

Issue Brief

March 2026

No : 494

India and the Eastern
Mediterranean:
Challenges
&
Opportunities

Col Rahul Tripathi (Retd)



India and the Eastern Mediterranean: Challenges & Opportunities

Col Rahul Tripathi (Retd)

Abstract

The Eastern Mediterranean Region has been the geographical link between the three continents of Asia, Europe and Africa. It also has seen the birth and rise of the Abrahamic religions and numerous ethnicities. Since times immemorial, the Ethnic Religious and Political lines have created conflicts in the region, some continuing even today. To add to the chaos super power proxy struggles have made the region unstable. For India to rise, there has to be massive volumes of trade with the Middle East, Europe and Africa, most of this trade will pass through the Eastern Mediterranean. This article brings out the contemporary conflicts that are challenges to the India- Middle East Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) and how these challenges could be turned into opportunities for steering India's ascent towards geopolitical leadership.

Keywords: Eastern Mediterranean, IMEC, Energy Security, IDRI, UNCLOS

Map 1: Eastern Mediterranean



Source: Google Maps

Introduction

Eastern Mediterranean Region

The Eastern Mediterranean Region is surrounded by Turkey and Greece to the North, Syria, Lebanon and Israel to the East and Egypt to the South. If we look at the map of Eastern Mediterranean Region, we see that not only it is at the cross roads of Africa, Asia and Europe, it is also the receiving area for ships moving from the Indian Ocean through the Suez Canal and Black Sea through the Bosphorus— between 15 to 20 % of the world trade passes through this region. Discovery of Leviathan, Tamar, and Zohr gas fields in this area, during the first decade of the new millennium, has made Eastern Mediterranean experience an energy thriving economic resurgence (Eia, 2025). It has also always been an area for great power competition, which continues even today with the West competing against the Russia-China combine, using regional countries as their proxies.

India and Eastern Mediterranean Region through the Ages

Since ancient times, India has had diverse interactions with this region, with Indian goods reaching Mesopotamia and the Levant through both overland and maritime routes. Post the Greek invasion led by Alexander, there were numerous instances of exchanges of cultural, philosophical, scientific ideas and intermingling of the gene pool. In the medieval times, these exchanges took place between the Mughals and the Ottoman Empire and continued post defeat of the Ottomans with the British Ruled territories on the Eastern Mediterranean. Post independence, India has had different levels of diplomatic and economic relations with each of the countries around Eastern Mediterranean, being founding members of Non-Aligned movement with Egypt, recognising Israel in 1950, mildly unfriendly towards Turkey for its support to Pakistan. This region has gained much importance for India for its economic rise, as most trade routes will pass through it in times to come and we need to be ahead of all the challenges that come our way.

Instability in the Eastern Mediterranean Region

Historical Conflicts

Geopolitical rivalries between the Ottomans, the Greeks and other ethnic and religious aspects in countries surrounding the region is in current times enhanced by influence of contemporary power blocks. The Collective West on one hand and China- Russia combine on

the other, through their proxies keep this area volatile. Then there is the longstanding Cyprus issue between Greece and Turkey and with the offshore gas finds, there is now competition over exploration and trade rights for the gas fields in this area increasing the magnitude of disputes over maritime claims and Exclusive Economic Zones (Stanicek, B. 2020). The Israel-Gaza conflagration further added fuel to the fire and it remains to be seen how the recent ceasefires will affect the region. The point of interest here is that, Greece and Turkey are both NATO countries and that adds to the chaos as the latter, is seen as a bulwark against Russian influence in the region. While geopolitical struggles continue in Eastern Mediterranean, there are internal struggles happening in the countries surrounding this region, migration due to wars, high unemployment and inflation, water and other resource shortages add to the strain which contributes to instability in the region.

