

COMPETING CORRIDORS: CHINA'S BRI, INDIA'S IMEC, AND U.S. INFLUENCE IN THE NEW GREAT GAME

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ABSTRACT

The current paper analyzes the strategic rivalry between the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China and the India Middle East Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) of India, which makes it a modern-day New Great Game. The study is based on the mixed-method approach that includes qualitative analysis of policy documents and academic discourse along with quantitative analysis of economic and geopolitical indicators. Based on the comparative case studies of the regions affected, the research provides delicate findings related to the changing power dynamics. IMEC is more of a geopolitical counter-narrative to the long-established BRI being driven by strategic objectives of India and the United States to balance the Chinese influence, particularly in the Indian Ocean Region. Nevertheless, IMEC implementation faces significant obstacles, such as the lack of resources, strong regional loyalty to China, and the continuing tensions. As a result, the competition reflects that infrastructure projects are now tools of great-power competition that strengthens the U.S.-India relationship but hinders cooperation in the region. Finally, the future path of these corridors is estimated to be the one that will follow not so much a pure economic logic but rather geopolitical ambition versus strategic necessity, which will contribute to the establishment of the Indo-Pacific as a critical projection of power in the 21st century.

Keywords: BRI, Central Asia, India, IMEC, Great Game, Regional geopolitics, US-India nexus

INTRODUCTION

1. Background of Research:

Trade has played a critical role in economic and political growth since the beginning of civilization. Trade, as a product of human interaction has gradually extended the regional interdependency to suit the demand, and trade routes have had a great effect on historical, cultural, and political changes not only on global economies. It is often control over such routes that has been used as a

factor in the development of political and military forces, and the relative significance of such routes has been increasingly growing over time. Ever since their launch, projects like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Indo-Pacific Multilateral Economic Cooperation (IMEC) have captured the interest of many scholars, policymakers, and international relations experts, becoming some of the central topics in world politics. These initiatives that include Asia, Europe, Africa and

other places are not just about infrastructure but are elaborate networks that have severe political, economic and geopolitical implications on the nations involved as well as the world order (Siddiq, 2023).

The rise of the Chinese influence in Central Asia has created both a strategic concern in India and the United States, each seeking to establish a strong domestic presence in energy and trade goals and at the same time playing a counterbalancing role to the growing influence of China. The gradual development of United States-India relations has significant consequences for Chinese's ambitions in the region. With the falling of the Soviet Union, the Central Asian republics, including Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, became key players, which can be explained by their richness of the hydrocarbon deposits, thus, becoming objects of attention regarding the strategic, security, political, and economic interests of China. The existing hydrocarbon reserves which are estimated to be about 13 to 15 billion barrels of oil and 270 to 360 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, together with potential reserves estimated to be 40-140 billion barrels, add fuel to the competition of the major great powers. The new great game paradigm emphasizes strategic rivalry which focuses on transit corridors. Confrontations have ensued with the United States, India, the European Union, Russia, China, and Pakistan competing to take control of the pipeline routes which realign the regional balance of power. The way forward with regard to the increase of strategic competition between global actors in recent years is an ever-changing phenomenon that involves the United States, China, Russia, and India. The post-Cold War

period saw the United States increase its presence in the region by planting air bases in Central Asia and using counterterrorism programs to reduce the Russian influence and limit Chinese expansion (Akhtar & Manzanay, 2024).

At the same time, the Prime Minister of India launched the India Middle East Europe Corridor (IMEC) in the G20 summit that positions it as an alternative to the Belt and Road Initiative. The IMEC tries to reformulate the spatial connections between West Asia, India and the European territories (as shown in figure 1) by encouraging greater trade and communication between the Arabian Gulf, Europe and Asia. The India Middle East Europe Economic Corridor is a trans-continental bridge between Israel and Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the United Arab Emirates and also between Indian ports like Mumbai and Mundra and the UAE (Kwok, 2018). An international maritime route between Haifa and the Greek port of Piraeus, and further to the rest of the European market, is planned to facilitate access to the Mediterranean Sea. These increased tensions in the Indian Ocean, which have been caused by powerful reactions of both China and India are the events that have led to a number of major developments (Mengal & Mirza, 2022). Even though military retaliations are meted out against perceived enemies, the report highlights that economic factors, as opposed to blatant militaristic buildup, are the primary drivers of the growing influence of China in the Indo-Pacific region. This paper therefore examines historical opposition and possible areas of cooperation between the two countries and provides policy suggestions based on the current geopolitical environment.



Figure 1: Map showing the Region of IMEC

Source: Author's creation

This paper examines the limitations of China in the Indo-Pacific region with a focus on economic factors that amplify Chinese influence and explores future military consequences related to the Belt and Road Initiative. The paper aims to expand the conceptual understanding of the dynamic changes of the region and assessing the possible opportunities of Sino-Indian cooperation in the environment of the changing geopolitical rivalry with the United States. The growing economic relationship between the United States and India that has now shifted out of estrangement to a strategic relationship in the twenty first century sheds some light on the changing geopolitical environment of Asia. The Indian and Chinese states have become key actors in the region after the collapse of the Soviet Union. At the same time, the United States is reconsidering its approach to security and establishing alliances to reduce the increasing threat of the Chinese economic growth and regional projects (Bora, Kumar, & Bhosale, 2025). The relations between the United States and India, which is one of the keys of the Indo-Pacific policy, is viewed as a source of destabilization and at the same time as a stabilizing factor, with broad-reaching world consequences. It is perceived as a remarkable counterbalance to the rising influence of China. The current investigation considers the ways in which the intentions, attitudes, and

actions of three East Asian and Central Asian nations infringe on this bilateral relationship and have the resultant impact on China. This alliance is essential to the U.S. policy in Asia since it neutralizes the influence of China, provides a strategic access to the Indian Ocean as well as secures essential resources. In Indian politics, there is a swing between assessing the partnership as a clever strategic act against China and the fear that it will mainly serve American interests. The position of China is also characterized by variability, as some actors are diluting the direct issues and focusing on the future goals. This paper analyzes historical enmity and discusses the possibilities of cooperation, and provides policy options based on the evaluation of the related geopolitical dynamics.

