

Interview – Gabriele Abbondanza

Written by E-International Relations

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Dr. Gabriele Abbondanza is Marie Curie Fellow at the University of Madrid (UCM – Spain), Associate Researcher at the University of Sydney (USYD – Australia), and Associate Fellow at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI – Italy). His fields of expertise comprise Italian foreign policy, Australian foreign policy, the Indo-Pacific, middle and great powers, and irregular migration governance. His teaching activity focuses on international relations, international security, and irregular migration; and his research has been published by some of the most influential publishers and journals worldwide, including *International Affairs*, *International Political Science Review*, *European Political Science*, and others. He often engages with public institutions and the media to disseminate the most significant aspects of his research, and can be found on Twitter as @Dr_G_Abbondanza.

Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?

That's an interesting question with a complicated answer, as “exciting” debates in international relations and security studies often arise from regional or global crises of different kinds. Great research continues to develop in a variety of niche fields – pertaining to both traditional and non-traditional IR – though from a personal perspective I find three developments particularly interesting. To begin with, the growing recognition that the Indo-Pacific is the world's geopolitical and geoeconomic epicentre. What started as a strategic counter-narrative by a handful of states (the US, Japan, and Australia) now effectively portrays both the economic opportunities and the strategic challenges of this macro-region, a condition that is finally being acknowledged by Europe as well. Secondly, and this is partially related to my former point, the tangible shifts in the international system and its global hierarchy are being explored in new and innovative ways, both theoretically and analytically. My colleagues and I have provided our small contribution to these debates, but there are dozens of great scholars who are also engaged in this effort to more accurately depict what I like to define as a “chaotically multipolar order”. Lastly, irregular migration now fully permeates not only (and understandably) humanitarian discussions, but also political and strategic debates, which I think is a positive development. I believe that we cannot think to address a transnational phenomenon – one that has become a permanent feature of the 21st century – without an effort including all relevant actors, from migrants themselves to destination countries and their regional organisations. Of course, it goes without saying that there are plenty more interesting developments in the IR and security studies disciplines!

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

In a Socratic sort of way, the more I think I know about something, the more I understand how complex the variables are behind any answer I feel inclined to give. Like most, the way I see and interpret the world depends on how much I read, conduct research, discuss with peers (including mentors and younger colleagues), learn from others, and react to the broader environment that surrounds me. I am lucky enough to be able to travel a lot and often to quite different places, and that clearly helps to keep me connected with different contexts and viewpoints. The way I understand the world also adapts to a continuously developing reality, since our world itself changes at a pace – and in ways – that few could anticipate. In essence, at least in my case, it's about reconciling my existing values and knowledge with a solid amount of pragmatism concerning our changing world.

How does the concept of awkward powers differ from middle powers, regional powers, and great

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powers?

This new concept stems from my and Thomas Wilkins' dissatisfaction with existing understandings of the international system. Why are vastly different states like Venezuela and Canada both called "middle powers"? How can influential G7 countries like Germany, Italy, and Japan be neglected by major power debates? How can we define "peculiar" members of the international community such as Israel, Singapore, or North Korea, among others? And how do these awkward powers behave compared to their more conventional counterparts? These are some of the many questions that we have sought to address with this new concept. Awkward powers are countries who either do not neatly fit in conventional IR categories (superpowers, great powers, middle powers, minor powers) or are simply ignored by related definitional debates. Following a careful analysis of existing theoretical and analytical understandings of the international system, we have identified their shortcomings and advanced the awkward powers' concept, which in turn bifurcates into awkward great powers (Germany, Italy, Japan, India, Brazil), and awkward middle powers (Indonesia, Israel, Singapore, Nigeria, North Korea, and many others). We were blessed with a stellar team of contributors, and hope to spark interesting debates concerning both middle and great power theory and the foreign policy of our case studies.

How does a middle power like Australia balance its political alignment to the United States with its deep economic relations with China?

This has been Australia's "hot question" since at least 2019. Canberra understandably took advantage of a very favourable situation for a number of years: unparalleled security guarantees from the US and huge economic gains from China. This worked well for about two decades, that is until Beijing revealed a more forceful foreign policy both regionally (Indo-Pacific) and globally. The full realisation that China is a revisionist state – the most formidable out there – naturally worried many, especially in a country with such a peculiar foreign policy (split in its economic and strategic components) like Australia. In reality, Canberra never had to choose since its choice was made decades ago: it's a formal ally of the United States, and arguably the most dependable one among Washington's many. The issue, then, is decoupling (or rather de-risking, to be more realistic), without unnecessarily shattering years of close economic and regional cooperation with China. This was never meant to be an easy feat – and Australia's economic and political systems had more than one hesitation – but it's been a developing process for a while now, and, I believe, a necessary one as well. This is particularly true when considering the major role that other Indo-Pacific economies could play in Canberra's dual effort to de-risk and concurrently reinforce relations with the broader region.

What are your views on an Italian withdrawal from the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative?