Turkey, Greece and Cyprus

Cyprus was an Ottoman domain till the initial British entry, and this later resulted in it becoming a British protectorate post Turkey's joining the Central Powers in World War II. It gained independence in 1960 and was largely divided into two ethnic populations viz. the Greek and Turkish communities. A Greek Cypriot led coup in 1974, resulted in Turkey invading Cyprus the same year. Since then, there has been an ongoing dispute between the Turkish Cypriots and the Greek Cypriots with a UN Peace keeping force between them. Turkey controls 36% of Cyprus and does not recognise Cyprus's EEZ, asserting the rights of the Turkish Cypriots in the Turk controlled areas of Cyprus.

Map 2: Cyprus Political Map

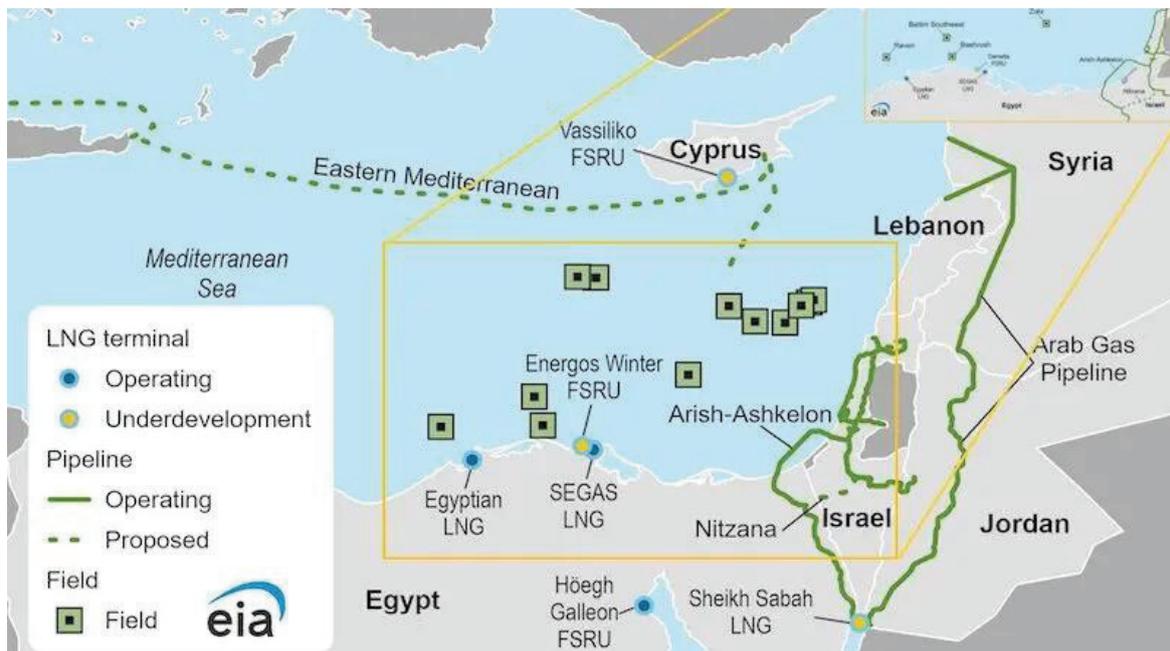


Source: https://www.nationsonline.org/oneworld/map/cyprus_map2.htm

Gas Explorations in the Eastern Mediterranean

Since 1990s, the Eastern Mediterranean has been explored and very promising gas fields have been found. These Gas fields spans across the EEZ of Israel, Cyprus, Egypt, Lebanon, Gaza (Palestine), Turkey, Greece, and Syria and have become a source of economic competition. A look at the map below, gives us a fairly good idea why this region has become important in the Maritime domain of Exclusive Economic Zones (Eia, 2025).

