

STRATEGIC DIMENSIONS:

IMEC amidst the Israel-Hamas War - A Geopolitical Perspective

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Abstract

The geopolitical dynamics between India and China are being influenced by their border dispute. India is trying to counter China's power in the Himalayas and South Asia. This competition has led to increased tension between Beijing and New Delhi, which countries like the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and GCC members are taking advantage of. India's increasing relations with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other Gulf Arab countries, where there is a sizable Indian diaspora, will be used to counter China's expanding presence in the Middle East. This determination to confront China will strengthen the US view of India as a valuable partner. India's opposition to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is due to the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) passing through a disputed area claimed by India. India sees the International North-South Transport Corridor (IMEC) as a way to gain more economic power over China and Pakistan. IMEC will also bypass Pakistan's influence and allow for more economic integration between India and Europe. However, the territorial disputes between India and Pakistan remain unresolved.

Keywords- Israel, Hamas, IMEC.

Introduction

The India-Middle East Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) has come into focus due to the interaction of geopolitics and economic interests against the backdrop of the complex and turbulent Israel-Hamas conflict. In the context of current hostilities, this research paper aims to examine the strategic elements of IMEC by dissecting the complex interplay between geopolitical considerations, regional dynamics, and economic cooperation.

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In September 2023ⁱ, negotiations and efforts to establish the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) took place during the G20 Summit in New Delhi, with seven nations and the European Union announcing their ambitions. This is the most recent in a line of US-led projects that aim to unite Middle Eastern and South Asian allies under a single geoeconomic framework while also proving that Washington is financing audacious global infrastructure initiatives, such as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

At the G20 Summit, the IMEC partners—the US, Saudi Arabia, the EU, France, Germany, India, Italy, and Saudi Arabia—signed a memorandum of understanding committing to work together to build two corridors: one connecting the Gulf to India and the other connecting Europe to the Gulf. Rail connections, communications and electrical cables, and hydrogen export pipes will all be part of the corridors. Even though Israel and Jordan did not join the IMEC pact, they will still maintain connections with these two nations.ⁱⁱ

The IMEC, as a burgeoning economic corridor spanning India, the Middle East, and Europe, serves as a conduit for trade, investment, and diplomatic ties. The current geopolitical landscape, marked by the Israel-Hamas war, has introduced new challenges and opportunities for this corridor. This paper aims to provide a comprehensive examination of how IMEC is navigating these challenges and contributing to the evolving geopolitical dynamics of the region.

As we delve into the geopolitical perspective, we aim to shed light on the multifaceted aspects of IMEC's role during the Israel-Hamas conflict. By scrutinizing economic interdependencies, diplomatic engagements, and the geopolitical inferences of the corridor, we seek to uncover the broader consequences and opportunities that arise for the participating nations.

Examining IMEC's strategic dimensions in this context is imperative for an nuanced understanding of the intersection between economic interests and geopolitical realities in a region fraught with tension and complexity.

Brief overview of the Hamas-Israel war and its impact on West Asia

The ongoing conflict between Hamas and Israel has profound and far-reaching implications for the complex and volatile region of West Asia. Rooted in historical, religious, and geopolitical factors, the conflict has led to cycles of violence, displacement, and humanitarian crises, with repercussions extending beyond the borders of Israel and the Palestinian territories.

Thousands of missiles fired from Gaza disrupted the stillness of the early Saturday morning on October 7, even as hundreds of Hamas militants infiltrated the heavily guarded border to launch multiple frontal attacks against Israel. In total, 22 places were involved in Israel invasions, with Hamas forces invading Israeli land up to a distance of 25 miles.ⁱⁱⁱ

At the heart of the conflict is the longstanding land dispute, particularly the contested territories of Gaza and the West Bank. The establishment of Israel in 1948^{iv} and subsequent conflicts have resulted in a protracted struggle for self-determination and control over territory between Israelis and Palestinians. The formation of Hamas, a Palestinian Islamist organization, further added a militant dimension to the conflict, challenging the more secular Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and complicating efforts for a peaceful resolution.

One of the most direct impacts of the Hamas-Israel conflict is the toll it takes on civilian lives. Periods of heightened tension often led to military confrontations, characterized by rocket attacks launched by Hamas from Gaza and Israeli airstrikes in response.

The densely populated Gaza Strip becomes a battleground, resulting in civilian casualties, destruction of infrastructure, and a severe strain on local resources. The West Bank also experiences unrest, with clashes between Palestinians and Israeli security forces.