2. Research Objectives

- Investigate the strategic rivalry between China and India, analyzing the impact of China's increased presence in the Indian Ocean driven by the BRI and the newly proposed IMEC.
- Explore the significance of the USD 20 billion India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC) within India's plan to connect with Europe through Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, inaugurated during the G20 summit.

- Explore India's proactive maritime efforts in response to China's influence and analyze China's "near-to-far-seas" policy.
- Examine the unlikelihood of China constructing bases for offensive purposes, focusing on its emphasis on safeguarding Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) in the Indian Ocean.
- Role of the United States in Supporting India to Counter China and Its Belt and Road Initiative, and an Assessment of U.S. Strategies to Strengthen India and the IMEC.

3. Statement of the Problem/Hypothesis

It is hypothesized that the interaction of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with the India Middle East Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) has a strong impact on international relations and regional power. The success of the BRI and the nascent IMEC depends on successful coordination and cooperation between the powers in the region. Moreover, the leading world powers, such as the United States, Russia, China, and India, are actively seeking improvements to their regional power through strategic diplomacy efforts, which can be compared to some intricate chess game.

4. Research Questions

1. What are the geopolitical implications of BRI and IMEC for regional alliances and power dynamics?
2. How has the U.S. used its foreign policy to influence the results of BRI and IMEC initiatives?
3. How do China's and India's motivations for BRI and IMEC, respectively, reflect their broader regional and global aspirations?

5. Significance of the study

The purpose of the proposal is to carry out an in-depth evaluation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China and its far-reaching geopolitical implications including the impact that these events have on the power relationships in their respective countries and on the global arena. The article assesses how the BRI, along with the Middle East Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), transforms international relations by changing infrastructure

connection, business relationship, and political participation, therefore, creating a shift in power structure between major decision-making powers. The research institution, set up in the United Kingdom, is of the view that the United States aims at using the IMEC project as a means of normalizing relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel. The acquired results are used to understand the overall strategic goals of China and the particular processes it applies via the BRI and the IMEC.

The study also entails the examination of the reactions of the current world powers to the emerging dominance of China in the geopolitical front. It examines why changes in the global economy, the changing world-political environment, and the growing power of China, supported by the BRI, are of symbolic importance to policymakers, researchers, and professionals who deal with the study of international relations. Examining the geopolitical changes brought on board by the BRI and IMEC, which are used to interconnect Europe and India, the study demonstrates a very important change in the balance of power.

The analysis framework also deals with how the world powers especially the United States responded to these developments. The BRI is largely described as a form of extending the influence of China over the Indian Ocean Region, thus causing India to raise issues about the threat to national security. The discussed point is placed in a more significant context of protecting the sovereign interests and ensuring regional stability.

6. Methodology

The current research uses a mixed-methods approach, which combines the qualitative and quantitative strands on a geopolitical economy platform. The qualitative strand will involve a systematic examination of primary policy reports and secondary scholarly literature in the formulation of the strategic narrative and goals of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC) (Stadtländer, 2009). This is enhanced by quantitative evaluation of economic and geopolitical indicators in the form of investment flows, trade statistics, and diplomatic activities, which are based on international databases. In

order to put the findings into context, comparative case studies of strategically significant areas are performed, which will synthesize both strands of data to challenge the power dynamics of a localized area. This triangulated design, in turn, helps to conduct a thorough analysis of the modern-day New Great Game, which explains the role of rival plans in transforming relationships between powers on the global and regional levels.

7. Literature Review:

The increasing influence of China is a subject of significant literature that dwells upon the intricate relations between New Delhi and Beijing. The exploration of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has elicited academic interest, with works by David Brewster, who discusses the implications of Indian Ocean exploration to both China and India, Chinese strategic vulnerability, and the notion of a string of pearls (Bhaskar, 2011). Although China's naval capabilities are limited, India does not perceive an immediate threat and does not view Chinese actions in the Indian Ocean as hostile. India's concerns regarding China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the responses it triggers are emphasized. After analyzing China's efforts to diversify its oil supply sources, it becomes apparent that China's activities in this sector are driven by military and geopolitical motives (Siddiq, 2023). The idea of a military-economic alliance emerging from China and India's activities involves the formation of alliances and carries significant geopolitical implications (Fazli, 2024). The relationship between China and India has influenced the geopolitical environment in the Indian Ocean and this has significant consequences for other countries in the region such as Pakistan. Pakistan prefers economic cooperation through the BRI. Although it is also worried about strategic autonomy and the consequences of these closer China-India military ties. The response to these concerns is essential in ensuring stability, economic development, and security of the region (Bhatt & Roychoudhury, 2023). BRI tries to finance as many projects as possible, however, the greatest part of the money has been spent on the projects of the traditional energy industry, roads, railways, and ports.