Map 3: Gas Explorations in the Eastern Mediterranean



Source: <https://www.eurasiareview.com/06092025-eastern-mediterranean-energy-profile-analysis/>

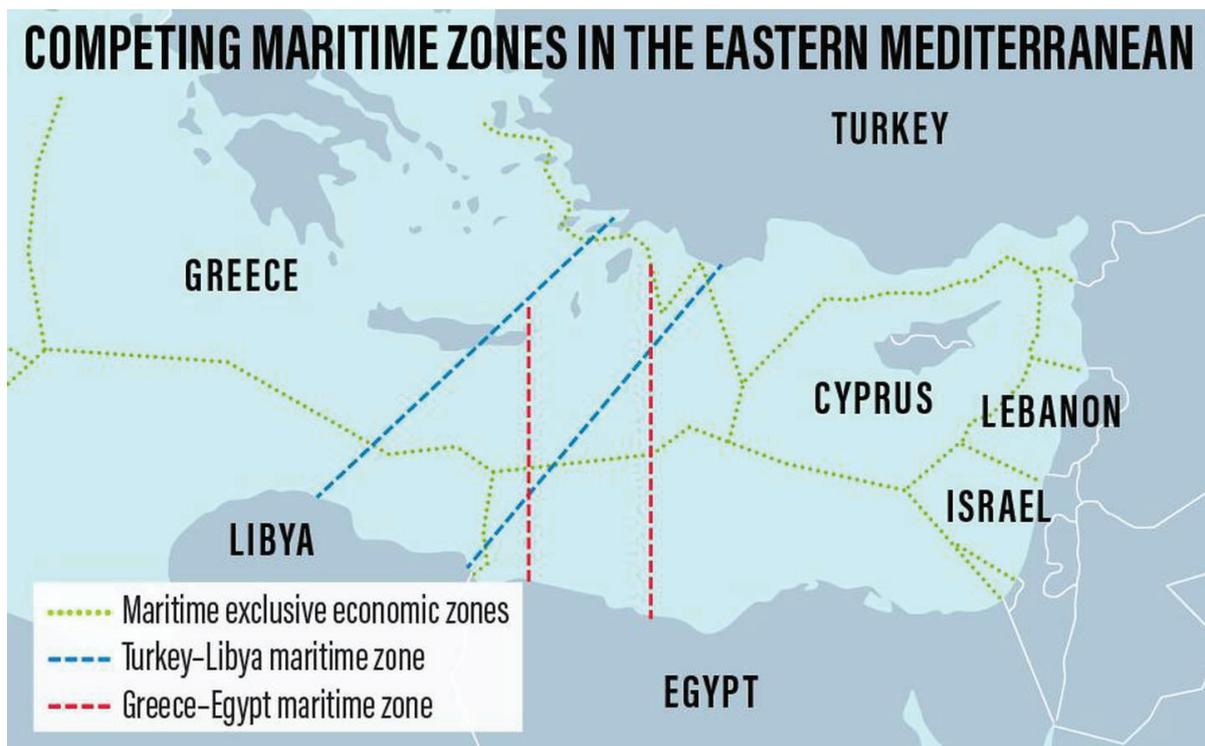
Maritime Issues

According to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) have been carved out for each country with a coast that allows for all economic activities— from the sea bed to the surface, and includes exploration for oil and gas, fishing etc. Turkey is not a signatory to the UNCLOS and has disputes with Cyprus and Greece on the EEZ in the Eastern Mediterranean Region— a matter that has taken centre stage post the gas finds (Stanicek, B. 2020).

Turkey - Libya vs Greece - Egypt. In 2019, Turkey signed a MoU with the Libyan interim Government of National Accord (recognised internationally) for a Libya - Turkey Maritime Zone that crosses the EEZ of Greece and its Islands. This MoU gave Turkey the exploration

and drilling rights in area denoted by UNCLOS as EEZ for Greece. To counter this move, Greece and Egypt signed a treaty in 2020 creating an exclusive EEZ for both —oil and gas explorations; this EEZ crosses the Turkey and Libya Maritime Zone and ironically, these agreements have increased the conflict potential in this region (Zaid, M.A. 2021). The Government of National Accord of Libya was dissolved in 2021 and the Libyan Courts ruled against ratification of this deal, further convoluting the entire issue (Al-Estiklal Newspaper, 2021). A look at the map below explains this better.

