direct investment as grounds for its limited economic exposure to Italy.⁴⁰

³⁸ Cristiana Palmieri, "Connecting Australia and Italy through Language", in Gabriele Abbondanza and Simone Battiston (eds), *Italy and Australia. Redefining Bilateral Relations for the Twenty-First Century*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, p. 137-154, DOI 10.1007/978-981-99-3216-0_6.

³⁹ Kurt Sengul and Francesco Bailo, "Twenty-First Century Populism in Australia and Italy: A Comparative Analysis", in Gabriele Abbondanza and Simone Battiston (eds), *Italy and Australia. Redefining Bilateral Relations for the Twenty-First Century*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, p. 213-239, DOI 10.1007/978-981-99-3216-0_9.

⁴⁰ Gabriele Abbondanza, "Time for a Strategic Partnership", cit.

It is understood that there are other elements, including their geographical distance, the variability of political interest in promoting closer ties, and regional issues which may divert such efforts. More to the point, the protraction of all of the above through time creates path dependencies that can be difficult to overcome when attempting to promote a change in countries' international relations.⁴¹ Starting from these premises, and considering both the recommendations and the few but noticeable barriers outlined so far, the below section provides further insights into how bilateral relations could be strengthened substantially for the years to come.

3. The way ahead: Strategic partnerships, the Indo-Pacific and minilaterals

Both the unexpressed potential and the barriers discussed above can be at least partially addressed in three complementary manners: a) by negotiating a strategic partnership (SP), which can be further reinforced by b) compatible Indo-Pacific strategies, and c) the joint membership of relevant minilaterals.

Strategic partnerships are a politico-diplomatic tool that is becoming increasingly common, since they bolster areas of interest while retaining a higher degree of flexibility than formal treaties (it is one of the key procedural components of modern alignments).⁴² In more practical terms, a SP takes the form of a document promoting stronger cooperation in specific fields, therefore offering preferential pathways.

With reference to Italian-Australian relations, a new SP could elevate cooperation in terms of shared goals and challenges, trade and economic governance, defence capabilities and procurement, scientific cooperation, socio-cultural relations, and others, as Rome and Canberra would deem appropriate.⁴³ To that end, politicians, diplomats, academics, entrepreneurs, major companies and other interested parties may be involved in the initial stages of the negotiations to hone and improve the entire process. Given their broad scope, SPs' negotiations require more time compared to narrower agreements, yet existing documents are somewhat standardised and could well serve as a serviceable blueprint that can then be tailored to the unexploited potential of bilateral relations that has been discussed above.

⁴¹ Scott E. Page, "Path Dependence", in *Quarterly Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 1. No. 1 (2006), p. 87-115, DOI 10.1561/100.00000006.

⁴² Thomas S. Wilkins, "'Alignment', Not 'Alliance'—The Shifting Paradigm of International Security Cooperation: Toward a Conceptual Taxonomy of Alignment", in *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 1 (January 2012): p. 53-76, DOI 10.1017/S0260210511000209.

⁴³ Gabriele Abbondanza, "Time for a Strategic Partnership", cit.

Italy already has entirely-comparable strategic partnerships with some of Australia's key Indo-Pacific partners, including Japan, India, South Korea and Vietnam,⁴⁴ and Australia has equally-comparable strategic partnerships with Italy's European peers, namely France, Germany and the United Kingdom.⁴⁵ Therefore, the potential decision to sign an Italian-Australian strategic partnership would not only promote the two countries' reciprocal interests, but would also strengthen their shared international network of alignments.

