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Corridor of Promise, Zone of Peril: IMEC and the Mediterranean in an Age of Conflict. The India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor and Mediterranean Geopolitics

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Sintesi

The India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) represents a transformative infrastructure initiative linking India to Europe via the Gulf, offering a strategic alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative. With the Mediterranean serving as its critical junction, IMEC promises to reduce shipping times by up to 40%, integrate green hydrogen pipelines and digital infrastructure, and reshape Eurasian connectivity. However, the corridor's potential is imperiled by escalating regional conflicts—including the Israel–Gaza war and the Iran–Israel Twelve-Day War of June 2025—alongside unresolved diplomatic normalization, Mediterranean port competition, and regulatory fragmentation. This policy brief analyzes IMEC's strategic architecture and risk landscape, proposing six recommendations spanning diplomatic engagement, EU-level port coordination, regulatory harmonization, sustainable finance mobilization, resilient infrastructure design, and green hydrogen integration. Without concerted multilateral action, IMEC's promise of enhanced trade, energy security, and digital connectivity may remain unfulfilled.

Introduction

The India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), launched at the 2023 G20 Summit in New Delhi on 9 September 2023, represents one of the most ambitious connectivity initiatives of the 21st century (White House, 2023 ORF, 2024). Designed to link India to Europe via the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Israel, IMEC aims to establish a multimodal infrastructure corridor—encompassing maritime, rail, digital, and energy networks—as a transparent, democratic, and sustainable alternative to China’s Belt and Road Initiative. The Mediterranean Sea serves as the keystone upon which the entire corridor depends. Ports such as Haifa (Israel), Piraeus (Greece), Trieste (Italy), and Marseille (France) are positioning themselves as the future terminals of this grand corridor. Each nation seeks to claim a central role in what could become a new Eurasian economic axis, with the winning port gaining substantial geopolitical capital. However, IMEC’s promise is tempered by rising instability across its core geographies. The intensifying Israel–Gaza conflict and the outbreak of the Iran–Israel war (13–24 June 2025), also known as the Twelve-Day War, underscore the corridor’s exposure to geopolitical volatility. These flashpoints, alongside unresolved diplomatic normalization between key actors such as Saudi Arabia and Israel, threaten to delay or derail corridor implementation. Political fragmentation in the Middle East, competition among Mediterranean ports, and regulatory divergence within the EU compound these challenges. The stakes are significant: IMEC could potentially boost India–EU trade, currently at approximately €124 billion in goods annually (European Commission, 2024–2025), through more efficient transport links, reduce shipping times by up to 40% compared to the Suez Canal route (Atlantic Council, 2025), contribute to Europe’s renewable energy supply through green hydrogen pipelines, and create up to 2 million jobs in India and the Gulf region (Bhatnagar, 2025). Yet without sustained diplomacy, conflict mitigation, and multilateral coordination, this transformative potential may remain unrealized.

Strategic and Economic Stakes

IMEC is not merely a trade facilitation project; it is a strategic counterpoint to China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Supported by the United States and the European Union, IMEC seeks to offer an alternative model for global connectivity, one grounded in transparency, sustainability, and democratic norms. The corridor’s architecture includes undersea data cables, green hydrogen pipelines, and electricity grids, integrating the transportation of physical goods with energy and digital infrastructure. From Europe’s perspective, IMEC represents an opportunity to diversify supply chains, reduce overdependence on the Suez Canal, and forge deeper economic and strategic ties with India. For India, the corridor aligns with its export-driven growth model and Act East/West policies. The Mediterranean leg intersects with the EastMed–Poseidon pipeline—a project developed by IGI Poseidon, a 50–50 joint venture between Greek gas utility DEPA and Italian energy company Edison, with an intergovernmental agreement signed by Greece, Cyprus, and Israel in January 2020 (IGI Poseidon, 2022)—aimed at channeling Israeli and Cypriot natural gas to Europe, offering an alternative to Russian energy sources.