Although the poor countries are mostly targeted, Pakistan, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka have been the primary beneficiaries of BRI subsidies, although industrialized countries are also involved, some of which are allies of the US. When these US partners develop critical infrastructure such as power grids, docks, and telecommunications networks with the help of BRI, this might complicate US contingency plans and complicate efforts to protect its allies (Sidhu & Rogers, 2015).

As Saudi Arabia opens to the global stage, focusing on China, the UAE has identified a unique competitive edge in connectivity and multi-alignment (Bharti, 2024). As alternative geostrategic and regional solutions persist, particularly with the growing power and global presence of China, it is a positive development to witness Gulf Arab states taking part in U.S. initiatives. This is indicative of their new balanced position in the current US-China competition (Zhao, 2021). Although the IMEC is mainly an economic, diplomatic, and security initiative, its success relies on its ability to build connections and convert its economic potential into commercial outcomes. Critics have pointed out that the project might not be financially sustainable. Nevertheless, there are more benefits than economic efficiency. The new corridor has the potential to be used to enhance strategic resilience, promote friend-shoring, and enhance technological collaboration, particularly among middle-income economies, in an age of de-risking and politically motivated changes in supply chains. Newer literature challenges how less powerful sovereign states can utilize the competitive nature of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) of China and the India-Europe Middle East Economic Corridor (IMEC) to obtain foreign resources. However, academic Warwick Powell has reservations about the economic sustainability of IMEC, stating that maritime corridors are of the utmost significance to the world trade flows. Clary continues to suggest that these smaller states will face a duplicity of opportunities and threats caused by any rivalry between IMEC and BRI. In that regard, IMEC will likely adopt a cooperative approach towards BRI instead of opposition. Moreover, researchers

single out other pathways, as the Trans-Siberian Railway and Arctic sea routes, to demonstrate the heterogeneous character of the range of opportunities in modern commercial geography (Siddiq, 2023). In its turn, the discussion highlights the emerging yet potentially successful role of IMEC in the shifting landscape of international commerce and the geopolitical plan, at the same time making an attempt to alleviate the fears about its strategic implications and economic viability.

8. BRI vs. IMEC: A Comparative Analysis:

International trade has been considered an important aspect of compensation since ancient times. The idea of exchanging goods and services across long distances, by sea and on land, was a widespread practice throughout the world when formal monetary or financial systems did not exist (Munir & Shafiq, 2018). Countries today employ different mechanisms and techniques to facilitate

and enhance economic relations and the emergence of economic corridors is now regarded as a key to promoting regional integration, trade and connectivity. In this regard, one of the most notable transcontinental projects and economic development endeavors is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in China. The BRI aims to redefine the world of trade and enhance connectivity between Asia, Europe and Africa. Although the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is its most important component, the broader BRI encompasses projects that benefit such countries as Iran, Afghanistan, and the Central Asian countries (Guang & Gang, 2020). It provides a platform of regional integration by enhancing trading, energy production and transportation, as well as economic cooperation founded on a win-win strategy. The BRI is a vision of a networked, unified region that is developed based on collective prosperity, peace, and development.

Table 1: The strategic comparison of BRI & IMEC

Founder	China-BRI	USA & India (IMEC)
Partners	Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Russia, Indonesia, Malaysia	India, USA, UAE, Saudi Arabia, European Union.
Policy Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Boost regional connectivity through infrastructure. ▪ Deepen economic integration across continents. ▪ Ease trade flows by reducing barriers. ▪ Open new markets for Chinese exports and investment. 	The purpose of developing alternatives to chokepoints like the Malacca Strait. Broaden international trade pathways and enhance economic ties in a multilateral environment.
Investment Scale	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Over \$1 trillion invested since its launch in 2013. ▪ 3,000+ projects across Asia, Africa, and Europe. ▪ 150+ participating countries are involved in BRI initiatives. 	Valued in the hundreds of billions, dependent on participant dedication and political agreement in the memorandum. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Total investment over \$600 billion planned. ▪ Saudi Arabia commits \$20 billion. ▪ The EU allocates around \$300 billion via Global Gateway. ▪ Major private sector investments in logistics and energy. ▪ India invests \$9.14 billion in a deep-water port at Vadhavan. ▪ Large-scale green energy projects with \$100+ billion potential (Ias, 2023).

<p>Financial & Institutional Framework</p>	<p>Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank AIIB – main multilateral financier. Silk Road Fund – long-term investment support. Chinese policy banks – major bilateral loan providers.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Public-private partnerships (PPPs). ▪ Bilateral trade and investment agreements. ▪ Intergovernmental policy coordination. ▪ Private sector-driven growth.
<p>Ecological Issues</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Deforestation and habitat loss due to large-scale infrastructure projects. ▪ Increased carbon emissions from coal-powered energy investments. ▪ Pollution risks to water bodies and ecosystems from construction and industrial activity. ▪ Weak environmental standards in some host countries. ▪ Limited transparency in environmental impact assessments. ▪ Threats to biodiversity in sensitive ecological zones. 	<p>Aims to rely on sustainability via renewable energy and low-emission initiatives.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Deforestation and habitat loss. ▪ Air and water pollution. ▪ Water resource depletion. ▪ Varying environmental rules. ▪ Sustainability coordination challenges.
<p>Futuristic aspects</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Digital Silk Road: Expansion of digital infrastructure, including 5G, fiber optics, and smart cities. ▪ Green BRI: Emphasis on sustainable, low-carbon, and renewable energy projects. ▪ Technological innovation: Integration of AI, big data, and IoT in trade and infrastructure. ▪ Enhanced regional cooperation: Deepening multilateral ties and policy coordination. ▪ New trade routes: Development of Arctic and space corridors for future connectivity. ▪ Financial innovation: Use of blockchain and digital currencies to facilitate cross-border transactions. 	<p>Will be relying on robust political determination and steady financial support.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ High-speed rail & smart logistics. ▪ Renewable energy cooperation. ▪ 5G and digital networks. ▪ Private sector-driven growth. ▪ Stronger geopolitical alliances. ▪ Sustainable infrastructure.