On this note, two additional considerations can complement the above and further promote Italian-Australian relations. First, both countries are involved in the Indo-Pacific.⁴⁶ Somewhat surprisingly, neither has released an Indo-Pacific strategy yet. Given the overlap of the western quadrant of the Indo-Pacific and the eastern end of the "Enlarged Mediterranean" in the western Indian Ocean, Indo-Pacific strategies that take Rome's and Canberra's views into account would further bolster Italian-Australian relations.⁴⁷

Second, and relatedly, the use of minilaterals (i.e. small flexible groupings addressing specific issues⁴⁸) is increasingly common. By way of example, Australia is a member of both AUKUS (the Australia-UK-US enhanced partnership) and the Quad/Quad Plus (a minilateral comprising the United States, Japan, India and Australia, plus additional countries with ad-hoc participation), while Italy is a member of GCAP, a cooperation platform designed to develop a 6th generation aircraft, in cooperation with the United Kingdom and Japan. The addition of either country to such minilaterals, especially in the case of the Quad Plus, given its broad focus spanning from pandemic responses to maritime and oceanic governance, could become a third and complementary way with which to elevate Italian-Australian relations.

Conclusion

Broadly speaking, Italian-Australian relations display a positive trend which has been consolidating in the past few years. Today, bilateral ties exhibit significant

⁴⁴ Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs website search: *strategic partnership*, <https://www.esteri.it/en/?s=strategic+partnership>.

⁴⁵ Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade website search: *strategic partnership*, <https://www.dfat.gov.au/search?keys=Strategic+Partnership>.

⁴⁶ Rory Medcalf, "Pivoting the Map: Australia's Indo-Pacific System", in *Centre of Gravity Series*, No. 1 (November 2012), <http://hdl.handle.net/1885/228705>; Gabriele Abbondanza, "Italy's Quiet Pivot to the Indo-Pacific", cit.

⁴⁷ As discussed at length by Gabriele Abbondanza and Alison Burrows (Chargé d'affaires at the Australian Embassy in Rome at the time of writing) in two recent parliamentary hearings in Rome. See: <https://webtv.camera.it/evento/23353> and <https://webtv.camera.it/evento/25715>.

⁴⁸ Bhubhinder Singh and Sarah Teo (eds), *Minilateralism in the Indo-Pacific. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, Lancang-Mekong Cooperation Mechanism, and ASEAN*, London/New York, Routledge, 2020, DOI 10.4324/9781003000839.

untapped potential which, if addressed, would foster closer *bilateral ties* across several areas such as shared international goals, trade, defence, science and people-to-people links. Additionally, an Italian-Australian strategic partnership, compatible Indo-Pacific strategies, and the joint membership of relevant minilaterals would promote the two countries' cooperation on *minilateral and multilateral* levels as well.⁴⁹

The year 2024 marks the 75th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Rome and Canberra, and, since commemorations of this kind are often used to accompany new initiatives, it would be mutually-beneficial and therefore desirable if both countries decided to take a step further in order to redefine their bilateral relations for the 21st century.⁵⁰ To that end, this paper has offered a number of practical suggestions, many of which could be incorporated into the negotiations of a new strategic partnership, further supported by compatible Indo-Pacific strategies and the joint membership of relevant minilaterals.

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⁴⁹ Simone Battiston and Gabriele Abbondanza, "Where to from Here? The Need for a Long-Term Strategy in Italian-Australian Relations", in Gabriele Abbondanza and Simone Battiston (eds), *Italy and Australia. Redefining Bilateral Relations for the Twenty-First Century*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2023, p. 267-278, DOI 10.1007/978-981-99-3216-0_11.

⁵⁰ In a similar vein, a number of dedicated initiatives are planned to celebrate Italian-Australian relations and their 75th anniversary. Among the several, one will be hosted at the Italian Senate, on 16 July 2024, thanks to the institutional hospitality of Sen. Francesco Giacobbe – see <http://tiny.cc/italy-australia-senate> – and another one will be hosted at the University of Sydney on 8 August 2024. Through initiatives such as these ones, as well as with careful analyses assessing both current limitations and ways to strengthen bilateral ties, we argue that broader and more effective forms of cooperation can be achieved, to the clear benefit of the two countries' partners, institutions, companies, research centres, and societies alike.

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