They are favourable. As is well known, Italy is the only G7 country to have signed a memorandum of understanding with China concerning the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Not only did Italy not benefit at all from its membership to the BRI – despite being the 7th largest manufacturing and exporting nation globally – but its trade levels with China remained lower than those of comparable European countries. Not to mention the substantial doubts that this sparked from a strategic viewpoint, of course. Rome's decision not to renew its ineffective membership to the BRI therefore addresses both economic and security concerns, and has been implemented diplomatically (no public tensions, concurrent strengthening of the existing strategic partnership) and swiftly (before the first renewal process could take place).

You have written that Italy, as well as Europe more generally, has been pivoting toward the Indo-Pacific. What would you hope a formal Italian Indo-Pacific strategy to include?

Despite common (and correct) understandings of Italian foreign policy being focused on Europe and the so-called "Enlarged Mediterranean" (*Mediterraneo Allargato*) in which it plays a leading role, Italy has been gradually pivoting to the Indo-Pacific for at least 15 years. Its economic, strategic, and diplomatic/normative relations with this region – both its nations and its regional organisations – are remarkable and continue to develop at a steady pace. I therefore believe that the time is ripe for a formal Italian strategy for the Indo-Pacific, one that is able to reconcile national (Italian) interests with the strategic interests not only of Rome's European and North American allies, but also those of its Indo-Pacific partners. In other words, an Indo-Pacific strategy that effectively merges traditional "Western"

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concerns with the many challenges that Indo-Pacific states are facing, including climate change, international law violations, uneven growth and development, and many others. I believe that Italy's foreign policy tradition could contribute to existing efforts with its own strengths and particular combination of soft and (when necessary) hard power means. These are conventionally applied in a multilateral manner, conscious of the plurality of viewpoints in this region. I have recently advocated such an approach within the Italian Parliament – both at the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate – thanks to the support of politicians who are highly aware of this potential, and I genuinely hope that an Italian Indo-Pacific strategy with such features can be released in the short-to-mid-term.

What are the main security obstacles/challenges in the Indo-Pacific from a European perspective?

In my opinion, the main obstacles to a stronger European engagement with the Indo-Pacific are twofold. First, there is Europe's traditional weakness, which could be summarised with Kissinger's famous question: "who do I call when I want to talk to Europe?". Despite being one of the world's top-tier polities in terms of both hard and soft power, the European Union cannot fully act on behalf of its member states as, for example, the United States can. On top of this, while the broader goals (and challenges) are the same for all the main European actors, their specific set of priorities and means with which to address them vary considerably, which further frustrates the idea of a univocal European approach. Second, Europe's regional context is riddled with both traditional and non-traditional security challenges and phenomena – Russia's new invasion of Ukraine, China's economic expansionism, large irregular migration flows, the festering Israeli-Palestinian conflict, broader regional instability in the Middle East and many parts of Africa, among the many – which provide an indisputable source of strategic distraction. With this said, however, Europe's pivot to the Indo-Pacific is also following an undeniably positive trend. In my view, this implies that these significant limitations are not sufficient to halt the growing ties and many forms of cooperation between European states (large and small) and the European Union on the one side, and the Indo-Pacific, understood as both its nations and regional organisations (ASEAN above all, but also PIF and IORA), on the other.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

This is probably the most difficult question here, so I will try to relay some of the suggestions I usually give to my many brilliant former students who are seeking a career in IR. If you have a dream then pursue it, obviously, but if you are not sure about your future (which is more likely and entirely normal) then go and see the options you have in front of you for yourself. If we are talking specifically about a career in academia, we need to be straightforward and make it clear that today it's a difficult and uncertain path. It can be pursued, of course, but it requires time, patience, and a good dose of adaptability, since academia is a strange place which operates with its own rules, rules that many would call bizarre. If this is what you want to do, then I suggest having a conversation with a friendly academic who can frankly talk about the many pros and few but substantial cons of this career. If your desire to pursue an academic path is unperturbed by this conversation, then I can think of three sets of recommendations.

First, no matter how much we would like things to be different, IR jobs in academia have specific requirements that we cannot ignore, so it's best to focus on them as soon as possible: top-tier scientific publications (with a focus on journal articles and monographs), a strong teaching record (not too much though, otherwise you won't have time for your research!), a mix of broad and niche research interests (and yes, there are "trends" here too), a good service record, and reasonable administration skills. Second, interact with your peers – both senior and early career – to learn from them, to see "how things are done", and, why not, to cooperate on joint projects. This will also lead to lifelong friendships and will contribute to making your job really enjoyable. Third, don't let the pursuit of these goals overwhelm you, and don't let your life be defined by your job, however interesting that may be. Academia can be demanding, especially at the beginning, so it's important to find your own way of balancing these two aspects. The perfect balance is a very subjective ideal, of course, but I think it's the most important aspect of an academic career, as it enables it to successfully continue throughout the years without, at the same time, neglecting what and who you are beyond your professional choices. If you think this resonates well with you, your personal circumstances, and your personality, then by all means go ahead and enjoy a challenging but very rewarding career.