

The Geopolitical Weaponisation of Connectivity: India's Stakes in the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor–Belt and Road Initiative Competition in Middle East and North Africa

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Introduction

In the 21st Century, power projection has evolved to involve not only military and economic tools, but the capacity to generate, control, and shape the cross-border flow of data, energy, goods, and infrastructure. Ports, railroads, roads, and underwater cables are increasingly viewed as strategic assets rather than a mere development tool. This development, which has been famously described as the 'Weaponisation of Connectivity', reveals how states are using infrastructure to carve out long-term benefits in the global system, to increase geopolitical power and to create dependency.¹

The competition is particularly strong in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), where the visions of regional connectivity are shaped by China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the recently proposed India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). India's Middle East connectivity is viewed within the country as a policy that would aim to re-align its role in the new global connectivity architecture, limit dependencies in China-based supply chains, and foster relationships with the Gulf and Europe.²

The Weaponisation of Connectivity: Conceptual Overview

On the surface, connectivity projects seem to be a mutually beneficial as they exchange trade, build infrastructure, and increase regional integration. However, they can also create unbalanced dependencies. The states that depend on vital nodes of connectivity, such as ports, railroads, energy pipelines, or digital networks, are influenced by the stakeholder that finances, constructs, or manages these infrastructures.³

There are several ways to see this dynamic in action:

- When countries use debt to fund infrastructure projects, it often makes the borrower state politically inclined and economically dependent towards the lender.
- The use of civilian ports or infrastructure as military logistics hubs.
- Control over data and technology through ownership of satellite systems and telecom infrastructure.
- The influence on regulations as top connectivity providers mould supply-chain guidelines and trade standards.

China's BRI exemplifies state-led infrastructure financing as a tool of geopolitical influence, enabling Beijing to project economic and political power in partner states. By contrast, India's IMEC emphasises multilateral cooperation,

transparency, sustainability, and inclusive economic connectivity rather than unilateral strategic leverage.

Belt and Road Initiative: China's Signature Project

China launched BRI in 2013 and the country's foreign policy has revolved around it. In that conundrum, MENA plays a crucial role for three primary reasons:

- **Energy Security.** Half of the oil imports of China come from MENA nations. This is the primary reason for Beijing to invest in the region to ensure long-term supply stability.⁴
- **Maritime Strategy.** Silk Road is anchored in regions like the South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, and the Mediterranean. This allows Beijing to expand its influence strategically.⁵
- **Strategic Influence.** Through infrastructure diplomacy, China gains political access to various governments in areas like the Red Sea, North Africa, and the Gulf, especially in places where Western influence has declined.⁶



Image 1: China's Belt and Road Initiative

Source: National Maritime Foundation⁷

Important Belt and Road Initiative investments in the area include:

- The Djibouti Naval Base and Pakistan's Port of Gwadar, which provide China with a dual-purpose maritime presence.
- The Suez Economic Zone between Egypt and China, as well as projects at the ports of Jizan, Saudi Arabia, and Duqm, Oman.
- The United Arab Emirates (UAE), Israel, and Iran have large-scale rail, energy, and telecommunication projects.

China's engagement strategy, which consists of turnkey construction, quick finance, and little political conditionality, has enabled it to establish a complex network of economic ties. But this paradigm also has a few issues, which include political leverage, debt exposure, and unclear terminology. China can use coercive power, influence host nations, or demand concessions when geopolitical problems emerge, due to the effectiveness of its infrastructure diplomacy.⁸

India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor Vision: India's Counter-Connectivity Strategy

In Sep 2023, during the G20 summit in New Delhi, the United States, the European Union, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, France, Germany, and Italy signed a memorandum of understanding. This document marked the beginning of the IMEC. The plan is to create a network that includes ports, railways, digital connections, and energy infrastructure.

