

Multilateral Connectivity Projects and Geopolitical Implications Through Transport Corridors in the Middle East

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Abstract

Human communities traditionally rely heavily on moving people, goods, and knowledge. Higher degrees of accessibility and a notable rise in mobility have coincided with modern economic processes. While this tendency dates back to the Industrial Revolution, it picked up speed in the second half of the 20th century with the liberalization of trade, the emergence of economic blocs, and the effective exploitation of global labour and resources. This study applies neo-realism, a theoretical paradigm emphasising the anarchic nature of the international system and the primacy of state interests, to examine the geopolitical consequences of multilateral corridors in the Middle East. The research examines how major infrastructure projects serve as tools of power projection, economic security, and regional influence. It focuses on major initiatives like the Iraq Development Road (Dry Canal), the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the proposed IMEC corridor. The study offers a thorough analysis of the strategic dynamics supporting these corridors by combining a variety of qualitative research techniques, such as literature review, content analysis, and comparison analysis. The results show that while international corridors present issues with sovereignty, reliance, and possible conflicts, they also act as arenas for great power competition, regional power dynamics, and alliance formation. The study provides insights into the strategic manoeuvres of state actors and the underlying power structures influencing regional stability and development by placing these corridors within the larger framework of Middle Eastern geopolitics. This helps to clarify the intricate interplay of competition and cooperation that shapes the region's evolving infrastructure landscape.

Keywords: Transport Corridor, BRI, INSTC, Neo- Realism, Geopolitics.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past ten years, there have been notable shifts in global politics due to incidents such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and the Israel-Hamas conflict. These crises have intensified pre-existing geopolitical tensions, resulting in a complex and unstable global environment. In response, nations everywhere are placing a strong emphasis on forming coalitions and cooperative partnerships, with a particular emphasis on fostering economic cooperation. This paper evaluates the behaviour of connectivity projects in an era of newly emerging opportunities and threats. The purpose is to analyse whether power politics are the dominant drivers behind new transportation networks and therefore if and how neorealism can explain the events shaping the Middle Eastern connectivity projects through BRI, INSTC and recently IMEC corridor.

RESEARCH METHODS

A thorough analysis of the body of research on geopolitical strategies, international relations theory, and neo-realism is done to provide a theoretical framework. This includes books, reports, research articles, and policy papers from reliable sources. To demonstrate how several multilateral corridors operate within the Middle East's geopolitical context, in-depth studies of the BRI, INSTC, IMEC and Iraq Development Road are chosen. Every case study's information is acquired from a variety of sources, such as official declarations, news articles, government reports, project paperwork, and scholarly journals. The strategic goals, state interests, and power dynamics of each case study are determined through analysis. The examination focuses on how these corridors project power and provide economic security as well as regional influence.

A comparison analysis is also carried out to identify similarities and differences among several

multilateral routes. This entails contrasting the BRI [¹], INSTC [²], IMEC [³], and Iraq Development Road (Dry Canal Project) in terms of their geopolitical consequences, economic effects, and strategic goals. The analysis will help us to draw a better understanding of each corridor's roles within the geopolitical framework of the Middle East by pointing out shared patterns and distinctive features. When taken as a whole, these techniques allow for a thorough analysis of how major infrastructure projects serve as tactical instruments for state actors, impacting the power structure, economic stability, and geopolitical environment of the region. An attempt was made to present a contradictory process of integrating state, regional, and global needs and interests in the space involved in the functioning of transport corridors by assuming a dialectical approach to the geopolitical background for the development of transport infrastructure in general and transport corridors in particular. Thus, within the paper the following hypothesis can be made.

- Under a neorealist perspective, multilateral connectivity projects in the Middle East, are strategically pursued by state actors to maximize their power and influence within the anarchic international system.
- These projects serve as critical tools for economic security, power projection, and regional dominance, reflecting the primary interests of states in maintaining and enhancing their strategic positions.
- From a neorealist viewpoint, the establishment and expansion of transport corridors in the Middle East led to heightened geopolitical competition and shifting alliances among major powers.
- The transport corridors become arenas of great power competition and regional power dynamics, where strategic manoeuvres by state actors contribute to both stability and volatility in the region's geopolitical landscape.

Geopolitics through the Lens of Neorealism

For a considerable time, researchers and decision-makers have used geopolitics, the study of how geography affects international politics and relations to examine world affairs. Neorealism, also referred to as structural realism, provides a unique and significant theoretical framework within this large discipline. Neorealism, which evolved from classical realism, emphasizes the importance of state interests in determining geopolitical dynamics and the anarchic nature of the international system. When examining modern geopolitical events like the emergence of multinational connectivity projects and transportation corridors, the neorealist viewpoint is very relevant. These projects, which include significant endeavours

like the International North-South Transport Corridor and China's Belt and Road Initiative, are not only commercial endeavours but also strategic instruments used by states to project power, secure resources, and shape regional dynamics. These initiatives are viewed as extensions of state interests through the neorealist perspective, reflecting larger geopolitical goals and competitive dynamics.

