

## **Corridors of Influence: A Comparative Analysis of the Geopolitical and Economic Dimensions of IMEC and BRI**

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### **Abstract**

*The contemporary global order is undergoing a transformative reconfiguration, driven by competing visions of connectivity embodied in China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the recently proposed India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC). This article provides a nuanced interrogation of these ambitious initiatives, situating them within the intersecting domains of international political economy, geopolitical theory, and global governance. Rather than reducing BRI and IMEC to mere infrastructure projects, the analysis elucidates their roles as sophisticated instruments of strategic competition, soft power projection, and economic statecraft. By leveraging frameworks such as dependency theory, hegemonic stability, and network power, the paper explores how these initiatives reshape global trade architectures, redefine regional influence, and challenge existing normative paradigms. The article critically evaluates the systemic implications of BRI and IMEC, including their potential to reorient supply chains, alter geopolitical alignments, and foster new forms of economic entanglement. Furthermore, it probes the sovereignty dilemmas faced by participating states, examining how these projects navigate tensions between economic integration and political autonomy, while interrogating their impact on global south agency and regional power dynamics. Through this multidimensional lens, the paper illuminates the broader stakes of these connectivity projects, offering insights into their capacity to recast the contours of 21st-century global order.*

### **Introduction**

The resurgence of transcontinental infrastructure projects heralds a profound shift in the global order, transcending mere economic pragmatism to embody a fierce contest of visions for a multi-polar world. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), launched in 2013, has woven an intricate tapestry of connectivity, binding over 140 nations across Eurasia, Africa, and beyond into a sprawling network of trade routes, digital infrastructure, and economic dependencies.

This ambitious enterprise, often framed as a modern Silk Road, is not merely a logistical endeavor but a bold projection of China's geo-economic and geopolitical ascendancy, redefining the axes of global commerce and influence. In counterpoint, the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC), unveiled at the G20 Summit in 2023, emerges as a rival architecture of connectivity. Anchored by India's rising global aspirations, bolstered by Western strategic imperatives, and amplified by the economic ambitions of Middle Eastern powers, IMEC proposes an alternative pathway that challenges the BRI's dominance while articulating a distinct vision of integration and influence. Far from being neutral conduits of trade, these corridors represent deliberate architectures of power, intricately intertwining economic flows with geostrategic objectives. This paper interrogates the BRI and IMEC as dynamic instruments of economic statecraft and soft power, analyzing their capacity to reshape global trade networks, reconfigure regional alliances, and redefine the normative underpinnings of international relations. By situating these initiatives within the broader frameworks of international political economy and geopolitical theory, the study illuminates their roles in navigating the tensions between economic interdependence and political sovereignty, while probing their implications for the agency of participating states and the evolving contours of global governance.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The paper draws conceptually from classical geopolitical theories—Mackinder's pivot of land power, Mahan's sea power centrality—and juxtaposes them with modern notions of economic regionalism (Baldwin) and global systems analysis (Wallerstein). These paradigms illuminate corridors as geopolitical artifacts that shape core-periphery relationships and contest hegemonic orders. Theories of economic sovereignty (Keohane & Nye) and dependency theory (Frank) offer insights into how deep infrastructural entanglements may erode or reconfigure national sovereignty by inducing financial dependency, regulatory alignments, and strategic concessions. The notion of "infrastructural imperialism," emerging from neo-Gramscian interpretations of hegemony, further enriches our understanding of how material connectivity can underpin ideational and normative dominance.

### **The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI):**

Strategic Rationales and Global Reach is the crucial factor for the China's Belt and Road Initiative. China's BRI transcends mere infrastructure. It represents an orchestrated strategy to recalibrate global value chains, entrench China-centric production networks, and internationalize the yuan. Through the dual axes of the Silk Road Economic Belt (land-based) and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (sea-based), Beijing seeks to insulate itself from maritime chokepoint vulnerabilities and assert influence deep into Europe, Africa, and the Arctic. However, the BRI's sprawling ambition encounters friction—accusations of debt diplomacy, governance opacity, and emergent regional push backs reveal both its reach and fragility.

### **The India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC):**

IMEC captures the attraction in geopolitical scenario as the new architecture of Strategic Balancing. IMEC emerges not merely as an infrastructure project but as a geostrategic counterpoint. With its multimodal corridors (rail, maritime, energy pipelines, and digital links), IMEC aspires to revitalize ancient trade routes while embedding a modern ethic of transparency and sustainability. Anchored by a diverse coalition—India, Gulf powers, EU, US, Israel—it positions India as a pivotal intermediary between West Asia and Europe. By bypassing traditional chokepoints like the Suez and reducing overreliance on China-centric supply chains, IMEC manifests as a spatial articulation of strategic diversification.

