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Commentaries

New Series

THE ADRIATIC ADVANTAGE:

FROM A SMALL SEA TO A GATEWAY TO THE FUTURE

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How precious this small sea is: the Adriatic reaches deep into the European continent, almost like a fjord, bringing the Mediterranean close to the heart of Europe — to Mitteleuropa, where Bled lies.

Only a few hundred kilometres from Bled, the Mediterranean reaches its northernmost ports: Venice, Trieste, Koper and Rijeka. Here, the Mediterranean comes closest to some of Europe's largest markets and industrial centres — from Germany to Italy, from Croatia and Slovenia to Central and Eastern Europe. Here, it comes closest not only to the Baltic Sea but also to the Black Sea. And here three great cultures of our Western civilisation meet: Latin, Slavic and Germanic. The Alps and the Mediterranean can divide. But at the most fruitful moments of our shared history, they have brought people together.

The importance of the Adriatic goes well beyond its modest size. It is a crucial part of the Mediterranean — itself a relatively small sea, but one that is literally at the centre of the world. And the Adriatic gives much back to the Mediterranean and to the wider world.

We never stop learning, and we need to do so especially when we are, like me, largely unfamiliar with the scientific disciplines that underpin our understanding of nature and innovation.

A few months ago, Paola Del Negro, Director General of the National Institute of Oceanography and Applied Research in Trieste (OGS) and an expert in marine biology and oceanography, explained to me the extraordinary role played by the Adriatic. Thanks to its cold currents, she described it as a kind of “engine” of the Mediterranean. The northern Adriatic is a key area for the formation of cold, dense waters during winter, particularly under the influence of strong winds such as the Bora. These cold and dense water masses sink and flow towards the deeper layers of the Mediterranean, contributing to its circulation and ventilation and ultimately to the exchange of water with the Atlantic through the Strait of Gibraltar. The lesson is simple but powerful: this small northern sea plays a vital role in keeping the much larger Mediterranean alive. The Adriatic, in other words, is not merely a gateway to the Mediterranean; it is one of the forces that keep it vibrant.

This is one of the reasons why Bled is such a fitting place to discuss the Adriatic and, more broadly, the Mediterranean as a whole. Situated between the Alps and the Mediterranean, between Central Europe and the

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sea, it offers a natural vantage point from which to consider the region's wider strategic significance. But the point is not simply to discuss. It is to act.

We should work to ensure that the Mediterranean — and within it the Adriatic and all the communities around its shores — remains a living sea, not only biologically, but also historically and economically. Seas have always shaped the destiny of economies. Around 80–90 per cent of world trade by volume is transported by sea. This alone tells us why freedom of navigation, as recognised by international law, must be preserved.

The issue is anything but theoretical. We see it in the consequences of disruption around the Strait of Hormuz, which can affect the daily lives of citizens at the petrol pump and the energy costs faced by our businesses. But for Europe, the principle goes well beyond Hormuz. Even more critical is freedom of navigation through Bab el-Mandeb, the maritime gateway connecting the Indian Ocean with the Red Sea and, through the Suez Canal, with the Mediterranean.

These passages must remain open. This is why the European Union established Operation ASPIDES to safeguard freedom of navigation in the Red Sea and around Bab el-Mandeb in response to the Houthi threat to international shipping. The Italian Navy is playing a leading role in this effort.

We are living through a period in which opportunities and risks are two sides of the same coin. We might even say that the countries of the Mediterranean — and particularly those of the Adriatic — are all in the same boat.

We can simply react to events. Or we can shape the future and become part of a major trend of growth. This trend has a name: the *Indo-Pacific*.

Our own participation in this transformation can have a name as well: the Indo-Mediterranean. It is a geopolitical vision in which our Mediterranean connects to the extraordinary dynamism of the vast space stretching from the Middle East and the Gulf economies to India — the world's most populous country and one of the fastest-growing major economies — and, further east, to China, Korea, Japan and the ASEAN countries.

The key to turning this opportunity into reality is connectivity. We need infrastructures capable of integrating maritime and land transport, making full use of inter-modality between sea and land. Above all, we need to understand that connectivity is not a national competition. It requires cooperation. Europe already has the Trans-European Transport Network, or TEN-T, which has traditionally focused heavily on continental connectivity. The Adriatic is Europe's natural maritime gateway, particularly for most of its landlocked countries. It could become even more important for Ukraine, especially in the reconstruction that will follow the war.

Our ports have strategic locations. But individually, most of them are simply too small to compete with the world's largest global ports. Their real strength lies in connecting with one another. This does not mean

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eliminating healthy competition among our ports; it means combining competition with cooperation, so that Trieste, Koper, Rijeka, Venice and the other Adriatic gateways can reinforce one another rather than compete in ways that weaken the region as a whole. We need to overcome local and national rivalries and build a genuinely integrated Adriatic port system. Consider the scale of the challenge. All of the world's ten largest container ports are located in the Indo-Pacific region, while none is in the Atlantic. Until relatively recently, the Atlantic was the unquestioned reference point for Europeans. Now, trends have changed. The centre of gravity of the global economy has shifted.

This gives us common objectives.