Several theories are offered by the field of international relations (IR) to explain state behaviour in the international arena. Waltz responded to the liberal critique of realism in his 1979 book "Theory of International Politics" by attempting to address the flaws in classical realism (e.g., Jacobs 2010, pp. 54–58; Link 1965; Waltz 1979, p. 62 et seq.) with a more scientific method known as structural or "neo" realism. According to Waltz, Anarchy is the neorealists' premise of regulating the international system. Furthermore, anarchy requires a "self-help system" in which each state is responsible for its survival because all states seek to exist. The ordered structure (anarchy) of the international system does not alter, despite fluctuations in the distribution of capabilities among states. Every state worry that other states may gain more from collaboration than they will, making them more dependent on them, since they don't know what other states have in mind. (Waltz, 1979).

The fight for connectivity and influence in the Middle East shows power dynamics, among the major world powers including the US, China, Russia, Iran India and even Iraq. International relations theory known as neorealism highlights the role of governments as logical agents whose main goals are security and power. To secure survival and security, states ought to seek to maximize their relative power within the international system. China and the United States are two powerful nations with a lot of interests in the Middle East. On the other hand, the Russian Federation and Iran are striving to make alternatives after the new geopolitical position shifted by the Ukrainian crisis. To strengthen their geopolitical position and project power globally, these global powers compete to vie for influence in the area.

Neorealism places a strong emphasis on how security considerations influence state conduct. With interests in counterterrorism, safeguarding oil supplies, and assisting friends like Saudi Arabia and Israel, the United States has traditionally dominated Middle Eastern security affairs. Meanwhile, China's BRI and its growing economic ties to the region are a reflection of its growing security concerns, which include energy security and safeguarding its citizens and interests abroad. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) would help China to reroute commerce away from the US and

¹ BRI: Belt and Road initiative

² INSTC: International North-south Transport Corridor

³ IMEC: India Middle Eastern corridor

Western Europe and toward China. China may use its economic might to exert political pressure on other nations to avoid adopting positions on delicate subjects that are in opposition to China's interests, in addition to the domestic forces driving the Belt and Road Initiative. China would be able to project more force onto its military thanks to its investments in foreign ports. Recently the United States and its allies have unveiled IMEC, an initiative that aims to connect Europe, the Arabian Gulf, and India through shipping lanes and railroads. This is a nod to the BRI. Apart from the commercial connections, IMEC also sees digital infrastructure, electricity, and pipelines for the export of clean hydrogen.

Neorealism also emphasizes that states establish partnerships and alliances to strengthen their security and gain an advantage over rivals. In the case of this region, China and the US both foster ties with important players in the Middle East to advance their agendas. For instance, China has established economic alliances with nations like Iran and the Gulf states, while the United States maintains close connections with Saudi Arabia and Israel. India on the other side is also thriving to gain a foothold in the region. India is investing in infrastructure projects and improving connectivity to fortify its strategic alliances with several nations in the Middle East. This howsoever can assist India in safeguarding its regional interests and balancing the growing influence of the Chinese 'Belt and Road Initiative'. In the current context, India hopes to strengthen trade, improve connectivity, and expand its strategic options in response to shifting geopolitical dynamics by seeking alternate transit corridors in the Middle East. Through connectivity projects like INSTC and recently IMEC corridor, India wants to lessen its reliance on conventional trade routes that travel through unstable areas by diversifying its trading routes. India also wanted to reduce the possibility of trade disruptions stemming from geopolitical tensions or hostilities in specific regions by creating other trade routes.

Transportation corridors in the Middle East can be viewed as a way for states to bolster their strategic dominance and positions. Middle Eastern transportation corridors serve as both vital economic links and possible hotspots for security risks like terrorism, interstate hostilities, and piracy. To defend these corridors and safeguard their interests, States may cooperate or compete, reflecting neorealist concerns about security rivalry in the anarchic international system. The creation of transportation corridors in the Middle East can be seen as a component of larger geopolitical rivalry and state efforts to counterbalance regional powers. Major regional players like Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Iran may want to dominate or control important transportation networks to impose their will and control over trade flows.

Neorealist ideas of balancing conduct would suggest that India's investment in other routes is a reaction to China's growing influence through its Belt and Road Initiative. Although neorealism offers a helpful framework for comprehending the strategic dynamics surrounding transit corridors in the Middle East, other elements including ideology, domestic politics, and historical grievances also influence state conduct in the region. Neorealism asserts that states do not operate by a logical decision-making process that they initiate on their own through proxy warfare and strategic shifts. Their choices are influenced by the relative positions of the relevant players and those of their rivals within the system (Thies, 2004, s. 171).

When strategic interests are at stake, alliances are made possible by the competition between the major powers. The China-Iran and Iran-Russia alliances are active partnerships in the development of transportation corridors and are consistent with a methodical examination of neorealism. Russia and Iran have maintained a long-standing strategic protectorate relationship. Russia and China are supporting Iran more and more in response to the Ukraine War to offset US dominance in the region.

Of course, if one can speak of order in the Middle East today at all, the question is how China's heightened involvement and interest in the region would affect regional power dynamics and the status quo. The most obvious thing to look at while trying to answer this question is Iran's viewpoint. China, which views Iran as a key hub in its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a prospective market for Chinese investment projects, and a significant energy supplier, is Iran's largest trading partner and the country's largest purchaser of Iranian oil (Jon, 2019).