Source: Author's creation

The BRI is a strategic move toward economic regionalization in a globalized world and stability and mutual benefit. Strategically, the BRI is of great benefit to China because it ensures that it widens the trade routes and reduces the reliance on maritime chokepoints. Presently, China is buying 60% of its oil in the Middle East, and 80%

of that is transported via the pirate-infested and geopolitically sensitive Malacca Strait. The long trip that consists of approximately 45 days can be reduced to less than 10 days through overland and maritime transportation systems like the Gwadar-Xinjiang pathway that is a safer and cost-effective option. This program not only favors the import

of energy, but it also opens up new markets in Central Asia, Africa, and the Middle East (Ahmad & Jamil, 2023).

Moreover, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) offers another vision on global connectivity. IMEC has two routes: the eastern route that links India to the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Israel; and a northern route that connects these nations to Europe. It aims at enhancing the connection between Asia and Europe by developing infrastructure in the form of railways, energy pipelines, high-speed cables, and transport corridors. The countries involved comprise approximately 40% of the global population and also approximately half of the world's GDP. The reliance of IMEC on the seaports, logistics centers, and road systems of the UAE and Saudi Arabia highlights the strategic roles of these Gulf countries in transforming the global trade trends (Rahman & Baldacci, 2025). This new zone should also be considered within the framework of the great power rivalry, particularly the renewed tactical rivalry between the U.S. and China. IMEC is viewed by the U.S. and its allies as a strong response to the BRI of China, drawing on alliances and smaller-scale structures to threaten the increasing economic power of Beijing. Washington views IMEC as a means through which to reestablish power in the Middle East and build its ties with Gulf countries. The Cooperation Council (GCC) raises concerns regarding the economic growth of China. Simultaneously, the UAE and Saudi Arabia consider IMEC as an intermediary between East and West, enhancing the influence of both countries as middle powers in a multipolar world. This concept builds on earlier initiatives such as the I2U2 Group which was established in 2021 comprising the U.S, Israel, India, and the UAE. Whereas I2U2 is concerned with energy, food, health, and space collaboration, IMEC has more ambitious infrastructural projects (Bhattacharya, 2024). Nevertheless, the continued instability in the region, including the Levant crisis, and lack of interest among Indian investors, undermine the future of IMEC.

The participation of India in IMEC is also influenced by the poor relationship that exists

between India and China particularly after the border disputes which have remained unresolved. These geopolitical frictions influence the Indian ambition to counter the influence of China in South Asia and the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The fact that India opposes the BRI is partially due to its disagreement with the part of the CPEC which crosses over the territory of India that is under the state of New Delhi. Thus, IMEC provides India with a platform to gain power without engaging Pakistan and China. The Indian strategic framework with its concept of Security and Growth in the Region (SAGAR) is the basis of Indian naval doctrine in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), which helps to strengthen its position as a major security provider. The stance of IMEC indicates a similarity with the wider strategic doctrine that focuses on the ambition of India as a country to become a leading regional and international power. At the same time, India wishes to avoid using Pakistan, whose history is characterized by a veto on the possibility of overland connectivity of South Asia with the rest of the world (Mokrai, 2025).

However, IMEC experiences serious problems, including poor financial infrastructure and security in the region. Nonetheless, both BRI and IMEC demonstrate how infrastructure and economic corridors have already become geopolitical rivals and partners (as shown in Table 1). The BRI reflects the desire of China to influence the world of trade, whereas IMEC is a Western-oriented initiative to establish a fairer international economic structure (Schneider, 2021). International relations tend to have zero-sum situations amid interdependence and common interests. The corridors are not merely projects of infrastructure, but they represent a transition of geopolitical forces with the powers struggling to achieve influence by economic tools. The competition between the US and China influences the narratives about these corridors, but both of them know the restrictions of unilateral actions. Ultimately, the two projects represent a geopolitics of the 21st century, with its key issues of rivalry, strategic interdependence, and the infrastructure as a new determinant of modern world order.

9. Strategic Importance of the Indian Ocean:

The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is becoming a strategic region due to changing political and security dynamics. The policies of China in the region and the Belt and Road Initiative pose a threat to the established powers and the changes in the approach of India in the Indo-Pacific region (IOR) are indicative of the concerns of rising economic power and influence of China. India is taking charge through measures such as the Act East policy, Western Indian Ocean outreach, and the Security and Growth in the Area (SAGAR) framework. This brings into focus perspectives that get neglected in the field of international geopolitics. The Indian Ocean, the third-largest ocean in the world, is still a critical point in international trade and geopolitics. It contains major choke points including the Straits of Hormuz and Malacca that are vital in trade and energy transport. The area encounters issues associated with cultural diversity, environmental concern, and maritime security. It is struggling to be influenced by the US, China and India. Its

close cultural background, local institutions, and commercial prospects, along with its geopolitical interests, make it more important in terms of strategies (Khan, 2022).