- The first is to work together politically and in the field of security to preserve freedom of navigation. The current crisis around the Gulf makes the point particularly clear. Hormuz matters enormously, but the principle is universal. It applies to every strategic maritime chokepoint — from Bab el-Mandeb and Suez to the Straits of Malacca and Taiwan.
- The second is to increase the flows that pass through the Mediterranean by developing the connectivity that can make it once again a central economic crossroads. Here we should remember two characteristics that make the Mediterranean what its name suggests: the sea in the middle.

The first is its proximity to Europe's markets. This is where the Adriatic is particularly important. It can provide the gateway to Europe for major global production centres and supply chains, while at the same time providing European economies — including landlocked countries — with access to the Indo-Pacific. This applies not only to Central Europe but also to the entire Balkan Peninsula and, through the Black Sea, to countries further east. It also creates an extraordinary opportunity for synergy between the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) and more continental initiatives such as the Three Seas Initiative, which links the Adriatic, Baltic and Black Seas. The same applies to the Central European Initiative (CEI). Its thirtieth anniversary was marked in Trieste in March 2026, where its Secretariat is based. Significantly, on that very same day, Trieste also hosted the IMEC Forum “Developing an Indo-Mediterranean Perspective through the IMEC Network”, opened by the Italian Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani. The decision to hold the two events on the same day highlighted the potential synergy between the CEI's role in strengthening connectivity across Central and Eastern Europe and IMEC's ambition to connect India, the Middle East and Europe. The Trieste Forum was the largest business-oriented IMEC gathering held to date, bringing together more than 300 companies and representatives from the business community, alongside senior government and institutional representatives from Europe, India, the Middle East, the United States and other countries involved in the Corridor. Its focus on logistics, infrastructure, energy, digital technologies and connectivity gave concrete substance to the idea that corridors are not built by governments alone: businesses must turn strategic visions into investments, industrial partnerships and functioning value chains. Trieste could become one of the European nodes — certainly not the only one — through which IMEC

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connects with the European continent, in synergy with other Adriatic and Central European gateways. The response from the business community shows that this is not merely a political vision. The economic community has a vital role to play in turning corridors on maps into functioning supply chains.

The second characteristic of the Mediterranean is its unique geographical position between three continents and two oceans. It lies between Asia, already a leading force in the global economy; Africa, whose economic weight will grow enormously in the coming decades; and Europe. The Mediterranean is also the link between two largest oceanic spaces of our planet: the Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific. This is why the Mediterranean, although accounting for only 0.8 per cent of the world's waters, carries an extraordinarily large share of global maritime traffic — around 20 per cent by some estimates.

The time has therefore come to act. We have before us a window of opportunity created by geography. The Mediterranean is returning, literally, to the centre of the global economic stage. But geography alone is not enough.

We must act in Europe, where in Brussels we need to work together to give greater dynamism to an economy too often constrained by bureaucracy and insufficient ambition. We must act together in the Adriatic, combining healthy competition among our ports with cooperation and exploiting synergies among our infrastructures rather than competing against one another. We must act in the Western Balkans, finally opening the European perspective to all the countries of the region. And we must act globally, defending freedom of navigation together with our allies and like-minded partners — within a West that, despite all its internal differences, must remain united, and with countries such as Japan and India with which we share an increasingly broad strategic agenda.

But we must also look at the forces that could narrow this window of opportunity. One of them is climate change.

Over the longer term, the growing accessibility of northern maritime routes across the Arctic Ocean could become a political challenge for the West, as the debate surrounding Greenland already reminds us. But it could also become an economic challenge for the Indo-Mediterranean. Routes across the seas north of Siberia could eventually connect East Asia and Europe more quickly than today. I do not believe they will eliminate the Mediterranean's geographical advantage. But they could reduce it.

A second major gateway between Europe and the Indo-Pacific could therefore emerge through the ports of Northern Europe. This could partially restore the advantages they enjoyed when the rise of transatlantic and global oceanic trade shifted the centre of gravity away from the Mediterranean. History reminds us that geography can create winners and losers. The great maritime republics of the Adriatic — such as Venice and Ragusa — flourished when the Mediterranean was at the centre of global trade. Their decline accelerated when the great oceanic routes opened new connections between Europe and the wider world. The Arctic could now

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add another dimension to this transformation. The North-East Passage could become an additional link between the Atlantic and the Indo-Pacific, alongside the Mediterranean and Suez. And here another geopolitical reality comes into play: Russia is the dominant power along much of the Eastern Arctic route and will, in all likelihood, need substantial Chinese investment and technology to develop connectivity infrastructure across the vast Siberian north.

Once again, everything is connected.

Our small and beautiful region between the mountains and the sea is influenced by forces that may seem distant: climate change, geopolitical competition, global value chains instrumental to technological innovation and the transformation of trade routes. The choice before us is therefore not simply whether we can be resilient in the face of these changes. It is whether we can acquire the capabilities to become protagonists in shaping them.

This requires overcoming fragmentation in Europe. Each of our countries may be strong in its own right, but none of us can go very far alone. And nowhere is this more evident than in the Adriatic. It should not be a peripheral sea at the edge of Europe. It can be a gateway, a bridge, a connector between Central Europe, the Mediterranean and the Western Balkans — and, ultimately, between Europe and the Indo-Pacific.

If we work together, preserving constructive competition while building cooperation among our ports and infrastructures, we can turn geography into strategy, connectivity into growth and resilience into influence.

We can shape our future. This is the power to shape the future. And we should use it together.

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