The IMEC Corridor: A Strategic Setback

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The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), proposed at the G20 meeting in New Delhi in 2023, was indeed a significant initiative aimed at creating a "geo-economic corridor" linking India with the Middle East and Europe. However, the concept isn't entirely new, echoing historical precedents like the British East India Company, which similarly used trade routes to shape geopolitics and control vast regions of the world.

The British East India Company, established in 1600, was far more than a trading entity. It wielded tremendous political and military influence in India and across parts of Asia, acting as a bridge between Europe and the East for centuries. The East India Company's role in facilitating the movement of goods, establishing colonial authority, and creating pathways for European influence parallels what IMEC seeks to achieve but in a modernized, supposedly cooperative framework.

The major difference lies in the power dynamics. While the East India Company operated under imperial motives, controlling territories and dominating trade for British interests, IMEC is presented as a collaborative economic project between sovereign nations. The corridor is intended to enhance connectivity through modern infrastructure, energy supply, and digital technologies, ostensibly benefiting all parties involved. However, like the East India Company's dominance over certain regions, the long-term influence of such corridors will be determined by the balance of power between the stakeholders.

A second important point is the exclusion of Turkey from the corridor. While historically, Turkey was a key part of routes such as the Silk Road and the modern Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), IMEC creates an alternative route that either minimizes its dependence on Turkey. By excluding Turkey, IMEC may appear to be creating an alternate route that either minimizes reliance on Turkey or reflects geopolitical concerns, including Turkey's complex relationships with the European

Union, the Middle East, and the United States. This bypass might also reflect shifting alliances, especially with Israel and Saudi Arabia becoming more prominent partners in the project. IMEC's design, which involves transit through Saudi Arabia and Israel before heading to Europe via Greece, could be interpreted as an attempt to solidify political and economic ties between these specific countries, rather than Turkey, which has occasionally been at odds with Israel, Greece and some Gulf nations.

A third issue is the creation of alliances that explicitly exclude Russia and China, but it raises deeper questions about the effectiveness and future of these strategies. The New India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC), although heralded as a game-changing initiative, is far from truly challenging China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which has already reshaped much of the global infrastructure landscape. One of the main ambitions behind the IMEC project is to provide an alternative to China's BRI. However, China's influence in the region and beyond remains deeply entrenched.

A New Framework for Regional Power Dynamics

The BRI, even if it has slowed down, is still a massive infrastructure project connecting Asia, Africa, and Europe through a network of railways, ports, and trade routes. The IMEC, on the other hand, still faces logistical and political hurdles. India, despite its growing stature as a global player and its desire to counterbalance China, remains cautious. It is estimated that it does not want to appear overly competitive towards China, especially as the economic ties between the two countries remain substantial. Furthermore, India's participation in BRICS+ complicates this balancing act, as BRICS+ includes China and is positioned as an alternative to Western-dominated institutions. The IMEC is far from the kind of transformative geopolitical power envisioned by its supporters, and as long as China's BRI maintains its momentum - even with challenges - the IMEC will struggle to reduce China's footprint in the region. The dreams of corridors and new multilateral banks are part of a broader competition over who will shape the global economy in the 21st century. The G20, led by the West and its allies, aims to offer an alternative.

Although it has been a year since the IMEC announcement, its tangible achievements might still be minimal. Infrastructure projects of this scale require long-term investment and planning, and political differences can slow progress. In 2024, as Brazil prepares to host the next G20 summit in Rio de Janeiro, IMEC's proponents will likely highlight any progress made, particularly agreements on energy and digital infrastructure. However, physical connectivity is still a distant goal, and geopolitical tensions—especially involving countries not included, like Turkey—could further complicate implementation.

In conclusion, while IMEC may present opportunities for economic growth and enhanced connectivity, its geopolitical implications are complex. By looking at the lessons from the East India Company, we can see that large-scale trade routes often bring with them political and economic shifts, not just benefits for all participants. The question remains whether IMEC will face similar challenges in balancing power and influence across the East and the West. The 2024 G20 summit will likely provide further clarity on whether IMEC can fulfill its ambitious vision, and whether countries like Turkey will find a place in this evolving corridor.

The question of how many more organizations are needed for regional cooperation within the context of the IMEC corridor raises critical issues of inclusivity, functionality, and geopolitical balance. The founders of the project — India, the USA, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, the EU, France, Italy, Jordan, Israel and Greece— have ambitious goals, but the broader challenge is not just in expanding membership but in managing the competing interests and ensuring tangible progress.

A New Strategic Vision is Needed

The recent eruption of war in Gaza has exposed cracks in Washington's offshore balancing strategy in the Middle East, particularly through the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). IMEC, envisioned as a strategic alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative, aimed to link South Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. However, the prolonged conflict in Gaza has disrupted this initiative, pushing many of its key stakeholders to seek alternatives. IMEC's challenges mirror a broader pattern of failed or faltering U.S. efforts to reduce its regional footprint while still exerting influence.

India's decision last May to sign a ten-year deal to operate Iran's Chabahar Port highlights the competing interests and strategic adjustments in the region. Despite U.S. sanctions and geopolitical hurdles, India sought to challenge China's dominance in Pakistan's Gwadar Port, a centerpiece of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. By securing Iran's Chabahar, India reinforces its strategic autonomy, even as the U.S. attempts to orchestrate regional partnerships under IMEC falter.