Map 4: Maritime Zones in the Eastern Mediterranean



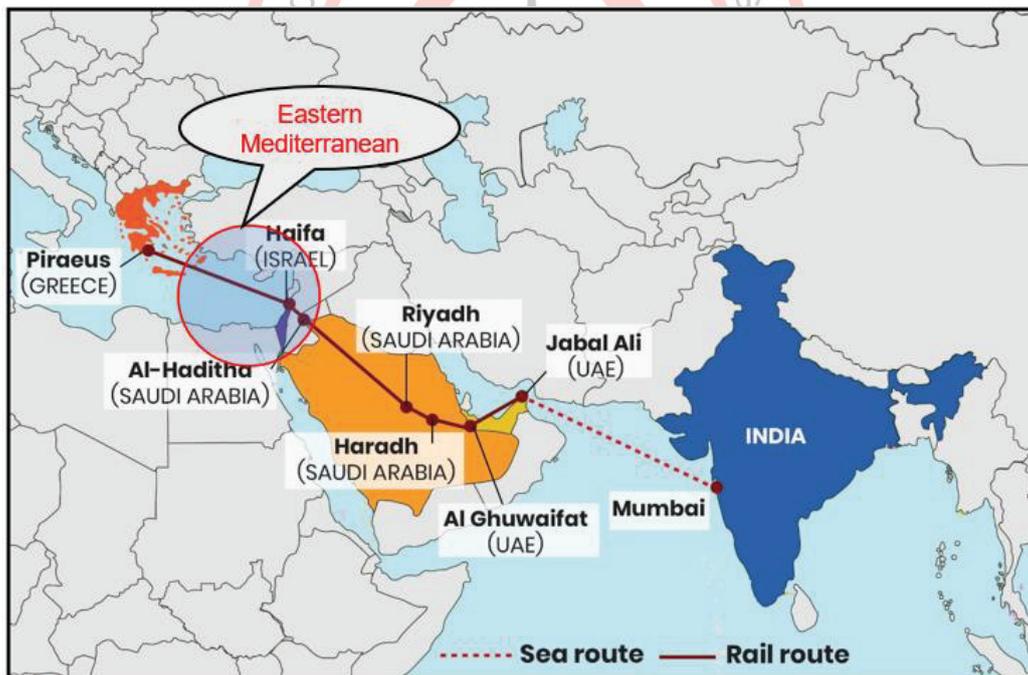
Source: <https://www.alestiklal.net/en/article/the-race-to-extend-influence-over-the-mediterranean-amid-the-huge-discoveries-of-energy-resources>

Regional Geopolitical Blocks. When we combine the two maps, we can see that there are clearly two geopolitical regional blocks emerging in this area— one led by Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF) and includes Israel, Greece, Cyprus and Egypt besides other European Countries and the other led by Turkey, bolstered by the collapse of Assad's regime with Syria and Libya. Turkey has also objected to the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) as defined by Greece and Cyprus—under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), coastal states are entitled to an EEZ extending up to 200 nautical miles from their shores (UN Conventions) (Stanicek, B. 2020).

Eastern Mediterranean Region's Importance for India

- ***India- Middle East Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC).*** The IMEC is backed by USA, European Union, Saudi Arabia, Israel and other countries and is a collaborative effort between Governments, International Organisations and Private Sector Players. Announced in September 2023, it joins India to Europe through Gulf countries for enhanced trade, energy and digital flows. It comprises of three main pillars viz. Transportation, Clean Energy and Digital connectivity and India became the Eastern Hub of the IMEC. Indian ports along the Arabian Sea are the start point of the Eastern Corridor of IMEC i.e. towards ports in the Gulf; there is also the Western Corridor that moves overland through the Gulf States to Israel to Europe through the Mediterranean Sea Route. IMEC's key infrastructure components are train routes, ports, gas and hydrogen pipelines, fibre cables along the Eastern and Western Corridors. These corridors are expected to increase the volume of trade between India, Middle East and Europe by 20 - 30 % while reducing shipping times by 30 - 40% (IMEC Website).

