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IMEC as a Strategic Asset:
Imperative of Security
in a Multi-lateral,
Multi-sectoral
&
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Connectivity Corridor

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IMEC as a Strategic Asset: Imperative of Security in a Multi-lateral, Multi-sectoral and Multi-stakeholder Connectivity Corridor

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Abstract

Launched at the sidelines of the G20 Summit 2023 hosted by India, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) is emerging as a pivotal strategic connectivity corridor envisioned by strategic players in a trans-regional format. As a global connectivity corridor, owing to its expansion as IMEC plus, it is embodied as a strategic asset that integrates multilateral, multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder interests.

The paper examines the corridor's potential to reshape trans-regional economic dynamics and to foster global supply chains through robust trade routes and ascertain deeper interconnections between the players. As a strategic connectivity corridor which aims to address the concerns and challenges of all the partnering countries, the paper underscores the imperative of a robust security framework to safeguard IMEC against potential geopolitical uncertainties, operational disruptions, cyber threats and non-state actors' interventions. It further explores the possibility of installing IMEC centered collaborative security models, risk mitigation strategies and robust policy frameworks. While the full operationalisation of IMEC may require an extended timeframe, it is necessary to ensure the appointment of designated authorities and special envoys at an early stage to oversee the development of a secure, well-coordinated corridor that can enhance economic integration and resilience, promote sustainable development and address the concerns of 'grey rhinos' of the future.

Keywords: IMEC, Food and Energy security, India Mediterranean Initiative, Strategic Connectivity Corridor, Multi-Modal Transport, Maritime and Supply Chain Security.

If the 20th century was defined by military strength and geopolitical rivalries, the 21st century is shaped by geoeconomics, economic interdependence and strategic connectivity. Launched on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in September 2023, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), a planned, transformative, economic corridor aims to bolster supply chain connectivity between Europe, the Gulf, the Mediterranean and India (PIB, 2023). It is envisioned as more than an infrastructure project—touted as a peace corridor, IMEC holds the ability to facilitate the much-anticipated normalisation between Middle Eastern regional powers, particularly between Saudi Arabia and Israel (Sauvignon, F. and Benaglia, S., 2023). By fostering economic interdependence and strategic connectivity, the Corridor strives in reducing geopolitical tensions by acting as a catalyst for holistic economic benefits. If this is not enough, while

ascertaining regional economic cooperation, IMEC holds the potential in reshaping regional dynamics, reinforce stability, and to pave the way for deeper diplomatic engagements even in resolving the Middle East peace process.

Even after being envisioned as a peace corridor, IMEC remains predominantly economic in character, focusing exclusively on trade, connectivity and regional integration. Fostering economic interdependence particularly between countries that have yet to establish formal diplomatic ties, is the unique selling point that the corridor offers. It is noteworthy that it was the US-brokered Abraham Accords which set a precedent for regional cooperation thus laying the groundwork for broader inter-regional connectivity projects like IMEC. The very ideation of the corridor was possible only after the signing of the Abraham Accords which normalised relations between Israel and few Arab states including Gulf Arabs. However, given the complexities of normalisation — especially in light of the Israel-Hamas conflict of October 2023— IMEC has so far avoided incorporating a security dimension and remains purely focused on economic aspects.

In all probability, IMEC operates on the idea that peace is ‘not just an absence of conflict but is about building economic ties and furthering mutual interdependence’. From a constructivist standpoint, it is reflective of nations today to prioritise economic growth over geopolitical tensions. And that shared prosperity has the ability to reduce chances of conflict. Based on an assumption that if nations are economically linked, they have less reasons to fight and thus security challenges can be managed through economic means than military. A realist perspective, however, presents a contrary aspect that security cannot be an afterthought! Especially in cases where economic corridors stretch across regions with historical and political complexities with critical trade routes, a strong security framework is a much needed aspect for them to function smoothly. With rising global and regional conflicts, threats from state and non-state actors, cyber vulnerabilities and maritime piracy, IMEC will be susceptible to such concerns. As an eventually evolving, an all-encompassing corridor addressing freight-food-energy supplies (Singh, M. 2023), physical and digital infrastructure, its protection is inevitable and thus security is imperative. In future, as it expands further east of India and west of Europe, security aspect will become critical with respect to IMEC as not just being a purely economic project but as a strategic asset in a geopolitically fluid environment.