Energy Security Politics and Transport Corridors

Energy security generally refers to the availability of energy resources required for the efficient operation of a state's economy and for guaranteeing the welfare of its citizens in the best possible ways. It also asserts a continuous flow, with the least amount of negative environmental impact by implementing the appropriate policies to safeguard supply sources, transportation routes, and processing and storage capacity concurrently with the execution of research and innovation activities to achieve long-term energy stability Cîrdei (2015), p. 80.

The Middle East's international relations have been influenced by oil, which is crucial for the region's economic growth, internal social contract, and international relations overall. When the British navy converted from coal to oil on the brink of World War I, oil became a strategically important commodity. The region's foreign relations have been impacted by compromised sovereignty in a "penetrated system" of

overlapping national, international, and local interests, with oil serving as the main driver of external power participation (Brown 1984).

The way that global events have developed has brought attention to the necessity of broadening the definition of energy security, which now encompasses resource-holders as well as energy-consuming states. Today's world politics is characterized by the resurgence of great power competition following decades of unipolar world order. Following its invasion of Ukraine and subsequent armament of natural gas supplies, Russia has elevated energy security to a primary political priority in Europe. Regional powers are now less susceptible to pressure from external players and more self-assured. The competition between major powers is reflected in the emerging multipolarity of the Middle East in its ties with external powers, as seen by China's involvement in regional economics and Russia's expanding role in regional security. Additionally, multipolarity facilitates regional actors like China and India's ability to strike a balance between powerful external powers.

Coming back to the major power interaction in the region, China continues to be a significant customer of natural gas and oil from Middle Eastern suppliers. More than 40% of China's oil imports come from the Middle East, which also supplies a significant portion of the nation's liquefied natural gas. With China expected to substantially grow its energy consumption and only marginally boost its domestic output, the country will likely become more dependent on energy from the area in the years to come (Reuters, 2018). China has stepped up its diplomatic and security efforts in the Middle East as American influence has started to decline there, especially after it left Afghanistan in August 2021 and more recently due to regional dissatisfaction with its handling of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Beijing is gradually putting itself in a position to take over the position that the United States has long held in the Middle East, despite its caution.

Beijing is worried that Washington would exert pressure on the Gulf monarchs to stop supplying oil to China because of their close relations with the US. Because China views Iran as being more hostile to US strategy, this worry heightens the perception of Iran's significance. The US's most recent round of sanctions against Iran also highlights China's dependence on the Arab side of the Gulf (Turak, 2019).

The world's two fastest-growing economies, China and India, have unexpectedly grown to be the major oil consumers at the global level. Vulnerabilities in the oil sector are a persistent concern for both nations. China surpassed Japan to become the second-largest economy in the world in 2010 with a population of 1.32 billion, approximately one-fifth of the world's total

population (McCurry and Kollewe, 2011). It has lately emerged as the biggest energy consumer and producer in the world. Not far behind the US, it is also the world's second-biggest oil consumer. In 1993, China imported just 6% of its total oil usage; by 2009, that number had risen to over 50%. Oil dependency might rise to 65% by 2025 (Scott, 2008). China is a wonderful example of how to build social legitimacy without resorting to political change but rather through economic progress.

Authoritarian dictators and regimes in the region find this approach more appealing. Therefore, regional authoritarianism is likely to become more commonplace due to the logic of great power rivalry and the attraction of "the China model" for political elites (Daley, Galip (2022).

The Middle East is an area that is close to Russia physically and has historical and strategic ties to the region. Both the Soviet Union and Imperial Russia were powerful outside forces in the Middle East, embroiled in conflicts with the Ottoman, Persian, British, and French empires. Naturally, the United States was the Soviet Union's adversary in the Middle East during the Cold War. Moscow was unable to reestablish itself during the Second Gulf War, the Arab Spring, or the NATO bombing campaign in Libya, which resulted in an uncontested Pax Americana in the region following the fall of the Soviet Union (Wilson Centre Report). Russia's overt invasion of Ukraine has given opportunities as well as challenges for Arab governments. In an increasingly multipolar world, this battle has accelerated the East-West divide, necessitating careful balancing acts from Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) members as they navigate changes in the global geopolitical order (Cafiero, 2022). Apart from the dynamics between Russia and Ukraine, the war has resulted in several transformations in global relations. Foreign economic relations, particularly in logistics and trade, are one of these shifts. The United States and Europe are the main sources of the sanctions against Russia, thus Western nations have concentrated on creating trade and logistical routes around the country. However, Russia is also making an effort to evade the effects of the sanctions by reorienting trade and logistics from the "West" to the "East" and "South." (Chuman, 2023). Russia's external economic contacts were mostly focused on Europe and extended westward, although trade with East Asia also continued to increase. The recent crisis catalyzed reviving INSTC corridor which was first put forth more than 20 years ago.

In July 2022, amid these regional and global contexts, both US President Biden and Russian President Putin paid a tour to the Middle East. A more obvious taste of great power competition in action was provided by Biden's Middle East visit and the Tehran Summit, which brought together Putin, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, and Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi.

The visits also demonstrated the current competition's lack of overarching ideas and metanarratives. Moscow exploits regional nations' dissatisfaction with the united governments as the glue of its alliances with regional powers, while the United States is trying to take advantage of Arab-Gulf governments' fear of Iran.