The Indian Ocean is experiencing a significant change in the strategic engagement of major countries (as shown in Figure 2) and their interests. It has attracted the attention of leading countries because of its geopolitical importance, which has introduced several maritime security risks. The increasing strategic rivalry between superpowers is broadening the scope of security threats. The unpredictable and unstable aspects of the Indian Ocean are significant factors behind the threats to marine security. These problems may be compounded by future population expansion, economic growth, and government efforts to increase regional power projection by use of maritime capabilities. To protect the Indian Ocean's marine security, strict regulations must be put in place. Maritime governance is the main policy option that can be pursued (Rodrigo, 2021).



Figure 2: Map showing the Indian Ocean Region

Source: Author's creation

Governments and regional organizations can coordinate land and sea through monitoring the situation and carrying out the necessary studies. Strict maritime governance rules must be established. Using advanced intelligence networks

and sharing information could reduce terrorist and pirate attacks in the Indian Ocean. Regional powers should work to trust each other more to achieve this. The possibility of exchanging and supporting marine activities can contribute to

developing knowledge about the marine sphere and evolve the collaboration of regions. Applying soft power geopolitics may help solve growing issues in the Indian Ocean more effectively. New relationships require developing new maritime strategies. Increasing crime, including drug trafficking linked to terrorism and human trafficking, damages international relations. Unless immediate measures are taken, such threats are serious threats to national security. If not addressed promptly, these threats pose serious risks to national security. The government must collaborate to resolve these challenges and ensure marine security in the region. Strengthening cooperation between countries will enhance diplomatic and political ties (Mengal & Mirza, 2022). Also, the area requires more robust and integrated approaches to address both regional and international threats, including security threats posed by non-friendliness of civilians, sea pirates, and militant groups associated with NGOs. Long-term plans are necessary to address policy issues and to modernize, upgrade, and reinforce naval capabilities.

The United States should collaborate closely with strong countries like Japan and Australia to develop a long-term marine security strategy due to the need for protection in this area. Therefore, building marine security is essential to prevent threats in this region. The Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has four major dimensions. The first is historical: before Europeans arrived in the Indian Ocean in 1498, the area had been a hub of human interaction for thousands of years, with a 1,500-year history of active high-seas trade (Ghani & Ali, 2020). There is evidence to suggest that tales of seafaring and maritime exchange between such waters have been accelerated by human migration, the dissemination of religion, academic visits and other prehistoric incidents. The second dimension is geographical relevance: geopolitics has it that geography has a lot to do with regional security and stability. The Indian Ocean is the third largest ocean in the world, with an area of 68.56 million square kilometers, which is approximately 20 percent of the Earth. It covers an area of about 10,000 km between southern Africa and Australia, and stretches to 13,500km between the Persian

Gulf and Antarctica. It is the most structurally complicated ocean, enclosed in land and walls on three sides. The only difference that is found in the Indian Ocean compared to the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans is that the former is not described as open-ended. The Indo-Pacific Rim (IOR), which stretches between the Suez Canal and the Strait of Malacca, features a number of strategic chokepoints that are used to limit maritime access (Kaushiva & Singh, 2014).

Thirdly, the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) is a region that is of great economic importance since it harbors 40% of global energy resources and 65% of major raw material deposits. It is also the largest producer of tea, jute, rubber, and spices. The rich natural resources and diverse economy enhance the strategic significance of the region. The ocean floor contains over 65 percent of the uranium and oil resources in the world. Geopolitically, the Indian Ocean is the most significant body of water and is also likely to be a critical point of considerable differences between nations in the twenty-first century. It is an important entry point to international shipping routes connecting the Americas, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East (Khizar, 2023). These gaps can be bridged through open dialogue. Pragmatic arrangements like the military-industry complex, technology transfer, military training, diplomacy and possible alliances are possible to help in liaising actions aimed at a single security system (Ahmed, 2020). Two more contemporary methods that may enhance regional security collaboration are Integrated Intelligence Sharing and Integrated Space and Cyber Security Agencies. These assist in joint operations to foster peace and stability in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR).

10. Challenges of the Indian-Middle-East-Europe-Economic-Corridor (IMEC)

India gives special focus to safeguarding its electricity industry and support to Indian expatriates, thus defining its policy priorities in these areas. West Asia is the leading producer of energy imports to the country, providing 53% of its oil and 41% of its natural gas. West Asia has a large Indian diaspora with more than 8.5 million Indian migrant workers, who play an important

role in the Indian economy (Guang & Gang, 2020). India has received 111 billion dollars in 2022, the GCC contributed 28%. Interestingly, by 2023, the United Arab Emirates will be the second-largest export partner of India, and Saudi Arabia will be its fourth-largest trading partner. The IMEC initiative has significant challenges, particularly where inflated claims are overlooked since few given limited success of past Western infrastructure projects. It should be noted that the US is the frontrunner in the Build Back Better World (B3W) initiative, which is projected to create \$40 trillion by 2035. The private sector investment target of the PGII (which is commonly regarded as an adaptation of the B3W) was reduced to 600 billion dollars in the G7 countries in a year. Most of the projects that were described as new were old programs with a new brand under PGII (Quah, Tan, & Nursultan, 2025).