Indian Pursuit to European Connectivity

With a volume of trade standing at US\$134 billion, Europe is India’s largest trading partner, accounting for 12.2 per cent of the latter’s total trade (Dutta Mishra, R., 2024). In order to maintain a seamless flow of goods and services, a well-connected supply chain is essential. For the past few decades, India has been working on multiple routes to link to the European market. From the

Chabahar to Lapis Lazuli corridor to the International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC), Suez Canal route, the Trans-Caspian corridor, the Ashgabat Agreement corridor, Turkey's Middle Corridor and the East-West Transport Corridor – India has explored many pathways for European connect.

The requirement for alternative connectivity routes has become increasingly significant after the severe supply chain disruptions caused by the outbreak of COVID-19 and the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war followed by Middle East crisis in October 2023. Houthi attacks on commercial ships passing through Red Sea further aggravated the situation and India had to bear the brunt by opting for a more expensive and longer route passing via Cape of Good Hope. Such tripling of transportation cost has a lot of bearing on any nation's exchequer (The Economic Times, 2024). Therefore, as these crises exposed vulnerabilities in traditional global trade routes, it thereby compelled India to seek for more reliable and geopolitically stable corridors to access European market.

From Indian perspective, IMEC in that context, appears to be the most viable option, more so given New Delhi's robust strategic partnerships with key Middle Eastern players headquartered at Riyadh, Abu Dhabi/Dubai and Tel Aviv/Jerusalem. Robust economic and security cooperation with these countries along with similar ties with European nations, further makes the corridor a promising initiative. The major challenge, however, lies in the intra-Middle Eastern dynamics. Unlike India's structured engagements, there is no equivalent framework for deeper collaborations among Middle Eastern nations as of yet.

For a corridor of this stature to be successful and to proliferate, mere normalisation of ties and economic integration cannot not be sufficient. It will require the Middle Eastern regional powers to enhance cooperation across domains such as economic, security, intelligence sharing, technology, and beyond. Without an IMEC-centric comprehensive framework of collaboration that encapsulates a security pact, robust economic integration, burden sharing mechanism and a highly systematic intelligence sharing network, the ambitious infrastructure project may face significant roadblocks. For longevity and sustainability of the corridor, a deeper, institutionalised partnerships across critical sectors is of utmost significance.

Notwithstanding strategic interests of all the partners, an active participation of the Middle Eastern nations is crucial for overall success of the corridor. While India given its 3Ds, namely, *drive*, *demography* and *demand* of its products in global markets, aims to position itself as a key global supply investor (WEF, 2021), Middle East faces critical food security challenges (Singh, M. 2022) and Europe grapples with energy shortages. Given that freight-food-energy and digital infrastructure form the backbone of IMEC, the corridor provides mutually beneficial opportunity

for all the partners and hence a symbiotic relationship in much needed. Notably, it is this interdependence aspect of the sectors that strengthens IMEC's feasibility, making it more than just an infrastructure project. It is a strategic necessity that is guided and controlled by various like-minded partner countries wherein economic and security priorities of its stakeholders is of importance.

IMEC So Far

Despite its strategic significance and economic viability, IMEC as of now, remains in the ideation stage. Structurally, there are two main routes to IMEC – the Eastern corridor, that connects India to the Gulf and the Northern Corridor, linking Middle East East to Europe. Within this framework, it is divided into three key legs, namely, maritime connectivity from India to the UAE (from Jawaharlal Nehru Navi Mumbai Port to Jabel Ali), a railway network linking the UAE to Saudi Arabia (Jabel Ali-Al Guwaifat-Haradh-Riyadh) and further to Israel (Riyadh-Al Haditha-Haifa), and another sea route from Israel's Haifa port to Europe (Haifa-Piraeus-Trieste). A multi-modal approach of this kind to integrate maritime, rail, road and inland transport aims to create a seamless trade link between Asia and Europe.