The Importance of the Middle East in Connectivity Corridors

The Middle East region encompasses not just the Arabian Peninsula but also several adjacent areas. The primary states in this region include Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, Israel, and Yemen. The article will try to focus and concentrate on the connectivity routes concerning the states that are located on the Arabian Peninsula. The Middle East's strategic location in the convergence of Asia, Africa, and Europe has made it an important region for transportation historically. To promote trade, business, and connectivity, the Middle East has several important transportation corridors. The region is home to important sea lanes for commerce, including the Suez Canal, the Strait of Mandeb, and the Strait of Hormuz. It is an essential hub for connection between the Atlantic and Indian oceans, a crossroads linking the East and the West, and a strategically critical location in world politics, economics, and military activities (Zhao, 2016).

The Middle East has observed a series of conflicts and wars, such as the Arab-Israeli wars, the war between Iran and Iraq, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the First Gulf War, the Second Gulf War, the Egyptian Revolution, the Syrian Civil War, and the ongoing conflict between Israel and the Palestinian Territories, and the terrorist groups fighting the state, the ISIS offensive in Iraq and Syria, the Yemeni Civil War, etc. These conflicts not only have a significant effect on the energy security of the states in the region but also on the energy-importing states (Cerdei, 2017). The region's abundant resources add to its contentious past and draw major powers to the area like a magnet. These powers then use the area's disputes and direct support of one party to further their agendas at the expense of the other. Today's major powers and emerging powers aim to gain as much influence as they can and prevent their rivals from doing the same, which translates into maintaining conflicting states and supporting opposing sides in regional internal conflicts, making the Middle East strategically crucial.

Connectivity is the cornerstone of international relations. Connectivity promotes diplomatic, commercial, cultural, and security relationships between states. To pursue different interests and tackle shared difficulties, nations must be able to navigate and efficiently utilize connections in an increasingly interconnected globe. Talking of connectivity, the Middle East has seen the greatest manifestation of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The region has

been given priority by the BRI because of its economic significance and relevance as a commerce and communication route. China has invested at least \$123 billion in projects related to the initiative, making it the largest foreign investor in the region as of 2016 (Dunes, 2020). Major port and infrastructure developments are planned for several nations, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Djibouti, and Egypt. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has involved investments in the development of multiple ports around the Middle East.

Russia is heavily involved in energy projects in the Middle East as a major energy producer. The Turkish Straits, which connects the Black Sea to the Aegean Sea and the Mediterranean, are made up of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles Strait. The maritime trade, especially the export and import of products to and from Russia and other Black Sea nations, depends on these straits. Building pipes for natural gas is one of Russia's major initiatives. For example, the "Islamic Gas Pipeline," a proposed pipeline connecting Iran, Iraq, and Syria, is intended to carry Iranian natural gas to Syria and eventually European markets (Olgu, 2013). Russia has indicated interest in helping to fund and take part in this initiative. Furthermore, talks and agreements about energy cooperation and investment with Middle Eastern nations have been held by Gazprom, the state-owned energy company of Russia.

Another connectivity project, the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) crosses portions of the Middle East en route to joining India, Russia, Iran, and Central Asia. It attempts to make the transit of commodities between these areas easier and more efficient by using a variety of transportation methods, such as road, rail, and sea. The recent initiative of the "India-Middle East-Europe Corridor" was developed at the September 10, 2023, G20 summit in India (Terracina, 2023). Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman of Saudi Arabia developed the proposal in cooperation with delegates from the United States of America (USA), the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and the European Union (EU) to finalize a new transport corridor. The establishment of a new India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) was agreed upon by leaders of the United States, India, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, France, Germany, Italy, and the European Union, according to a White House fact sheet.

It is notable, particularly from a geopolitical standpoint, as it includes several of the major Middle Eastern nations, such as Saudi Arabia, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and Jordan.

The ratification of a Memorandum of Understanding, which will have the support of all parties involved, will formalize IMEC's ambition to develop a large commercial and transportation corridor (The White

House, 2023). To improve trade and services "to transit to, from, and between India, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Israel, and Europe," this corridor will work alongside the current road and sea networks.

Iraq's "Dry Canal" corridor is planned to be finished by 2038 at a cost of about \$20 billion. It will pass via Mosul, Diwaniya, Najaf, Karbala, Baghdad, and Turkey before ending at the Turkish border, giving access to Istanbul and Mersin Port in Europe (Duman & Alaca, 2023). Since the project will directly connect the Gulf states to Turkey, it will undoubtedly impact Gulf geopolitics. Furthermore, it will have the potential to undermine Iran's influence in the area by establishing a different route from the Far East to Europe. Iraq hopes to join the economic route connecting the ports of Mersin in Turkey, Bandar Abbas in Iran, and Port of Khalid in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates, as a sea and land transit corridor. Al-Faw is expected to surpass Dubai's Jebel Ali Port, which has 67 berths and is now the largest container port in the Middle East if the mammoth project is ever completed. It may even surpass the Red Sea transit route (Duman & Alaca, 2023).