The success of IMEC relies on a strong partnership between the industry stakeholders and government agencies. Regrettably, the G7 does not have a detailed global framework that could establish equitable distribution of funds and the creation of high-quality infrastructural projects. This is the gap that shows the need to work as a team to bridge the gap. However, the PGII

recommends that each G7 country coordinate its respective contributions. For instance, the United States plans to hire a second executive planner to manage its extensive approach and has detailed its implementation plans. At present, no group of senior officials is tasked with coordinating the activities of multiple government funding and development agencies or liaising with counterparts in other G7 countries or the private sector. IMEC still faces a number of challenges despite its potential. One of the major issues is whether the exact demand can be identified on its proposed route. The maritime and land components (as shown in figure 3) of the project make it multimodal, implying logistical challenges. In addition, IMEC also competes with other developed routes like the Suez Canal. In the absence of available existing infrastructure, it may be challenging to have effective trade lanes (Russel & Berger, 2020). The problem of the closure of EU ports is also exacerbated by poorly established railways in Greece, which is due to geographic and financial limitations. In the Gulf region, covering the vast deserts of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, building a railway network would substantially increase project costs.

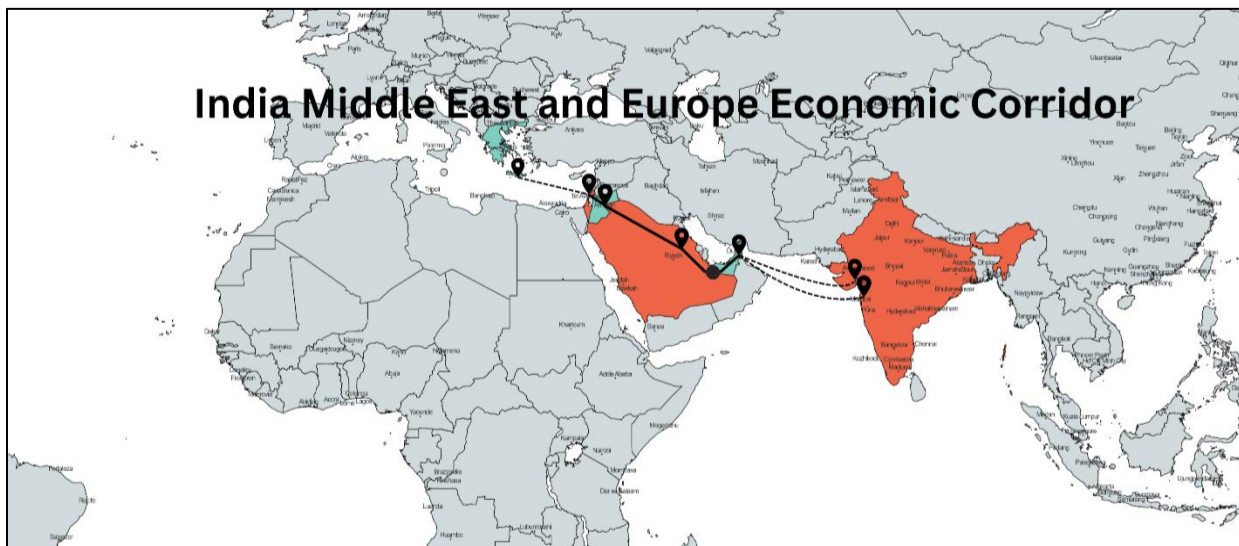


Figure 3: Map showing the Indian-Middle-East-Europe-Corridor-IMEC

Source: Author's creation

India also forms only 2% of the total imports of the European Union, as compared to the 16.2%

of the imports of the European Union that are made up of China. However, it is also true that the

process of economic growth and the flow of trade volumes become possible with the help of advanced infrastructural connectivity. On this basis, there should be a commitment to diversification that is actively developed. Excessive dependence on sea cargoes increases the vulnerability to embargo, naval blockades, and piracy. Additionally, there are a few railroads connecting the vast distances of the Middle East. The Business Standard (2023) projects that the IMEC will lead to a 40% reduction in travel time and a 30% decrease in costs. The shorter distances enabled by train construction are likely the reason for this trend (Zafar, Akhtar, & Shahzad, 2025). Building a rail system between Saudi Arabia and Israel requires official diplomatic ties between both nations. Given the current chaos in Palestine, it is highly unlikely that this project will happen anytime soon. The entire project may also be at risk due to calls to revoke the Abraham Accords, a diplomatic agreement between Israel and Arab countries. The construction of the access route is likely to be delayed by ongoing conflict and instability in the Israeli region, as well as rising tensions involving Saudi Arabia and the UAE with Israel.

The docks include Haifa in Israel, Piraeus in Greece, and three ports on the west coast of India: Jawaharlal Nehru Port Trust (Navi Mumbai), Mundra, and Kandla. There will be five ports in the Middle East that connect to harbors in India. These include the ports of Dammam and Ras Al Khair in Saudi Arabia, as well as Fujairah, Jebel Ali, and Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates. The final option, which depends on routes that can reduce the amount of cargo delivered along a likely route, is being determined by refining the available options. As noted by various academic media houses, research efforts are underway to examine the condition of the railway networks and other related infrastructure in the Middle East. New relationships are being established for construction-related activities.