Map 5: India- Middle East Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC)



Source: <https://www.imec.international/progress/>

- ***Need for Ensuring Security in Eastern Mediterranean.*** The Eastern Mediterranean region straddles the IMEC's Western Corridor, hence conflicts in the region will delay India's enhanced trade access through West Asia to Europe. Delays may stem from the conflicts like

the Gaza war, Cyprus conflict and other maritime disputes between the countries of Eastern Mediterranean that results in stalled diplomatic engagements. For IMEC to function to its optimum, the Eastern Mediterranean region needs to be safe, secure and stable. The recent finds of the Gas fields in the region are also of interest for diversification of energy requirements. India, being the third largest energy consumer in the world, can look upto the Eastern Mediterranean region for meeting its energy security needs (Chambers, B. 2023) (Eia, 2025) (Krane, J. 2025). India's future national interests of trade, energy and security converge in the Eastern Mediterranean and hence the safety and security of the region is of paramount importance to India to further its own economic interests.

Regional Countries Excluded from IMEC

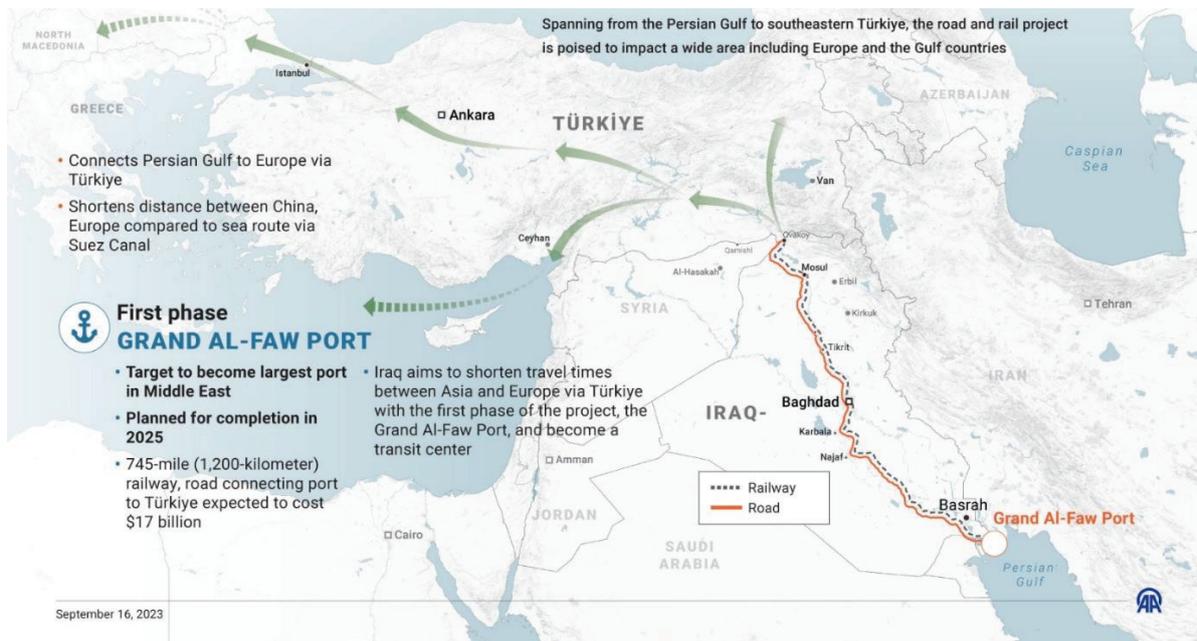
Egypt and IMEC

Egypt was left out of the IMEC, and is apprehensive of losing revenue through the Suez Canal and yet is keen to join this multinational economic corridor. Egypt is the geographical link between Asia and Africa, controls the Suez Canal infrastructure and is relatively more stable and secure than the Jordan - Israel route. It offers trade routes and ports on Eastern Mediterranean, hence expanding the IMEC into the African countries will provide a continental bridge between Asia, Africa and Europe (Adam, H. 2025) (Mathews, S., Soylu, R. and Essa, A. 2023).

Turkey and IMEC

Turkey sees itself as a natural Eurasian bridge between the East and West, yet, it has not been invited to be a part of IMEC and has shown strong reservations against its implementation. With the Greece- Cyprus conflict, Maritime and Gas Exploration issues in the disputed EEZs, the IMEC initiative could be detrimental to Turkey's regional interests. As a counter, Turkey is backing the Iraq Development Road Initiative which joins the Persian Gulf to Turkey, thus positioning it as a key transportation hub between Asia and Europe (Alaca, M. and Karaalp, H. 2023) (Cafiero, G. 2025).