One of the key aspects of developing IMEC is also to gaze the possibility of reviving old historic trade and transport routes and to use a combination of old and new networks. For instance, discussions are underway to extend Saudi Arabia railway network operated by state-owned Saudi Arabia Railways (SAR) till Haifa towards Mediterranean and also to link it to the UAE's Al-Ghuwaifat towards the Gulf. Similarly, since 2017, Israel has been looking forward to reviving the old Hejaz Railway network, an Ottoman Empire times rail connectivity and has even discussed its plans with some Arab countries and the US (Sweidan, M.H., 2023). In all probability, it will be connected to IMEC to link railway networks between Haifa, the UAE and Saudi Arabia. It is be noted that road networks and hinterland connectivity is also being planned in IMEC, however, no plans have been laid out yet. A robust hinterland study as part of holistic IMEC research needs to be undertaken to make the corridor a viable option. By linking these old and new networks, IMEC will also foster regional cooperation in the Middle East which will be beneficial to the players beyond the corridor and in enhancing their mutual trade.

Rome was not built in a day. Any infrastructure project of this stature takes cons and efforts to materialise. Belt and Road Initiative, even though initiated in 2013, has an estimated completion date of 2049. IMEC, a multilateral, multi-sectoral and multi-stakeholder initiative will not be an exception to this phenomenon (NewsX Live, 2025). Ideated just in September 2023 and impending Middle East normalisation, the corridor remains a work-in progress.

Some groundwork has been laid out in the form of India signing an inter-governmental framework agreement with the UAE in March 2024 (GoI, 2024); in June same year India launched the Indo-Mediterranean Initiative (IMI) (First Post, 2024) to strengthen collaboration with European Mediterranean nations and in November, Indian External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar addressed the Mediterranean Dialogue and emphasised on the significance of IMEC to the European economies. Some key developments took place in February 2025 following a ceasefire deal between Israel and Hamas. Indian EAM's meeting with the Greek Foreign Minister George Gerapetritis on 7 February (The Hindu, 2025) and Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to the US to meet and discuss 10 crucial agenda points with the newly elected US President Donald Trump, signal towards important progress being made on IMEC in the coming months (MEA, 2025).

Among his 10 point agenda discussion with the American President in his second innings, IMEC became of the key agenda on table. While endorsing the corridor, this was one of the first instance when President Trump spoke about expansion of IMEC to the US through Italy via undersea cables and digital infrastructure thereby hinting towards development of IMEC plus. An impending free trade agreement being worked out between India and European Union of which 10 rounds have been concluded, seems to be a welcome step towards steering IMEC to a logical start (Kar, J. 2025).

Apart from official interventions on the corridor, it is crucial to analyse Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogues taking place on the subject. On 12 November last year, a closed door discussion was held in Abu Dhabi between all major stakeholders of IMEC ranging from academia, industry, government representatives of nearly all partnering countries, private sectors etc (Singh, M. 2024). The author was one of the speakers in this meeting. Active participation of South East Asian leaders and representatives during the meeting once again signals towards IMEC's expansion from an inter-regional corridor to a global one. Indian leaders especially the Prime Minister Modi's and EAM's repeated mention of the corridor in all major academic dialogues such as during Kochi Dialogue 2025 (CPR, 2025), at the 8th Indian Ocean Conference (India Foundation, 2025), at the Mediterranean Dialogue, at the India-Israel Business Forum (PIB, 2025), at the *NXT Conclave*, *TV9 What India Thinks Today* etc signals that major developments are going to take place this year.

IMEC Security Imperative

For a game-changing initiative with the potential to reshape global trade to flourish, a robust security framework is imperative. Given the regional complexities, the corridor will require a dedicated IMEC-centric security pact to safeguard it from various threats including piracy, thefts, cyberattacks and geopolitical disruptions. Other security concerns notwithstanding, threats posed by non-state actors particularly by Houthis is compelling. In the past, this Iran-backed Shia militia has

already demonstrated their ability to disrupt intra and inter-regional trade by attacking ships in the Red Sea amidst Israel-Hamas war. They have also been successful in targeting both Saudi Arabia's and the UAE's critical energy installations. With the growing Arab-Israeli cooperation and much anticipated Saudi-Israeli normalisation, the seemingly unresolved Palestinian issue, and Trump's new Gaza peace plan, Houthis hostilities is likely to exacerbate and result in symbolic and strategic targeting of the critical infrastructure corridor.