Humanitarian challenges in the region are exacerbated by the displacement of civilians. Palestinians, especially in Gaza, often find themselves trapped in the crossfire, forced to flee their homes to seek safety. The displacement adds to the already dire living conditions in Gaza, where access to basic services such as healthcare, education, and clean water is severely limited. The international community, including humanitarian organizations, faces the ongoing challenge of providing aid and support to affected populations.

Beyond the immediate humanitarian impact, the Hamas-Israel conflict contributes to regional instability. The situation has strained diplomatic relations in West Asia, with neighboring countries often taking sides based on historical alliances and geopolitical considerations. The conflict also fuels broader tensions between Israel and other nations in the region, impacting regional security dynamics.^v

Efforts to achieve a lasting peace in the region face significant obstacles. Diplomatic initiatives and peace talks have been repeatedly attempted, but a comprehensive resolution remains elusive.

International actors, including the UN, the United States, and the European Union, have been involved in mediating and facilitating negotiations, but the deeply entrenched historical grievances and conflicting national aspirations continue to impede progress.

Hamas-Israel conflict significantly shapes the dynamics of West Asia, impacting the lives of civilians, exacerbating humanitarian challenges, and contributing to regional instability. Achieving a sustainable resolution requires addressing the root causes of the conflict, fostering diplomatic efforts, and garnering international support for a comprehensive and just solution that accommodates the rights and aspirations of both Israelis and Palestinians.

Introduction of the India-Middle-East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC)

The India-Middle-East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) emerges as a visionary and transformative initiative aimed at fostering economic integration and connectivity between three strategically significant regions: India, the Middle East, and Europe. This corridor envisions a network of infrastructure, trade routes, and economic cooperation agreements to enhance regional collaboration, boost economic growth, and create new avenues for trade and investment.

Roots of the IMEC can be traced back to the increasing recognition of the economic potential and geopolitical significance of closer ties between India, the Middle East, and Europe. The growing interdependence of nations in an era of globalization has spurred the need for innovative economic frameworks to harness collective strengths and address shared challenges. Spanning vast distances and diverse landscapes, the IMEC encompasses the Indian subcontinent, the Arabian Peninsula, and the European continent. The corridor is designed to connect major cities and economic hubs, creating a seamless flow of goods, services, and ideas. Key countries involved include India, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Iran, Turkey, and various European nations.

A cornerstone of the IMEC is the development of robust infrastructure to facilitate efficient transportation and logistics.

Highways, railways, ports, and airports will be upgraded and expanded to create a modern and interconnected transport network. Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and industrial clusters along the corridor will further incentivize trade and investment.

Along with a rail network linking the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan with the Israeli port of Haifa to access the Mediterranean Sea, the corridor will comprise a shipping route that connects Mumbai and Mundra (Gujarat) with the UAE. After that, Haifa will be sea connected to the Greek port of Piraeus, and eventually to Europe.^{vi}

The IMEC aims to deepen economic ties through the reduction of trade barriers and the facilitation of cross-border investments. Trade agreements and partnerships will be forged to promote the free flow of goods and services, while harmonizing regulatory frameworks to create a conducive business environment. The corridor also envisions leveraging technology and innovation to drive economic diversification and sustainable growth. Given the strategic importance of energy resources in the Middle East, the IMEC will likely include initiatives for energy cooperation and resource-sharing. This could involve the development of renewable energy projects, joint ventures in the oil and gas sector, and the establishment of energy corridors to ensure a stable and sustainable energy supply.

Beyond economic considerations, the IMEC seeks to foster greater diplomatic and cultural ties. People-to-people exchanges, educational partnerships, and cultural initiatives will play a crucial role in building mutual understanding and trust among the participating nations.

The importance of IMEC

India-Middle-East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) holds significant importance on multiple fronts, encompassing economic, geopolitical, and social aspects.

While the concept is speculative, its potential importance can be outlined based on the perceived benefits of enhanced regional connectivity and collaboration.

Economic Integration:

IMEC would facilitate a seamless flow of goods and services across the participating regions, promoting increased trade volumes. Reduced trade barriers and improved infrastructure would lead to greater economic integration, opening new markets and business opportunities for the participating countries. The corridor's development would create attractive investment opportunities, particularly in infrastructure projects, logistics, and special economic zones. Foreign direct investment (FDI) could flow more freely, stimulating economic growth and creating jobs in the corridor countries. IMEC could contribute to the diversification of economies in the involved regions. By fostering collaboration in various sectors, nations might reduce their dependence on a limited range of industries and resources, enhancing overall economic resilience.