The connectivity projects in the Middle East serve as catalysts for regional development, promoting economic, social, and strategic advantages that help the region maintain its importance in the broader context. Transport corridors in the Middle East have significant strategic value due to their geopolitical location. They influence regional dynamics and international relations, providing countries in the region with leverage and influence on global affairs. Being a crucial crossroads for global trade, linking Europe, Asia, and Africa and historical maritime transport corridors such as the Suez Canal, the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait, and the Persian Gulf facilitate the movement of goods between these regions. Disruptions to these routes could have significant implications for global trade flows. Control over key transport corridors in the Middle East can confer significant geopolitical influence. Countries in the region often seek to leverage their strategic location to enhance their geopolitical standing and influence regional dynamics. Control over vital chokepoints and transit routes can also be used as a tool for diplomatic and economic leverage.

Overview of the Transport Corridors in the Middle East

China and BRI

With multiple projects in progress, the concept of turning borders into points of connection between nations and continents has gained popularity in recent years. To establish commercial routes connecting Europe and Asia, the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the most notable example. It aims to build cross-border integrated economic networks, but they are unlikely to change the nature of geopolitical competition. Arab nations are ideal BRI partners since they were

historically a significant component of the old Silk Road. Arab nations have enthusiastically embraced and actively participated in BRI collaboration during the last decade.

The initial launching of the BRI in September 2013 by Chinese President Xi Jinping, left out the majority of MENA nations. However, as the initiative progressed, an increasing number of nations joined by signing pertinent Memorandums of Understanding. Under the BRI, substantial investments have been made in the Middle East, with an emphasis on trade, energy, and infrastructure. It can be traced to the formation of the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) and the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum (CASC) in the middle of the 2000s (Sidlo *et al.*, 2020). China's bilateral relations with each of the member states of the region have developed further with the establishment of the China-GCC Strategic Dialogue at the end of 2010. Gradually China has signed comprehensive strategic partnerships with Algeria, Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, as well as strategic partnerships with eight more states in the MENA region (Sidlo *et al.*, 2020). Infrastructure projects, however, continue to be the core of the BRI. The Chinese have prioritized energy-related projects due to the MENA's significance as a supplier of energy. Chinese businesses have developed ports and logistics hubs, among other infrastructure projects, in the United Arab Emirates. One notable instance of China's COSCO investing in a significant port is the Khalifa Port. The goal of investments in Oman's Duqm Special Economic Zone is to establish a significant industrial and logistical hub. The China-Oman Industrial Park is a project of great significance in the Belt and Road initiative. From 2014 to 2019, Chinese state-owned enterprises (SEOs) invested a total of USD 21.6 billion in the region, with 58% going toward that industry. The next largest industry, agriculture, received 14% of the funding; according to the data from AEI, 2020. With 40% of these USD 21.6 billion is going to the oil business, which is the largest amount and the other majority of Chinese foreign direct investment (FDI) shares in the region were held by the UAE (USD 6.43 billion, up from USD 2.3 billion in 2014) and Israel (USD 4.62 billion, up from USD 86.7 million in 2014) at the end of 2018 (MOFCOM via China Med (2019). Beijing is particularly keen to engage in the technology sector, which worries Israel's closest ally, the United States (Arab Center, 2023). As another evidence of the Gulf's readiness to further integration with Beijing's global development goals and of Beijing's ever-expanding commercial relations, China has also inked 5G agreements with each member of the GCC (Sharaf, 2021).

On March 27, 2021, China concluded a historic partnership deal with Tehran. This is particularly true given China's aim to increase its political and economic

sway in the Middle East and its willingness to allow Iran to join the strategically important "Belt and Road Initiative" to access European markets (Rasanah, 2021). Iraq and China reached a deal in 2019 that allowed Iraq access to BRI projects in exchange for oil. The Chinese government uses the money it receives from the daily sale of 100,000 barrels of crude oil to finance infrastructure projects carried out by domestic businesses (Das, 2022). More Chinese BRI projects include ports in the United Arab Emirates (Khalifa Port), Oman (Duqm Port), Saudi Arabia (Jizan Port), Egypt (Port Said), and Djibouti (Ain Sokhna Port) (Lons *et al.*, 2019).

Chinese investments are viewed by Middle Eastern countries as a chance to diversify their economy, lessen their reliance on oil income, and expand into other industries including technology, manufacturing, and logistics. The Belt and Road Initiative is influencing the Middle East's geopolitical environment through strengthening China's clout, promoting regional relationship diversification, and altering economic trends. It affects US influence, changes local political dynamics, and creates new complexity in regional conflicts even as it offers chances for economic growth and development. While navigating these changes, Middle Eastern countries are attempting to strike a balance between the possible economic and geopolitical risks and the advantages of Chinese investments.

Importance of INSTC in Middle East

The International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) was initiated in September 2000 by an agreement between Iran, Russia, and India. At first, it appeared like trade and economic activity would pick up steam, but the regional geopolitical landscape saw significant shifts. With major international events including several small economic downturns, US involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq, China's increasing influence in Central Asia, the creation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the resumption of economic sanctions against Iran, and the commencement of a massive trade war with Russia, the project seemed to have been halted for nearly 20 years (Chatterjee, 2018).