11. United States Influence in the New Great Game:

The US-China relationship has historically been mistrusted due to the long-standing ideological

incompatibilities, geopolitical competition, and economic rivalry. The belief in communism in China is a contrast to the promotion of capitalism and democracy by the United States, thus creating a structural point of conflict. The rapid fiscal growth of China in the twenty-first century has posed a direct threat to American interests, and it has triggered a race over resources, intensifying trade conflicts, and raising concerns about intellectual property theft. The United States has strengthened its partnerships in the Asia-Pacific region in response to the growing Chinese influence, and in particular, with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD), as a strategic measure to counter the tensions linked to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the growth in Chinese naval capabilities (Fazli, 2024). American participation in the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) reflects a more extensive approach to counter China's influence in the world through the BRI. At the same time, provide stability in the region, promote economic integration, and develop infrastructure based on common values. This interaction is also inherently multidimensional (shown in Table 2), as it includes diplomatic, financial, security, and multilateral levels, and it is perfectly balanced with the strategic rivalry paradigm commonly known as the New Great Game between China, India, and Western powers.

1. Diplomatic and Strategic Backing of IMEC

- The United States officially joined the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) as a signed participant in the September 2023 MoU, along with India, the EU, Gulf states, and European governments (Rolland, 2019).

- President Joe Biden referred to IMEC as a game changer investment making it a strategic alternative, which aligns with G7 and provides a response to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative.

2. Geopolitical and Economic Countermeasure to BRI

- IMEC is well known in U.S. strategic circles as a diplomatic instrument to offset the Belt and Road initiatives of China in Asia, the Middle East, and even Europe.

- The U.S. experts highlight BRI's risks to transparency, debt sustainability, and geopolitical influence, thus America has been encouraging the use of other forms of connectivity such as IMEC (Nisar, 2020).

3. Development Finance and Infrastructure Leadership

- The U.S. International Development Finance Corporation (DFC) placed a \$50 billion portfolio in 114 countries and has directly invested in key infrastructure projects (e.g. in Africa) as a strategic counterpoint to the China financing model.

- The DFC, through IMEC, allows the U.S. to be an actively engaged party in the project via its financial assistance, which encourages the concept of transparency and Western values of governance.

4. Security and Military Posture in the Indo-Pacific and Middle East

- The Pacific Deterrence Initiative (PDI) the program that has seen more than \$40 billion spent since FY 2021 enhances the U.S. military infrastructure and deterrence in the first and

second island chains, contributing to the stability in the region, and indirectly enhancing IMEC maritime connections.

- The US has participated in high-profile military exercises (such as the Talisman Sabre exercises with India, Australia and other partners) to enhance collective deterrence in the Indo-Pacific.

- The U.S. naval bases, defense relations, and security co-operations in the Middle East contribute to the stability of the region, which is crucial in corridor projects such as IMEC.

5. Multilateral Frameworks & Regional Integration Tools

- The U.S. initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) or U.S. diplomatic efforts like the Abraham Accords or the I2U2 alliance bolster economic and political relationships with allies in the region.

- IMEC encourages U.S. policy to promote Eurasian integration through cooperation but does not demand that the countries have to decide between Washington and Beijing, with a primary aim of mutual economic growth and enhanced regional relations.

Table 2: Table Showing the Dimensions and Role of the United States

Dimension		Role of the United States
Governance Partnership	&	Signatory to the 2023 G20 Memorandum of Understanding and co-leads the Indo-Mediterranean Initiative (IMI) to track and coordinate IMEC implementation.
Strategic Geopolitical Objectives	&	Positions IMEC as a counterbalance to China's Belt and Road Initiative, reinforces the US pivot to Asia, and secures continued American influence in South Asia and the Middle East.
Infrastructure Components		Advocates integration of rail corridors, maritime links, undersea cables, electricity grids, and clean hydrogen pipelines; promotes high-capacity optical-fiber and data networks
Economic Development Trade	&	Endorses IMEC to accelerate India-Europe rail trade by 40%, mobilizes US financial institutions and private-sector investment, and champions diversified supply chains.
Security & Stability		Backs IMEC as a tool for Middle East stabilization, reduces dependence on the Suez Canal, and deepens economic ties among key US allies such as Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Source: Author's creation

The United States faces a shrinking area of international access and influence, systemic lack of resources, complicated security issues that include

several states, and re-emergence of a bipolar world hierarchy controlled by two huge forces in a post-BRI world. This is because in many cases, analysts

who start to look at the hazards related to China and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) tend to assume in the beginning that the greatest threat is a direct war with China, after which they seek to shift the policy priorities towards collaboration (Hong, 2019). Nonetheless, this worst-case scenario, fear-based method of thinking obscures understanding, instead of shedding light on it. The completion of the BRI will introduce a few strategic issues for the United States. China will be forced to enhance its military forces to protect its key BRI infrastructure, such as ports, communication systems, and energy assets. It is also necessary that China protects against infrastructure failure, especially those that involve the movement of energy resources because of the fact that they are becoming very critical to its national interests despite not necessarily being located in its immediate territorial boundaries (Saoud, 2019). The South China Sea (SCS) is an example of such a dynamic. The Straits of Malacca are currently receiving almost 80% of Chinese energy imports, which are mostly petroleum. Despite regional protests, China has used this situation, along with the claim that the SCS is Chinese sovereign territory, to justify militarizing small shoals and islands. These actions are rightly seen as encroachments on neighboring countries' sovereignty.