Geopolitical Significance:

The economic corridor would likely foster closer diplomatic ties among participating nations. Shared economic interests often contribute to political stability and cooperation, potentially mitigating regional tensions and conflicts. By promoting economic interdependence, the IMEC could contribute to the reduction of geopolitical risks. Nations with shared economic interests are generally incentivized to find peaceful resolutions to disputes, enhancing overall regional stability. The corridor could provide participating nations with improved access to strategic resources. This is particularly relevant for energy resources in the Middle East, potentially enhancing energy security for countries along the corridor.

The project has received a warm reception in Greece, with the country expressing its desire to serve as India's gateway to Europe. However, Turkey has reservations about it. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has openly opposed the project, arguing that Turkey, as a significant production and trading hub, should be included in the East-to-West traffic route. Concerns in Turkey revolve around the belief that the project aims to isolate the country despite its formidable military and expansive coastline. Atif Ozbey, the founder of the Turkish news website haberdeger.com, emphasized that Turkey cannot ignore the project, especially as it passes through disputed waters to Greece.^{vii}

According to Ahmed Aboudouh, an Associate Fellow at Chatham House, the United States sees the project as an opportunity to mend relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia. The Biden administration aims to foster an understanding between the two countries as part of their broader strategy to curb Iran's influence and counter China's growing presence in the Middle East. The recent announcement of a Beijing-mediated initiative to restore diplomatic ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran surprised Washington, highlighting the need for alternative approaches.^{viii}

Omair Anas, a professor of international relations at Yıldırım Beyazıt Üniversitesi in Ankara, argues that the corridor project was never intended to exclude Turkey, the only NATO member in West Asia. He emphasizes that Turkey is actively working to enhance transnational connectivity through various modes of transportation. Anas believes Ankara should have every reason to participate in the IMEC and should consider joining the corridor in the future, given its existing relationships with most members of the India-Middle East-Europe route. Furthermore, Erdogan's efforts to forge partnerships with BRICS, SCO, ASEAN, and other Asian groups indicate Turkey's interest in engaging with Asian economies and their growth potential.^{ix}

Infrastructure Development:

The development of modern infrastructure, including highways, railways, ports, and airports, would improve connectivity between the regions. Efficient transportation networks are crucial for reducing trade costs, promoting economic activities, and facilitating the movement of people and goods. Infrastructure development along the corridor could drive technological advancements, incorporating smart technologies and sustainable practices. This, in turn, would contribute to the overall modernization of the participating nations' economies.

Potential impact of Hamas-Israel war on IMEC

The recent escalation of conflict between Hamas and Israel has sent shockwaves not only across the Middle East but also to other regions, including India and Europe. One area of concern is the potential impact on the India-Middle-East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), a significant trade route joining these regions. As tensions rise and the conflict intensifies, it is imperative to assess how this war could affect the countries involved in IMEC.

The IMEC signatories had to convene to devise an action plan for the development of the economic corridor, which would ease the transit of data, energy, and commerce to, from, and between India, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Jordan, Israel, and Europe. This timeline coincided with the October 7 attack by Hamas on Israel. One factor that can create a delay in the formalization of IMEC soon is the resurgence of pro-Palestine feeling in West Asia, particularly in Jordan, which on October 27 sponsored a UN General Assembly resolution for a humanitarian truce in Gaza. However, officials claim that the region's continued state of conflict has demonstrated the necessity for economic stabilizers.^x

It has been more than three years since the Abraham Accords were signed, which were a series of agreements aimed to normalise relations between Israel, the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco.

Additionally, there had been positive indications of de-escalation in the region since the normalization of ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia until October 7, 2023. This progress prompted the announcement of a transcontinental connectivity project in Delhi, as there was hope for improved relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel. However, Israel's retaliatory actions against Hamas in the Gaza Strip, resulting in the loss of thousands of civilian lives, have made the leaders in Riyadh and Amman hesitant to pursue closer ties with Israel.^{xi}

The ongoing Hamas-Israel war poses several potential impacts on the India-Middle-East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). The conflict has the potential to disrupt the flow of goods, destabilize markets, and impact vital infrastructure along the corridor. One of the primary concerns arising from the war is the disruption of trade and commerce along the IMEC. As tensions escalate, countries involved may impose trade restrictions and tariffs, hindering the smooth movement of goods. This could lead to delays, increased costs, and reduced efficiency in trade operations. Additionally, the conflict may create an atmosphere of uncertainty, deterring businesses from engaging in cross-border trade activities. The fear of instability and potential disruption may cause companies to reconsider their investment plans and seek alternative trade routes.