The INSTC is the only meridional transcontinental corridor in the EAEU (Eurasian Economic Union), in contrast to multiple East-West lines. The INSTC is one of India's most preferred land-based trade corridors for effective trade with Russia and Central Asia given its quickly expanding economy. India has taken a proactive stance toward the INSTC, seeking to increase its global developmental and infrastructure footprints in line with its rising international prominence. Leading this massive project, India is exploring other ways to establish connections with strategically significant and hydrocarbon-rich Central Asia touching through the ports of Iran in the Middle East. Opportunities to connect with other international and

local East-West latitudinal transport corridors are created by the distinctive North-South route. These include the Trans-Siberian railway, the international transit corridor between Europe and Western China, the Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia, the international Lapis Lazuli transport corridor, and the transport corridors of the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (Karavayev and Tishehyar, 2019).

The primary benefit of the North-South international transport corridor in comparison to alternative routes is a notable decrease in travel time. The INSTC is now more important than ever for India. India and INSTC have a chance because of the current geopolitical unrest and the decoupling of Russia and the West following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 (Raghavan *et al.*, 2022).

According to research conducted by the Federation of Freight Forwarders' Association of India (FFAI), freight transportation via INSTC will be 40% faster and 30% less expensive than using the Suez Canal, which is the conventional route (Chatterjee, 2018). Apart from that, it will also speed up India's access to the landlocked region of Central Asia's hydrocarbons and other mineral resource reserves. INSTC has the potential to assist India in luring a substantial share of export-oriented manufacturing operations that are considering relocation from China by serving as a smooth transportation and transit corridor. In stark contrast to China's predatory lending practices, which frequently prioritize self-interest and leave recipient nations burdened with debts marked by nefarious designs like a salami-slicing strategy, India's accelerated foreign lending programs are showcased by the INSTC project, one of several international initiatives involving India. A few moves in this direction are India's emphasis on the INSTC and its investments in Iran's Chabahar Port.

The importance of the INSTC project has increased significantly, particularly since the COVID-19 epidemic, when the necessity for alternate supply chains to lessen overdependence on China became urgent. Despite operating at a painfully sluggish rate and failing to meet its targets, the project is still far from finished (Liam, 2022).

The March 2021 stranding of the container ship in the Suez Canal ascribed to weather, technical malfunctions, or human error highlighted the urgent need for diversification of the choke points of international trade. This event prevented cargo transit between the Mediterranean and the Red Seas for approximately a week, causing a significant loss in global trade (Berger *et al.*, 2021). It became a great opportunity for the INSTC nations to charge up this alternate corridor.

India officially launched the first Intermodal Digital Transports Internationaux Routiers (TIR) Pilot

Transport between India and Iran in September 2022, demonstrating the tremendous expansion of the INSTC vertical over the previous year. The TIR system guarantees the smooth and paperless cross-border passage of goods (Chaudhury, 2022). India is also using the INSTC as leverage or a trade balancer in light of the BRI's expanding presence in Central Asia and Europe. Overall, despite a variety of security concerns, such as the use of these routes for drug and weapon trafficking or terrorism, and the possibility of Western sanctions, the INSTC stands to gain from the current geopolitical realignments.

Oman is the only Arab nation to have ratified the INSTC accords. But as their connections with the major INSTC stakeholders grow, other regional nations are showing a growing interest in this corridor. One of the projects that will have an indirect impact on the corridor's potential is the 2,100 km Trans-Arabian Railway, a Gulf Cooperation Council initiative that connects Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the UAE. Russia has already indicated interest in participating in this project by supplying rolling stock and helping to build and equip the railway (Uralvagonzavod, Transmasholding, Sinara-Transport Machines, and United Wagon Company). In addition to increasing overall regional passenger traffic by 10%, this railway is intended to divert 40% of air traffic within the Arabian Peninsula. The railway would also support the economic unification of the Arabian monarchs (Karavayev and Tishehyar, 2019). With a recent advancement in the project, a formal 10-year agreement for the management and development of the strategically important Chabahar Port in southeast Iran was signed by India and Iran on May 13, 2024. India will develop and run the important port, Shahid Beheshti terminal, for ten years as per the agreement between India Port Global Limited (IPGL) and the Ports and Maritime Organization (PMO) of Iran. This is India's first attempt at overseeing a foreign nation's seaport.

India has been building a port in Chabahar on the southeast coast of Iran along the Gulf of Oman as a means of delivering goods to Iran, Afghanistan, and other central Asian countries to avoid utilizing the ports of Karachi and Gwadar in Pakistan (The Hindu, 2024).

India, Iran, Russia, and Europe may now trade more easily because of the multimodal International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC). Its strategic location as a transit hub in the Middle East gives it a major role in the region. Countries in the Middle East, such as Iran and the United Arab Emirates, are vital hubs for the passage of products along the corridor. The development of Chabahar Port and the building of rail linkages connecting the port to the national rail network and beyond are two of Iran's major projects in the

INSTC. The UAE [⁴], acts as a vital intersection in the corridor, enabling the transshipment of goods, especially through its ports like Jebel Ali. The corridor fortifies strategic relationships among its members, particularly those involving Russia, Iran, and India. This affects regional power dynamics and alliances. By giving Middle Eastern nations additional choices for international collaboration and infrastructure development, the INSTC serves as an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). By facilitating economic diversification, the INSTC helps Middle Eastern nations become less dependent on traditional trading routes and partners. The Middle Eastern countries can benefit greatly from the INSTC as an alternative to existing trade routes and the Belt and Road Initiative. This is because it presents potential for infrastructure development, strategic collaborations, and trade diversification. There could be significant geopolitical and economic advantages for the area if the obstacles are overcome and the corridor's potential is completely realized. The further development of the International North-South Transport Corridor has the potential to greatly improve the interconnectedness of global trade, stimulate economic growth, and alter geopolitical dynamics. Continued infrastructure development, economic integration, strategic alliances, technology adoption, and environmental sustainability will be essential to its success. Realizing the corridor's full potential and optimizing its advantages for member nations and the larger region would require addressing issues including geopolitical difficulties and regulatory harmonization.