Map 6: Iraq Development Road Initiative (IDRI)



Source: <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkiye-iraq-development-road-project-enhancing-regional-connectivity-trade/2993555>

Iraq and IMEC

Iraq is not an Eastern Mediterranean Country and is also not part of the IMEC, however it has initiated the Iraq Development Road Initiative (IDRI), connecting the Grand Al Faw Port (GFP) near Basra to Turkey to EU countries. This project has potential to complement the IMEC through UAE which is a part of both these trade routes. Also using Iraq's increasing closeness to GCC, this may result in a more secure, stable and shorter route to reach EU destinations, providing redundancy and resilience to the overall IMEC global supply chains (Alaaldin, R. 2024) (Saeed, Y. 2023) (Alaca, M. and Karaalp, H. 2023).

Syria and IMEC

Syria is not part of the IMEC, mainly due to the conflict between Assad's regime supported by Iran and Russia and the opposition supported by Turkey, Gulf States, USA and its Western Allies. While the War has come to an end with the Assad regime falling, the region is still not stable and is prone to conflicts.

Lebanon and IMEC

Lebanon is not part of the IMEC, however, it has excellent ports at Tripoli and Beirut which can further the IMEC mesh providing multiple port facilities to trade with Europe and

hence a lot more flexibility in terms of sea routes and costs. Lebanon, however, is controlled by Hezbollah which in turn takes orders from Iran.

Iran and IMEC

While not part of Eastern Mediterranean and also not openly opposing IMEC, Iran has been bypassed and may pose a considerable threat given its location, influence in the region and its ongoing conflict with Israel. The Sea Route of IMEC passes through the Gulf of Hormuz to UAE and Iran may use its various asymmetric maritime capabilities mine drones, proxy actors to target commercial shipping. While India and Iran are strongly linked with the Chabahar port and its trade route to Afghanistan and Central Asia, the Indo – Iranian relations may get stretched due the strong presence of US, Israel and Arab investments in the IMEC project. Also, the recent Israel – Iran conflict has cast a shadow over the IMEC Corridor (Kumari, K. 2025) (Eldoh, M. 2025).