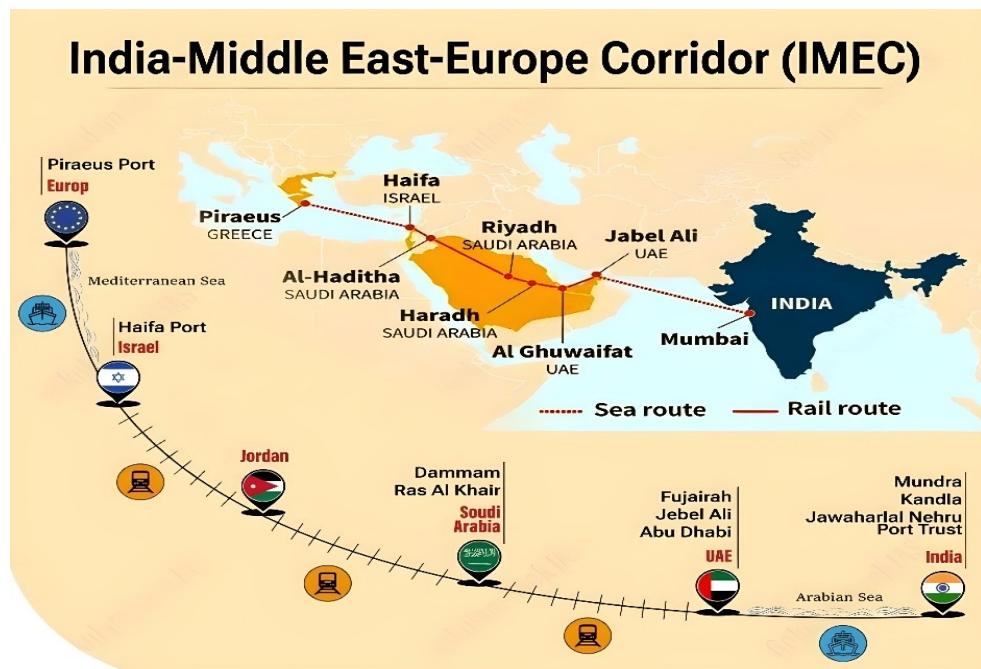


Image 2: India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor

Source: ResearchGate⁹

The IMEC has two segments:

- The Eastern Corridor connecting India to the Arabian Gulf.
- The Northern Corridor linking the Gulf to Europe through Jordan and Israel.¹⁰

Apart from reduction in transportation costs and avoiding congested or politically vulnerable routes such as the Suez Canal, the IMEC could reduce transit time between India and Europe by 30-40 per cent, if successful. The IMEC carries symbolic significance beyond being economically effective; it is, in a clear way, a counter to the hegemony of China in international infrastructure diplomacy and a way

to establish India as a significant connectivity provider within the Indo-Mediterranean region.¹¹

Implications for India

- **Beyond Maritime Routes.** New Delhi establishes itself as a vital link in the India-Gulf-Europe economic arc between Asia, the Middle East, and Europe by expanding its transportation routes. It bypasses the primary maritime routes that connects India to Europe and Gulf, via the Red Sea and Suez Canal, which are susceptible to threats like Houthi strikes and reduces the chances of any possible blockade risk.
- **Strategic Balancing.** By establishing IMEC, India is trying to strengthen the 'Connectivity Diplomacy' and cap the rising influence of China in the Gulf and the Indian Ocean, areas vital to its oil and maritime interests.
- **Energy Corridors and Maritime Leverage.** The IMEC will facilitate energy pipelines, such as hydrogen and renewable energy projects, that would create long-term linkages between India and the Gulf states. This will be a gamechanger as approximately 65 per cent of India's crude oil imports are from the Gulf, making energy security an important aspect of the country's foreign policy. Enhanced maritime cooperation will strengthen India's control over crucial sea lanes and chokepoints, supporting its Indo-Pacific strategy.
- **Technology and Infrastructure.** The IMEC stands as a priority for digital connectivity—fibre optic cables, data centres, and exchange platforms. This contrasts with the BRI, which focuses on physical infrastructure. India can offer financial services, standards on digital governance, and information technology expertise to the MENA region. A competing digital corridor also presents India and its allies with an opportunity to set data security, privacy, and cyber resilience standards as an alternative to China's 'Digital Silk Road'.¹²

Threats in the Middle East and North Africa: Issues and Intricacies

The IMEC is faced with regional challenges despite ambitious targets. Long-term projects can be paralysed by the MENA's rivalries, conflicts, and fluctuating alliances.

- **Regional rivalries.** Turkey and Egypt feel left out in the IMEC route. Their geographical locations provide them ideal transit ports for the Asia-Europe trade and cutting them off could impede support in the region.
- **Security instability.** The effect of ongoing tensions in the Red Sea, the crisis in Gaza, and the Iran-Saudi rivalry poses a serious threat to the continuity of projects.
- **Economic feasibility.** The IMEC will be very expensive and may cost hundreds of billions of dollars. Unlike the BRI, which is purely state-backed, the IMEC is based on a combination of multilateral, corporate, and

government-funded economy, which may slow the development and result in a more conservative approach.

- **Institutional coherence.** In lieu of a central governing body, the IMEC is still a political declaration and not an operational corridor. India must somehow balance between idealism and pragmatism to turn it into strategic ambition and concrete projects.¹³

Policy Recommendations

- **Incorporate Digital Diplomacy.** There should be a 'Digital IMEC' project to link cybersecurity, e-commerce, and finance frameworks in Europe, MENA, and India.
- **Establish Framework for Financing the IMEC.** A dedicated IMEC Financing Mechanism India's Export Import (EXIM) Bank should be established, with EU and Gulf contributions to support feasibility studies and initial projects.
- **Co-development Instead of Donations.** India must aim to partner with other nations to develop the infrastructure rather than donating or providing them with a 'Line of Credit'. This will help job creation, talent transfer, and reciprocal advantages in the partner nations.

Conclusion

The new currency of power is connectivity. More than an economic competition, the BRI and IMEC competition in MENA defines the norms, interdependencies, and hierarchies of the 21st Century global order. The IMEC gives India the opportunity to influence this order, rather than merely respond to it. India must create a balance between geopolitical aims and its execution by following a mix of creativity and practicality. To determine the future of connection in MENA, the stakeholders must establish the most reliable and long-lasting foundation rather than just making big announcements.

Endnotes

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