IMEC Corridor

In September 2023, negotiations to establish the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) took place on the fringes of the G20 Summit held 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 for an alternative to Chinese President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road (BRI) infrastructure project. The India Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), a massive US-led connectivity project would link India to Europe via the Gulf, also overshadowing INSTC which is now being steered by Russia and Iran after their economic sanctions by the West (Alhasan & Solanki, 2023). A major advancement in international trade channels, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) aims to improve connectivity and economic integration between Europe, the Middle East, and India. It is anticipated that the IMEC corridor to have a multimodal transportation network that includes roadways, railroads, and marine links. Facilitating trade, promoting economic cooperation, and improving regional connectivity are its main goals.

⁴ UAE- United Arab Emirates

The proposed IMEC partners namely the United States, Saudi Arabia, the EU [⁵], 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. A new railway network would connect these, allowing it to connect the Mediterranean and the Gulf through Israel and Jordan. Long-distance hydrogen pipes would help the participants achieve their climate and decarbonization targets, while underwater connections would enable data communication outside of the transportation infrastructure (Rizzi, 2024).

Rail connections, communications and electrical cables, and hydrogen export pipes will all be part of this corridor. A network of highways, railroads, ports, and airports is planned for the corridor to promote investment and trade between the three regions. There are various geopolitical reasons why the IMEC corridor is important. In the first place, it would offer a substitute commerce route, avoiding the conventional Suez Canal route, between Asia and Europe. This will lessen India's need for Egypt-controlled Suez Canal, which is prone to interruptions. Second, India's economic connections with the Middle East and Europe would strengthen as a result of the IMEC corridor. India would have more control over international trade and investment flows as well as increase its geopolitical position in the region as a result.

The ambitious plan has been briefly overshadowed by the mounting impact of the extraordinary terror strikes carried out in Israel on October 7, 2023, by Hamas [⁶]. The Israeli port of Haifa is an essential part of the projected corridor (Suri *et al.*, 2024).

The IMEC is an economic corridor that facilitates more than just trade in goods. A safe, fast data pipeline is also suggested in light of the growing importance of cyber security, since it may help India export its IT services to West Asia and Europe. From an Indian standpoint, the incorporation of electrical grids into the corridor design holds particular significance. India has already supported the "One Sun, One World, One Grid" effort as part of its leadership of the International Solar Alliance (Ministry of Power, India, 2023). This initiative is an ambitious endeavour to link the world's essential regional grids into a single green grid that can move renewable energy from one region to another. By utilizing several time zones, it would

optimize solar power utilization and minimize the requirement for costly energy storage systems.

The plan to add clean hydrogen pipelines to the corridor will be the best long-term replacement for fossil fuels, and the Indian government has already committed US\$2.5 billion to help the nation become a hub for green hydrogen development (Suri *et al.*, 2024). The vision for the UAE Saudi Arabia, and other members of the corridor to develop their green hydrogen projects will further push towards energy transition projects of the Middle Eastern countries.

As the participating nations begin to coordinate to tackle the range of difficulties, their political will and resolve will be put to the test. There will be a different set of difficulties for each vertical section of the corridor. It is important to remember that the proposed corridor is a long-term connectivity project, even amid West Asia's general doldrums. The completion of the comprehensive project studies and finance options is probably going to take several years. A lot can happen during this time, and with West Asia's shifting sands, it ought to give the preliminary work some momentum.

Iraq's Dry Canal or Development Road Project

An important infrastructure project called the Iraq Development Road, or the Dry Canal, aims to turn Iraq into a hub for regional logistics and transportation. With the help of Turkey, a vast network of roads and railroads would be built to connect Europe and the Arabian Gulf.

The project was tabled on May 27, 2023, when transport ministers from the Arab Gulf nations; Iran, Syria, Turkey, and Jordan met in Baghdad with representatives from the European Union (EU) and the World Bank. The aim was to introduce the Development Road project, an important strategic initiative that would transform Iraq into a corridor for the flow of goods between Asia, the Gulf, and Europe (Iraq Study Unit, 2023).

The principal objective of the project is to connect the vast Faw Port to a road and rail network that extends north to the Turkish border crossing at Faysh Khabur. This network would be used to move goods from Asia to Europe and vice versa. Turkey would be traversed by Europe. According to Iraqi officials, the road would save roughly fifteen days for the movement of goods between Eastern Asia and Northern Europe (2023, العالم الجديد).