Need for Indian Initiative to Stabilise Eastern Mediterranean Region

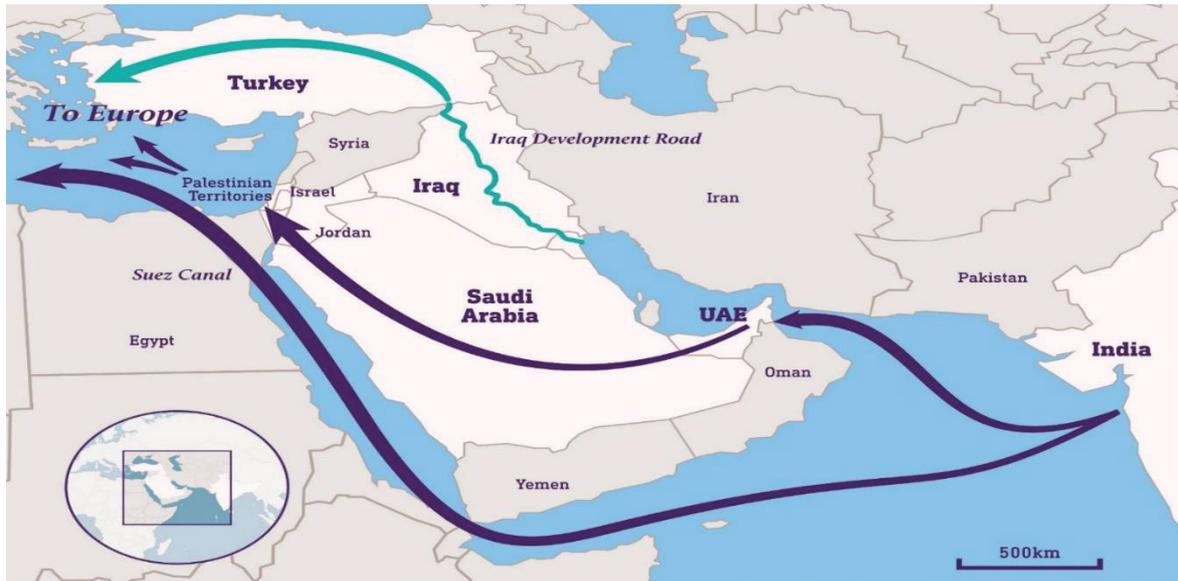
Summary

For India, the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East regions are very important for trade, energy diversification and success of the IMEC project. However, the regions are unstable because of historical conflicts, maritime issues, great power rivalries and a host of ethnic - politico / religious issues. Also, the current conflagrations in West Asia (Middle East) may cause delays to the IMEC and, if not contained, pose credible threats in the future, which can derail the rise of India. A stable Eastern Mediterranean Region will go a long way in securing trade routes, energy diversification and viability of the IMEC. With this in mind, India should proactively engage with all the stake holders in the region, addressing each issue to reach an agreeable middle point.

Diplomatic Engagements

There is a need to connect with those countries in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East who are not part of the IMEC, and can affect the same by either complementing it positively or obstructing its progress. Engaging with Egypt, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and keeping them in the room for positive discussions will be of much significance. This should aim at developing into a scenario where benefits from the trade and energy diversification of IMEC, are also accrued by these nations (Mathews, S., Roynu, R. and Essa, A. 2023).

Map 7: Redundancy to IMEC Routes



Source: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/big-story/india-middle-east-trade-corridor-region-jockeying-influence>

Redundancy to IMEC Routes

The current IMEC routes, though very well thought off, passes through rather geopolitically unstable regions, as the current Gaza war and Israel – Iran conflicts show. It is in our favour that India should try to get both Egypt with its Suez Canal Infrastructure and Iraq with IDRI aligned with the IMEC. This will have a host of benefits— inherent redundancy from different routes for trade, development; a possible entry into 1.7 billion strong African market with 21 of the fastest growing economies. The most important benefit may come from engaging with Turkey with respect to trade benefits, as this would likely give us leverage to reduce the current geopolitical Pakistan centric friction (Mathews, S., Roylu, R. and Essa, A. 2023).

Military Engagements

The aim of military engagement would be conflict containment and conflict resolution in the region and this may be accomplished using a broad spectrum of activities. These could include, increasing the presence of our military personnel to all countries in the region—from Defence Attaches to permanent military missions with the aim to understand the conflicts and give out regular feedbacks and to carry out bilateral / multilateral military exercises for

interoperability between forces. There could also be an offer to build deterrence for specific friendly countries by modernising their military capability and increasing military capacity through technological and defence industrial cooperation. Once IMEC is active, placing of military assets and signing reciprocal military logistic agreements with friendly countries in the region, should also be planned as part of our long-term military strategy for securing stability of the region.

Conclusion

For India's growth story, Eastern Mediterranean wherein three continents meet and where the religious, politico – ethnic potpourri keeps the region in news for conflicts old and new, is of utmost importance. IMEC is a vital link for India's economic progress and energy diversification and may need to add other trade routes for redundancy and to reduce friction from countries excluded from it till now. There is thus a need for bringing peace and stability in the area through a multi-pronged approach to engage countries surrounding Eastern Mediterranean Region. For India's increasing stature in the changing world, bringing peace and security to this area for sustained trade and economic benefits— this may well be a test case to assert geopolitical leadership.

Works Cited

Adam, H. (2025, June 15). Recalibrating IMEC: Why Egypt, not Israel-Jordan, is the corridor's future. *ETGovernment.com*. <https://government.economicstimes.indiatimes.com/blog/revolutionizing-trade-why-egypt-is-key-to-the-future-of-the-india-middle-east-europe-corridor/121850683>.