The Hamas-Israel war can have a significant impact on investment and infrastructure development along the IMEC. The conflict may result in the destruction or impairment of critical infrastructure such as ports, railways, and highways, disrupting the flow of goods and hindering trade activities. Moreover, the uncertainty surrounding the war can deter potential investors from committing to long-term projects along the corridor. The risks associated with investing in an unstable region may outweigh the potential benefits, leading to a slowdown in infrastructure development and economic growth.

The political implications of the Hamas-Israel war on the countries involved in IMEC cannot be overlooked. The conflict has the potential to strain diplomatic relations and disrupt political stability, further exacerbating the challenges faced by the corridor.

Countries may be forced to take sides or adopt diplomatic measures that could impact their trade partnerships and economic cooperation. Political tensions and conflicts can create a hostile environment for businesses, making it difficult to maintain seamless trade relations along the corridor.

Strategies to mitigate the impact of the war on IMEC

While the potential impact of the Hamas-Israel war on IMEC is significant, there are strategies that can be employed to mitigate these effects and ensure the continuity of trade and economic cooperation.

Enhanced diplomatic efforts

Strong diplomatic efforts are crucial to resolving conflicts and maintaining stability along the IMEC. Governments and international organizations should actively engage in dialogue and mediation to de-escalate tensions and find peaceful resolutions.

By promoting diplomatic solutions, countries involved in IMEC can foster an environment of trust and cooperation, minimizing the negative impacts of the war on the corridor.

Diversification of trade routes

To mitigate the risk of disruption caused by the conflict, countries should explore diversification of trade routes. Developing alternative transportation networks and exploring new markets can help reduce reliance on the IMEC and ensure the continuity of trade even during troubled times.

By diversifying trade routes, countries can minimize the impact of conflicts on their economies, ensuring stability and resilience in the face of geopolitical challenges.

Strengthening infrastructure resilience

Investing in the resilience of infrastructure along the IMEC is crucial to withstand the potential impacts of the war. Governments and private entities should focus on fortifying critical infrastructure, enhancing security measures, and implementing contingency plans to minimize disruptions.

By strengthening the infrastructure resilience, countries can ensure the continued flow of goods and services along the corridor, even in the face of conflicts and geopolitical challenges.

Geopolitical Aspects of IMEC

The geopolitical aspects of IMEC should be considered when examining the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members and their adjustment to a multipolar world. Apart from Oman, all these countries are Dialogue Partners in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Last August, the UAE and Saudi Arabia were invited to join the BRICS; the UAE accepted immediately, and Saudi Arabia is likely to follow suit. Despite the integration of some GCC states into the SCO and BRICS, the UAE and Saudi Arabia were still enthusiastic about signing the IMEC Memorandum of Understanding, demonstrating their growing influence in rebalancing the world's geopolitical landscape. This transportation corridor will reinforce the importance of energy-rich Gulf Arab states in the global economy as the focus of geoeconomics slowly moves away from the West and towards the East and the Global South. This trend was accelerated after the 2008-09 global financial crisis. To demonstrate their dedication to Middle Eastern countries and offer an alternative to China's BRI, the Biden administration strongly backs IMEC.^{xii}

Examining the current "new Cold War" between the US and China is essential to understanding the Asia-Middle East-Europe corridor. In addition to offering an alternative to BRI, the Biden administration's backing for the IMEC stems from the desire to demonstrate to its Middle Eastern friends that Washington is committed to the region. The goal of this plan, which was first put forth by President Xi Jinping 10 years ago, is to place China at the centre of the global economy in the twenty-first century by connecting Asia, Africa, Europe, and Latin America.^{xiii}

Because of the links between China's initiative and Saudi Arabia's project 2030, the Gulf Arab governments play a significant role in the BRI project. Washington is alarmed by the strengthening relations between Israel and the traditionally West-aligned Arab nations, which is why the US is making an effort to curtail China's expanding geo-economic influence in the Middle East.^{xiv}