⁵ EU- European Union

⁶ Hamas, an Islamist militant movement, has ruled the Gaza Strip for nearly two decades. It aggressively rejects Israel's existence, claiming that it occupies Palestine.

The 1,190-kilometer roadway is intended to connect South Iraq with the Turkish borders, and the 1,175-kilometer railway included in this project will be utilized by high-speed trains. The construction of these transportation corridors would improve internal trade and integration by traversing twelve governorates in Iraq from south to north. According to the Iraqi government, the two-track freight train would begin service in 2028 with a capacity of 3.5 million containers and 22 million tons of bulk cargo annually. By 2038, the capacity will be gradually increased to 7.5 million containers. It should be able to carry 80 to 90 pairs of trains a day, the majority of which would be powered by electricity, thanks to the double-track railway that connects to the port. (Hasan, 2024)

The project's development faces substantial obstacles despite these chances. To finish these projects, Iraq requires assistance in the areas of financing and security. To get past these challenges, international investment and cooperation are essential. Indeed, coordination and cooperation between Turkey and Iraq as well as with other regional and international actors will be necessary for the effective completion of the al-Faw Grand Port and Development Canal project. Notwithstanding these difficulties, the initiative has a lot of potential advantages. The al-Faw Grand Port and Development Canal have the power to change the economic climate in the area and open up new avenues for investment and trade. Iraq's rehabilitation efforts will be aided by increasing trade and employment. Together, Turkey and Iraq can overcome obstacles and risks to create a more promising future for the two nations as well as the region.

This project intends to establish Iraq as a major logistical hub, spur economic growth, and advance regional integration by building a contemporary transportation corridor connecting the Arabian Gulf with Europe. Addressing security issues, obtaining funding, and promoting regional collaboration will be necessary for successful implementation.

CONCLUSION

The Middle East has long served as a crossroads for civilizations, creating commerce and transportation networks that link this area to other regions of the world. One of the world's oldest trading routes, the Silk Road, connects the Middle East and Central Asia, which have long been at the intersection of East Asia, Europe, and Africa. Multilateral corridors are an expression of competitiveness between major powers in the region. While India, Russia, and Iran lead the INSTC, which wants to offer a different path to balance China's dominance, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) aspires to increase its influence through infrastructure projects. On the other hand, these corridors are used by Middle Eastern states to strengthen their respective strategic advantages and are used by nations like Iran,

Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates to consolidate their economic advantages and expand their regional clout.

The Middle Eastern countries also hope to increase economic growth, diversify their economies, and lessen reliance on a single commodity like oil by enhancing trade routes and infrastructure. On a broader perspective, it might be drawn that, nations might cooperate on initiatives to improve their security or offset the power of adversarial powers. While strategic alliances are frequently formed as a result of the development of these corridors it also raises questions about sovereignty even as they promise economic benefits. The neo-realist viewpoint also emphasizes the danger of "debt diplomacy," in which nations may become enmeshed in debt as a result of massive infrastructure loans, making them more susceptible to outside pressure. Multilateral channels can both lessen and intensify hostilities. Although interconnectivity and better economic conditions may lessen the likelihood of violence and rivalries conflicts can still arise from rivalry for control of these corridors. While governments are naturally competitive, neorealism recognizes that they can work together when it is in their best interests. To ensure successful development and operation, multilateral corridors frequently require some degree of cooperation.

To conclude from a Neo-realist perspective, multilateral corridors in the region can be depicted as strategic instruments that governments employ to increase their influence, security, and power within anarchic international relations. These corridors show the intricate interaction between geopolitical and economic interests, as well as the underlying rivalry between regional and major powers. They present concerns associated with conflict, dependency, and sovereignty even as they present great prospects for regional integration and economic growth. Policymakers and other players involved in the creation and management of multilateral corridors in the Middle East must comprehend these dynamics. All of these economic crossings must be created and exist alongside one another but to achieve this cooperative scenario, the major powers will need to make some political concessions in addition to creative thinking and a desire to find points of agreement. Whether these corridors become bridges to cooperation or barriers to peace and prosperity will depend on the decisions made by regional and international authorities in the upcoming years.

In conclusion, it is suggested that Middle Eastern governments interact with a variety of international powers (such as China, the US, and the EU) in order to counterbalance influences and prevent becoming unduly dependent on one nation. Regional cooperation is required to manage rivalries and collaborate toward mutually beneficial projects amongst

regional powers (e.g., Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey). Infrastructure must be better secured against threats like terrorism and piracy, which requires more investment in security measures. Standardizing and harmonizing trade laws, customs processes, and standards is one of the crucial things that must be done to enable easier and more effective cross-border trade. It is preferable to create policies that assist small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) in gaining access to new markets and improved connections.

Environmental impact evaluations for all significant infrastructure projects must be guaranteed for sustainable growth in the face of the impact of climate change. Renewable energy sources must be incorporated into infrastructure and transportation projects in order to enhance environmental sustainability and lower carbon footprints and contribute to a cleaner environment. Middle Eastern states can improve their ability to manage the intricate geopolitical terrain, strengthen their strategic autonomy, and take advantage of international connectivity projects to promote economic growth and regional stability by putting these policy ideas into practice. In a fiercely competitive and unstable region, these suggestions seek to maintain stability and security, foster collaboration, and advance growth.

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