### **Strategic Significance of BRI and IMEC**

BRI and IMEC delineate distinct but overlapping spheres of influence. Where BRI deepens China's continental integration westwards, IMEC stitches together a maritime-terrestrial arc re-centering India and the Middle East as vital nexuses. Strategically, BRI's emphasis on state-led financing contrasts IMEC's hybrid model of public-private partnerships and multilateral governance. Yet both corridors underscore how infrastructure is the new currency of global influence—reshaping not just trade, but strategic alignments and normative orders. Moreover, The BRI and IMEC represent competing paradigms of global integration, each leveraging infrastructure as a currency of influence. The BRI's dual axes—the Silk Road Economic Belt (land-based) and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (sea-based)—aim to insulate China from maritime vulnerabilities while embedding its economic and normative standards across

continents. Conversely, IMEC's multimodal framework, encompassing rail, maritime, energy pipelines, and digital links, positions India and the Middle East as pivotal nodes in a transparent, ESG-compliant connectivity network. By bypassing chokepoints like the Suez and reducing reliance on China-dominated supply chains, IMEC manifests as a spatial articulation of strategic diversification. Both initiatives underscore infrastructure's role as a tool of economic statecraft and soft power, reshaping trade geographies, reconfiguring regional alliances, and redefining the normative underpinnings of global governance.

**Table 1: Comparative Overview of IMEC and BRI**

Dimension	Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)	India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC)
Launch Year	2013 (China)	2023 (G20 Summit)
Primary Proponents	China	India, EU, US, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Israel
Geographical Span	Asia, Europe, Africa (140+ countries)	India, Middle East, Europe
Key Components	Silk Road Economic Belt (land), Maritime Silk Road (sea)	Multimodal: Rail, Maritime, Digital, Green Energy Pipelines
Strategic Objectives	Recalibrate global value chains, Secure resource corridors, internationalize yuan	Diversify trade routes, bypass China-centric corridors, promote sustainability & transparency
Financing Model	State-led, Chinese policy banks (AIIB, CDB, Exim Bank of China)	Public-private partnerships, multilateral financing
Infrastructure Focus	Ports, Railways, Highways, Energy pipelines, Digital Silk Road	Ports, Railways, Green hydrogen pipelines, High-speed digital cables
Sustainability Emphasis	Fossil fuel-heavy, emerging green projects (limited)	Strong ESG focus, de-carbonization-aligned (green hydrogen corridors)
Soft Power Instruments	Confucius Institutes, Media cooperation, Capacity building	Democratic coalition branding, Regulatory parity, Capacity building
Sovereignty Risks	Debt-trap diplomacy, regulatory entanglements (e.g., Hambantota Port)	Lower debt risks, emphasis on transparency; but potential intra-coalition leverage dynamics
Key Criticisms	Debt unsustainability, governance opacity, neo-colonial tendencies	Coalition asymmetries, feasibility & timeline uncertainties
Potential Trade Impact (by 2040)	Estimated >\$1 trillion cumulative investment	Estimated \$500 billion boost in India-Europe trade

## **Economic Geographies and Sovereignty Dilemmas: BRI and IMEC as Contested Infrastructural Regimes**

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) represent competing paradigms of global economic connectivity, each reconfiguring trade geographies while igniting profound sovereignty dilemmas. These megaprojects, embedded in distinct ideological and strategic visions, exemplify the tension between economic integration and geopolitical control, raising critical questions about dependency, autonomy, and hegemonic influence in the Global South.

### **Economic Reconfigurations: Divergent Models of Connectivity**

The BRI, with over \$1 trillion in cumulative investments, has reshaped global trade by channeling Chinese capital into emerging markets. Yet, its debt-financed model has sparked widespread concerns about fiscal sustainability, with critics arguing that it engenders neocolonial dependencies. Cases like Pakistan's Gwadar Port and Zambia's infrastructure loans illustrate how BRI's financial architecture can burden recipient states with unsustainable obligations, often necessitating strategic concessions to Beijing.

In contrast, IMEC—still in its formative stages—positions itself as a modular, ESG-compliant alternative, emphasizing green hydrogen corridors and decarbonized infrastructure. Projections suggest IMEC could enhance India-Europe trade by \$500 billion by 2040, leveraging multilateral financing and regulatory parity to foster equitable growth. Unlike BRI's fossil-fuel-heavy investments, IMEC aligns with the global decarbonization agenda, offering a normative counterpoint to China's resource-intensive approach. However, IMEC's ambitious scope and reliance on coalition dynamics raise questions about its scalability and cohesion, particularly given the divergent interests of its stakeholders—the US, EU, Gulf states, and India.