The US, Israel, the UAE, and India formed the I2U2 Group in 2021 with the goal of promoting private sector participation in areas like water, energy food security, transportation, health, and space. Building on the I2U2 Group, the IMEC initiative aims to achieve more ambitious goals. Declared by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, this transcontinental corridor will "drive sustainable development for the entire world". The ship-to-rail transportation network was hailed as "a green and digital bridge across continents and civilizations" by European Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen. Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli prime minister, referred to IMEC as the "largest cooperation project in our history."^{xv}

Every country along the IMEC corridor will have a different perspective on multipolarity due to differing geopolitical objectives and viewpoints. According to Washington, IMEC is a means of limiting China's advancement in the Middle East and bringing the nations of the Gulf Cooperation Council closer to the Western worldview.^{xvi}

Officials in Abu Dhabi and Riyadh, meanwhile, see this economic corridor as an opportunity to further solidify ties between China and other East and Global South nations, as well as between Europe and North America. As intermediaries between the Global South, the East, and the West, the Emiratis and Saudis do not regard themselves as a part of US efforts to limit Beijing. In short, IMEC presents a chance for the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia to further establish their prominence as centres of interregional connectivity, so aiding in their objective of diversifying their economies away from hydrocarbons.^{xvii}

Now coming to India which is in a competitive relationship with both China and Pakistan. Tensions between these three countries have been long-running due to their conflicting interests. With the rise of India's economy and military strength, tensions between India and its neighbours have further increased. China and Pakistan have often resorted to military provocations to try and gain an advantage over India. India has had to take a firm stance against its rivals to protect its sovereignty and national interests.

The rivalry between China and India dramatically affects the geopolitical dynamics of IMEC and New Delhi's engagement in this transcontinental route. With the two Asian nations at a low point in their border dispute, India is attempting to offset China's power in areas across the Himalayas and South Asia. As the competition between China and India intensifies, states from the Indian Ocean, like the Maldives and Sri Lanka, are taking advantage of the increased tension between Beijing and New Delhi; the same goes for the GCC members.^{xviii}

Modi's administration will be able to exploit India's increased links to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other Arab Gulf nations, where sizeable Indian communities are present, with the help of IMEC.

The Modi government will use India's increasing relations with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other Gulf Arab countries, which have a sizable Indian diaspora, to counter China's expanding presence in the Middle East and beyond. India's determination to confront Beijing's dominance will further strengthen Washington's view of New Delhi as a valuable "Cold War" partner. At a time when India is embroiled in a rift with Canada, one of America's NATO allies and a neighbour to the north, India's position as a possible challenge to Chinese power will likely motivate the White House not to take sides too firmly with Ottawa against the South Asian giant.

The tensions between India and Pakistan are pertinent when discussing the BRI. India has opposed the BRI due to the CPEC passing through an area claimed by India as its own. Thus, India sees the IMEC as a way to gain more economic power over China and Pakistan by joining the BRI's natural alternative. In the past, Pakistan has had a say when it comes to India's connection to the West. An Indian foreign policy analyst has suggested that IMEC will break this Pakistani veto, allowing for more economic integration between India and Europe and bypassing Islamabad. At the same time, the territorial disputes between India and Pakistan remain unresolved.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the strategic dimensions of IMEC amidst the Israel-Hamas conflict present a multifaceted tableau of economic aspirations, geopolitical considerations, and diplomatic endeavors. The corridor, while navigating the turbulent waters of regional conflict, encapsulates the interconnected nature of our globalized world. The analysis undertaken in this research paper reveals that economic corridors such as IMEC are not immune to the geopolitical challenges of the regions they traverse.

The Israel-Hamas conflict serves as a crucible, testing the resilience and adaptability of economic initiatives that seek to bridge nations and continents. The corridor's role as a facilitator of economic connectivity amidst conflict underscores the potential for such initiatives to contribute to peace and stability. However, it also highlights the inherent complexities and risks involved in navigating geopolitical fault lines.

As we reflect on IMEC's journey amidst the Israel-Hamas conflict, it becomes clear that the corridor is not a passive participant but an active agent in shaping the geopolitical landscape. The lessons drawn from this analysis are not confined to a singular conflict; they resonate across regions where economic corridors intersect with political realities. In an era where global connectivity is both a promise and a challenge, understanding the strategic dimensions of initiatives like IMEC is essential for forging a path toward sustainable economic collaboration in regions grappling with conflict.

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