Alaaldin, R. (2024, October). Iraq's Development Road Project: A Path to Prosperity or Instability? *Middle East Council on Global Affairs*. https://mecouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/ME-Council_Issue-Brief_Iraqs-Development-Road-Project-A-Path-to-Prosperity-or-Instability__WEB.pdf.

Alaca, M. and Karaalp, H. (2023). Türkiye-Iraq Development Road Project: Enhancing regional connectivity, trade. *AA*. <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/turkiye-iraq-development-road-project-enhancing-regional-connectivity-trade/2993555>.

Cafiero, G (2025, March 5). (2025, March 5). Geopolitical dynamics surrounding Iraq's ambitious development road project. *Arab Center Washington DC*. <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/geopolitical-dynamics-surrounding-iraqs-ambitious-development-road-project/>.

Chambers, B. (2023, September 22). India-Middle East-Europe corridor: How feasible is it? *TRT World*. <https://www.trtworld.com/article/15034069>.

Eia. (2025, September 5). Eastern Mediterranean Energy Profile – analysis. *Eurasia Review*.
<https://www.eurasiareview.com/06092025-eastern-mediterranean-energy-profile-analysis/>.

Eldoh, M. (2025, June 19). Israel-Iran War Casts Shadow over IMEC Corridor Ambitions. *Geopolitical Monitor*. <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/israel-iran-war-casts-shadow-over-imec-corridor-ambitions/>.

India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). <https://www.imec.international/>.

Krane, J. (2025, October 7). Gas and Geopolitics in the Eastern Mediterranean. *Arab Center Washington DC*. <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/gas-and-geopolitics-in-the-eastern-mediterranean/>.

Kumari, K. (2025, June 21). Chabahar, IMEC, and the Strait Squeeze: Why India's trade ambitions face a new regional test amid Israel-Iran conflict. *Financial Express*.
<https://www.financialexpress.com/policy/economy-chabahar-imec-and-the-strait-squeeze-why-indias-trade-ambitions-face-a-new-regional-test-amid-israel-iran-conflict-3882829/>.

Mathews, S., Soylu, R. and Essa, A. (2023, September 23). The India-Middle East Corridor: A new Silk Route or diplomacy by PowerPoint? *Middle East Eye*. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/big-story/india-middle-east-trade-corridor-region-jockeying-influence>.

Preamble To The United Nations Convention On The Law Of The Sea.
https://www.un.org/depts/los/convention_agreements/texts/unclos/part5.htm.

Saeed, Y. (2023, April 12). Iraq deepens ties with GCC Neighbors. *AGSI*. <https://agsi.org/analysis/iraq-deepens-ties-with-gcc-neighbors/>.

Stanicek, B. (2020). Turkey: Remodelling the eastern Mediterranean [Report].
[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/652048/EPRS_BRI\(2020\)652048_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2020/652048/EPRS_BRI(2020)652048_EN.pdf).

The race to extend influence over the Mediterranean amid the huge discoveries of energy resources (2021). *Al-Estiklal Newspaper*. <https://www.alestiklal.net/en/article/the-race-to-extend-influence-over-the-mediterranean-amid-the-huge-discoveries-of-energy-resources>.

Zaid, M.A. (2021, March 5). Egypt and Greece discuss cooperation in eastern Mediterranean. *Arab News*. <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1820086/middle-east>.

About the Author

Col Rahul Tripathi (Retd) is a Research Scholar at Rashtriya Raksha University, specialising in the Indian Defence & Aerospace Sector. He is a 2nd Generation Infantry Officer having been commissioned and also commanded 11 JAK RIF. An NDA Alumni with Masters in Defence and Strategic Studies from Staff College Wellington, he has been associated with Military procurement for eight years, first in the WE Directorate (now CD Directorate) and later working in the Indian Defence & Aerospace Industry.



All Rights Reserved 2026 Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS)

No part of this publication may be reproduced, copied, archived, retained or transmitted through print, speech or electronic media without prior written approval from CLAWS. The views expressed and suggestions made in the article are solely of the author in his personal capacity and do not have any official endorsement. Attributability of the contents lies purely with author.