Meanwhile, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) diversified its own geopolitical bets by participating in the Türkiye-Iraq Development Road, signaling a pragmatic approach to trade and infrastructure, separate from IMEC. This reflects a broader trend of Gulf states balancing relationships with multiple global powers, including China, Russia, and Turkey, while maintaining ties with the U.S.

The U.S.-Saudi talks further underscore the difficulties in implementing offshore balancing. Washington has sought to leverage normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel as a cornerstone of its regional policy. However, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) remains committed to Palestinian rights, reaffirming that normalization with Israel is contingent upon the creation of an independent Palestinian state—a demand that is increasingly improbable given Israel's current right-wing government.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken's statement that "none goes forward without the others" reveals the interdependence Washington envisions: Saudi military support in exchange for normalization with Israel. Yet, MBS's insistence on a two-state solution and the deeply entrenched conflict in Gaza highlight the fragile and potentially unworkable nature of this strategy.

In essence, IMEC and the broader U.S. attempt to "rightsize" its role in the Middle East are encountering significant resistance from regional powers seeking strategic autonomy and balancing between global players, while the unrelenting Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues to block key diplomatic initiatives. The shifting alliances and pragmatic diversifications of Gulf countries indicate that Washington's once-dominant influence is increasingly challenged in the multipolar dynamics of the region.

The situation in Gaza and the broader Middle East continues to highlight the challenges faced by external powers like the United States when attempting to act as an "offshore balancer" in regional conflicts. The term offshore balancer traditionally refers to a strategy in which a great power, like the U.S., intervenes selectively in distant conflicts, preferring to influence regional powers from a distance rather than being directly involved on the ground. In this context, Washington's current predicament mirrors past difficulties and miscalculations, particularly in its attempts to use military force as a primary tool for shaping outcomes in the Middle East.

The mention of the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) is critical to understanding how these dynamics play into broader geopolitical strategies. IMEC, presented as a bold new initiative to enhance economic ties and reduce reliance on China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), was seen as an important step in integrating the economies of the Middle East, South Asia, and Europe. However, the war in Gaza has dealt a significant blow to this vision.

IMEC's success depends on regional stability, economic cooperation, and, critically, the goodwill of Middle Eastern states. The ongoing conflict, coupled with deep-seated resentment toward U.S. policies in the region, threatens to derail these plans. Countries like Saudi Arabia and the UAE, key players in the IMEC project, may find it difficult to fully commit to such initiatives while popular anger over Gaza mounts and regional rivalries persist.

In this sense, the loss of IMEC is not merely about an economic project falling apart—it's emblematic of the larger strategic failures facing Washington in the Middle East. The U.S. cannot simply offset this loss by counting on military victories or the elimination of its enemies. The real damage lies in the erosion of trust, credibility, and cooperation that Washington needs to achieve its long-term goals in the region.

In theory, the U.S. could still adopt a role as an "offshore balancer," stepping back from direct involvement and encouraging regional powers to manage their own affairs. However, the current geopolitical landscape makes this difficult. The U.S. no longer enjoys the uncontested dominance it once did. Russia and China have established footholds in the Middle East, and regional players like Iran and Turkey have grown more assertive. The U.S. must also contend with its diminished influence and credibility in the wake of the Iraq War, the Syrian conflict, and the ongoing crisis in Gaza.

Furthermore, no clear successor has emerged to act as an offshore balancer in the region. The U.S. is too entangled in the politics and conflicts of the Middle East to play a truly detached role. Meanwhile, no other global power—whether it be China, Russia, or the European Union—seems ready or willing to take on this role. China's Belt and Road Initiative has economic reach, but Beijing avoids the kind of direct military or political engagement the U.S. has employed. Russia's involvement in Syria and its ties with Iran give it some leverage, but Moscow lacks the economic and diplomatic influence necessary to shape regional politics comprehensively.

The war in Gaza and the failure of initiatives like IMEC to take root suggest that Washington needs a more nuanced strategy in the Middle East—one that goes beyond military force and reactive diplomacy. The U.S. must recognize that its ability to shape outcomes in the region has its limits, and that regional peacebuilding efforts, economic partnerships, and political diplomacy must take precedence over militaristic approaches.

Conclusion:

Rebuild relationships with regional powers by addressing their security and economic concerns, especially in light of conflicts like the Gaza war.

Shift from military intervention to diplomatic engagement, working with regional players to resolve conflicts through political channels rather than through direct involvement or military support.

Strengthen multilateral frameworks, involving Middle Eastern nations, regional organizations like the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and global institutions to create cooperative mechanisms for addressing regional instability.

The current trajectory of U.S. policy in the Middle East—characterized by reliance on military force and intermittent diplomatic efforts—has proven insufficient to secure long-term strategic gains. The loss of the IMEC corridor and the inability to act as a true offshore balancer in the region underscore Washington’s need to reassess its approach.

A new strategy, grounded in diplomatic engagement, regional cooperation, and economic partnerships, is essential. Only by addressing the root causes of instability—whether they be economic inequality, political repression, or unresolved territorial conflicts—can the U.S. hope to achieve a meaningful and sustainable role in the region. In the absence of such a shift, Washington risks repeating the same mistakes that have plagued its Middle Eastern policy for decades, ensuring that dreams of lasting peace and strategic success remain out of reach.