Apart from non-state actors, even state actors and regional powers such as Iran and Turkey perceive IMEC as a challenge in contrast to their own economic and strategic ambitions to connect with Europe. Iran's traditional support to its own Chabahar project and INSTC and Turkey's Middle Corridor initiative and the Iraq Development Road projects aim towards establishing themselves as transit hubs. IMEC in that context is viewed as a competition to these initiatives. Moreover, Arab and Israelis collaboration through IMEC may further fuel regional tensions making security a primordial concern even before the project can fully take off.

Given multi-modal transport format, the IMEC Security Pact must encompass maritime security, cybersecurity, intelligence monitoring and sharing of critical information and physical security of railways and ports. The corridor is likely to be operational at the time emerging and critical technologies will be predominantly Artificial Intelligence (AI) – driven. Hence, investments in smart ports equipped with AI-enabled surveillance systems and automated threat detection, blockchain technology incorporation for a tamper-proof supply chain, satellite monitoring and real-time analytics will be crucial.

It is apparent that the corridor development responsibilities will be shared by private infrastructure giants such as India's Adani Group, Reliance Industries, Larsen & Toubro Ltd, France's CMA CGM, and other potential private investors like India's ReNew Energy, JSW Energy; France's Orange, Ariston, Engie; Germany's Siemens, Volkswagen, RWE, Deutsche Bahn; Greece's COSCO shipping lines (though majorly owned by China), the UAE's DP World, Al Dahra; Saudi Arabia's Saudi Basic Industries Corporation (SABIC), Alfanar Energy; Israel's Haifa Port Company; Italy's ENI Spa, Enel Green Power, Saipem SpA, Maire Tecnimont, Leonardo Group, Ferrovie dello Stato Italiane, Telecom Italia, Fiat and Pirelli. However, private sectors will only invest in such an elaborate global project if longevity and long-term survivability, security and compliance measures are in place. Therefore, it is needless to mention that the security framework should be government-led. While only France has appointed Gerard Mestrallet as their IMEC Special Envoy (France in India, 2024)¹ and Italy seems to be next in doing so; all partnering countries will have to appoint Sherpas and special envoys exclusively for IMEC.

Additionally, steering committees will have to be framed to move IMEC from idealistic stage to a reality. Legally binding security agreements for an all-encompassing protection along the entire 4,500 kms of length must be worked out by the governments of all partnering countries and as it extends potential partners may be added along the way.

On balance, given multi-lateral interests, multi-sectoral involvement, multi-stakeholder indulgence and appropriate endorsement of the global infrastructure project which aims to act as a bridge between the Global North and the Global South, it is safe to consider that IMEC has the potential to be one of the most critical and significant projects of the 21st century. Economic integration and global supply chain considerations notwithstanding, a strategic project of such a stature is likely to transform into a critical asset for the partnering countries and the world at large. With non-state actors gaining momentum towards technological capabilities, securing such strategically critical assets becomes a collective responsibility.

Therefore, it is pertinent to look at the security imperative encompassing the project. As of now, this particular aspect has not been envisioned within IMEC and the reasons are obvious in the form of impending Middle East normalisation and that the partners do not wish to equate the project akin to China's BRI. However, as IMEC will operationalise at the time when technology will be predominantly AI-driven, a wholesome security architecture and apparatus is much required. In that context, a binding IMEC Security Pact is the need of the hour. Once all the partnering nations appoint their special envoys and sherpas, such a security framework should be looked at. As of now, only France have appointed Gerard Mestrallet as their Special Envoy to IMEC. Italy on the other hand is on the verge of appointing one.

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Dr. Manjari Singh focuses on contemporary West Asian/Middle East affairs. She serves as the core member, Greater West Asia Forum initiated in collaboration with the Embassy of Israel in India. She is the author of *India and the Gulf: A Security Perspective* (Routledge) and an Associate Editor of the *Journal of World Affairs: Voice of the Global South* (Sage Publications). She participated in the Track 1.5 dialogue on the first multi-stakeholder closed door talks on IMEC held in November 2024 in Abu Dhabi. Previously, she taught at Amity Institute of International Studies, Amity University and served as an Associate Fellow at the Centre for Land Warfare Studies.



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