12. Analyzing BRI and IMEC as Complementary Paths:

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), led by the People's Republic of China, and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) and launched by a United States-led alliance at the 2023 G20 Summit is often described as rivalry at the global level between competing structures. Although the BRI is the product of a geopolitical dream to expand Chinese influence globally, IMEC is being described as a Western-based antidote to the Chinese dominance; however, both initiatives are trying to increase connectivity, promote trade, as well as infrastructure-related economic growth in Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. This raises a great question: may the two initiatives, despite the difference in their

strategies, work together as complementary directions instead of rivals?

The BRI and the IMEC overlap within the geographical areas. The Maritime Silk Road element of the BRI passes through key bottlenecks including the Strait of Malacca and Suez Canal compared to IMEC where a different route is proposed by connecting India and Europe via the Middle East particularly the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Israel. An alternative approach to these directions will be to view them as complementary rather than exclusive to each other and empowering each other. The ports and transport centres developed within the BRI may address the IMEC logistical needs in particular, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, which have strategic alignment with both models. Infrastructure and transport node sharing could help to improve interconnectivity, reduce redundancy, and create a more integrated trade and transit network in the region. On the economic front, the massive BRI infrastructure spending on railways, highways, and energy infrastructure offers a substrate base to the IMEC goals (Burger, 2024). Both projects make a statement of sustainability and collaborative work relating to green energy and digital infrastructure might create a platform to achieve synergistic results. As an example, the BRI focus on renewable energy would go in line with the quest of IMEC towards environmentally sustainable corridors. Besides, strategies of regional development such as the Act East policy of India, western expanse agenda of China, the vision 2030 of Saudi Arabia, and the global gateway strategy of European Union have common goals implying that there can be a possibility of complementary activities as opposed to zero-sum games (Skidmore, 2023).

There are still major challenges in political and strategic issues. The mistrust between China and major IMEC stakeholders, especially India and the United States, has deep origins and therefore acts as a hindrance to cooperation opportunities. IMEC is viewed as a counterpoint program meant to lessen the reliance on China-centered supply chains and infrastructure, thus pitting the United States and China against each other. The lack of

institutional alignment and conflicting geopolitical objectives are significant impediments to the strategic partnership. The overall international climate, which is dominated by the growing tension between the U.S. and China and a conflict between the two countries in the region, further deters cooperation between these structures (Laruelle, 2018). Nevertheless, focused and problem-oriented cooperation is still possible. First engagement can be achieved by specific activities in various areas, especially climate resilience, logistics, energy transition, and digital infrastructure. Countries in the Middle East, such as the UAE and Saudi Arabia, which participated in both programs, can also serve as facilitators or brokers to promote the technical cooperation and dialogue. Also, neutral platforms to discuss regulatory standards, best practices and infrastructure development could be offered at multilateral forums such as the G20 or ASEAN (Sonobe, Buchoud, Akbar, & Altansukh, 2024). Despite the fact that BRI and IMEC are the creation of antagonistic approaches to geopolitics, a conflict is not inescapable. Both initiatives have the chance to co-exist and, in the right conditions, complement each other in an increasingly globalized and multipolar world. BRI and IMEC can move beyond being strategic competitors to serving in the establishment of a more integrated, resilient and inclusive global infrastructure through pragmatic diplomacy, aligned economic objectives and the emphasis on sustainable development (Bhatti & Sahito, 2020).

13. Conclusion

The current discussion shows that the competition between the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) is less a direct competition between similar types of infrastructural projects and more a manifestation of major changes in the structure of power on the regional and global levels. IMEC is also mostly symbolic in that it is still in its embryonic years. It has so far only been formalized by the use of non-binding memoranda. It is mainly a geopolitical initiative: a strategic project inspired by India and greatly facilitated by the United States and aimed at balancing the growing

influence of China and to offer an alternative model of regional connectivity. However, IMEC is fraught with various problems, including limited resources in India, the long and complicated economic relationship that Gulf States have with China, and the disruptive nature of the uncertainty that is there due to the ongoing regional strife. In this regard, therefore, the main mode of operation of IMEC is a strategic counter-narrative, rather than a fully operational and realizable infrastructure programme. The project is consequently an indication of a desire to redefine the geopolitical geography of the Indo-Pacific and the Middle East with India seeking to reclaim its perceived world and the United States trying to restrain the BRI through allied relations. The economic logic of IMEC is necessarily, and, perhaps secondarily, interwoven with its strategic calculus, and thus repeats historical trends according to which connectivity projects become the instruments of geopolitical rivalry. Finally, the dichotomy of BRI-IMEC highlights the continuation of the region as a theatre helping to project power in the 21st century. Although multilateral forums endorse cooperative principles, states consider economic corridors in the prism of competitive balancing, harmonizing the development of infrastructure with strategic goals. As a result, the further course of these initiatives will depend not only on feasibility studies and finances, but also on the changing balance of the states negotiating the movement and on anxieties of both economic opportunities and geopolitical needs.

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Muhammad Atif contributed to supervising, writing, reviewing and editing, and project administration.

Usman Anwer contributed to the conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, and the writing of the original draft. All authors meet the Taylor & Francis criteria for authorship. All authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

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