### **Sovereignty and Strategic Entrapment: A Dependency Theory Lens**

Sovereignty emerges as a pivotal axis of contestation. Drawing on dependency theory, BRI's debt-driven projects risk what scholars term "strategic entrapment," wherein fiscal distress compels states to cede critical assets, as evidenced by Sri Lanka's Hambantota Port lease to China in 2017. Beyond physical infrastructure, BRI's export of digital standards and regulatory

frameworks embeds Chinese technological hegemony, incrementally eroding recipient states' policy autonomy. This infrastructural entanglement, as articulated in critical geography literature, transforms economic partnerships into vectors of geopolitical leverage, binding weaker states to Beijing's orbit.

IMEC, by contrast, champions multilateralism and equitable financing, ostensibly safeguarding sovereignty. Its emphasis on transparent governance and regulatory harmonization seeks to mitigate the asymmetrical dependencies associated with BRI. Yet, this narrative of parity is complicated by power imbalances within IMEC's coalition. The US and EU, with their economic and normative dominance, alongside the financial clout of Gulf states, may subtly prioritize their strategic interests, potentially marginalizing India and smaller partners. Such dynamics risk replicating the hierarchical structures IMEC purports to transcend, underscoring the fragility of its egalitarian rhetoric.

### **Complex Interdependence and Hegemonic Ambitions**

Keohane and Nye's framework of "complex interdependence" provides a theoretical lens to interrogate these dynamics. Both BRI and IMEC foster mutual economic benefits through enhanced connectivity, yet they simultaneously engender asymmetrical dependencies that expose weaker states to normative coercion and strategic realignment. BRI's centralized, state-driven model amplifies China's ability to shape global economic norms, while IMEC's multilateral framework, though less overtly hegemonic, embeds Western liberal standards that may constrain the agency of Global South partners.

This duality—connectivity as both opportunity and instrument of control—positions BRI and IMEC as dual-edged constructs. They are not merely infrastructure projects but geopolitical gambits, contesting the architecture of global governance. BRI's expansionist logic consolidates China's influence through economic leverage, while IMEC's normative alignment with ESG principles and multilateralism reflects a Western-led effort to counterbalance Beijing's ascendancy. Neither project is neutral; both are imbued with hegemonic aspirations, mediated through the language of trade and development.

### **Conclusion**

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor

(IMEC) transcend their material foundations as infrastructure projects, emerging as potent socio-political constructs that crystallize competing visions of global order. Far from mere conduits of trade, these corridors embody strategic narratives inscribed in concrete, steel, and digital networks, reshaping economic geographies while redefining the contours of sovereignty, agency, and power in the 21st century. Drawing on world-systems theory, BRI can be understood as China's bid to consolidate a Sino-centric core within the global capitalist system, leveraging infrastructural power to reorient peripheral economies toward Beijing's orbit. IMEC, conversely, articulates a counter-hegemonic vision—pluralistic, decarbonized, and ostensibly multilateral—yet one that risks reproducing Western-dominated normative frameworks under the guise of sustainability and inclusivity.

From a sociological perspective, these corridors are not neutral artifacts but sites of contestation where global inequalities, state capacities, and socio-political identities are negotiated. BRI's debt-driven model, critiqued through the lens of dependency theory, engenders what critical sociologists term "infrastructural capture," whereby recipient states, particularly in the Global South, face diminished autonomy as economic obligations translate into geopolitical subservience. The Hambantota Port handover in Sri Lanka exemplifies this dynamic, illustrating how infrastructure becomes a vector for reshaping social relations and national sovereignty. IMEC, while promoting equitable financing and environmental stewardship, is not immune to such critiques. Its coalition—comprising the US, EU, Gulf states, and India—embeds power asymmetries that may perpetuate hierarchical dependencies, subtly aligning Global South partners with Western liberal norms and limiting their socio-political agency.

Theoretically, Keohane and Nye's concept of "complex interdependence" illuminates the dual nature of these projects: they foster economic interconnectivity while generating asymmetrical vulnerabilities. BRI's centralized, state-led approach amplifies China's capacity to export its developmental model, embedding techno-political standards that constrain the policy space of partner nations. IMEC's multilateral framework, though framed as a corrective, risks imposing its own normative coercion, as ESG compliance and regulatory harmonization align with Western priorities, potentially marginalizing alternative developmental paradigms. Both projects, in this sense, function as "hegemonic infrastructures," to borrow from critical



infrastructure studies, simultaneously enabling connectivity and asserting dominance through the socio-technical systems they propagate.

The unfolding rivalry between BRI and IMEC will decisively shape not only global trade routes but also the architecture of world power and the socio-political capacities of nations. For policymakers, engaging with these corridors demands a nuanced understanding of their role as instruments of soft power, sovereignty negotiation, and normative contestation. States in the Global South, in particular, must navigate the tension between economic integration and strategic autonomy, resisting infrastructural capture while leveraging connectivity to bolster domestic resilience. As these megaprojects redefine the global order, their legacy will hinge on whether they empower or erode the agency of the societies they connect, determining the extent to which the 21st century is defined by inclusive interdependence or entrenched hegemonies.



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