Comparative advantages over existing routes

IMEC’s multimodal design combines sea, rail, and road segments to create a route that is 20–30% shorter and up to 40% faster than the all-sea Suez Canal alternative. According to the Atlantic Council (2025), transshipment times via the transportation corridor could be reduced by about 40 percent (to twelve-plus days) relative to maritime routes, generating approximately

5.4 billion in annual savings on Asia-Europe trade traveling the route. This reduction in distance and time translates into lower shipping costs, improved reliability, and enhanced competitiveness for Indian and European exporters. The integration of digital and green energy infrastructure—including undersea data cables and hydrogen pipelines—further distinguishes IMEC from traditional maritime routes. Security and resilience are markedly improved under the IMEC model. While both routes face geopolitical risks, IMEC’s diversified entry and exit points, as well as its ability to bypass the Suez chokepoint, make it less vulnerable to disruptions such as blockages, piracy, or regional crises. Environmental sustainability is another key differentiator, with IMEC’s shorter, electrified, and greener route promising lower emissions.

Mediterranean port competition

The selection of IMEC’s European terminus represents a strategic contest with far-reaching implications. Piraeus (Greece) leverages its established position as a China-Europe gateway and substantial Chinese investment through COSCO, which acquired a 67% stake in the Piraeus Port Authority by 2021, increasing container throughput from 1.5 million TEUs in 2009 to a port capacity of over 6.2 million TEUs (Atlantic Council, 2025; Jackson, 2024). However, its close ties to China’s BRI may complicate its positioning within the IMEC framework. Trieste (Italy) brings unique advantages through its historical free port status, granted by Habsburg Emperor Charles VI in 1719 and reconfirmed by subsequent treaties, and exceptional rail connectivity to Central and Eastern Europe, aligning with the Three Seas Initiative (World Port Source, 2024; Three Seas Initiative, 2025). Marseille (France) offers sophisticated digital and energy infrastructure, with submarine cable landings and LNG facilities. Haifa (Israel) presents the most direct geographical connection to IMEC’s Middle Eastern segment but faces the most complex geopolitical environment. The EU faces a delicate balancing act in this competition. While supporting IMEC as a strategic priority, it must navigate the competing interests of member states without undermining the corridor’s overall efficiency. The final selection will likely reflect a compromise between optimal logistics, political considerations, and broader strategic objectives.

Green energy and digital innovation

Green hydrogen pipelines and electricity interconnectors are at the heart of IMEC’s energy vision. Planned links from India and the Gulf through the Mediterranean to Europe would enable large-scale export of renewable energy, supporting the EU’s Green Deal and reducing reliance on fossil fuels. These projects would make IMEC the world’s first transcontinental green hydrogen corridor. Undersea data cables—such as the Blue-Raman system (connecting Italy, Greece, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and India) and Medusa (linking Mediterranean countries from Portugal to Egypt)—will make IMEC a digital superhighway (Google Cloud, 2021; TeleGeography, 2024). By connecting India and the Gulf directly to Europe via the Mediterranean, these cables diversify global data routes away from the vulnerable Suez/Red Sea chokepoint, enhance digital sovereignty, and boost the role of regional data hubs. Smart ports and digital logistics platforms deploying automation, IoT, and blockchain will create efficient, transparent, and green supply chains.

Risk landscape and mitigation

Geopolitical instability remains the most acute risk, especially given ongoing conflicts in the Middle East. Disruptions could stall corridor operations or deter investment. Port rivalry and fragmentation in the Mediterranean present operational and political challenges—without EU-level consensus, competition among ports could undermine corridor efficiency. Regulatory and customs barriers risk making the corridor less attractive than established routes.

Security threats range from terrorism and piracy to cyberattacks, while infrastructure bottlenecks could limit IMEC's capacity and reliability. Environmental and social risks, if neglected, can lead to project delays, legal challenges, and reputational damage. Financial risks, including cost overruns and funding gaps, threaten long-term viability. Political volatility, such as government changes or policy reversals, may disrupt project continuity. Technology gaps and digital fragmentation could undermine efficiency and security.

Key recommendations

- Prioritize diplomatic engagement and conflict resolution. In response to the geopolitical volatility identified above—including the Israel–Gaza conflict and the Iran–Israel Twelve-Day War—sustained, high-level diplomacy is essential to address regional conflicts and accelerate normalization between key corridor states such as Saudi Arabia and Israel (*short-term*).
- Foster EU-level coordination on port selection. To mitigate port fragmentation and rivalry in the Mediterranean, the EU should establish transparent, criteria-based selection processes that balance national interests with corridor-wide efficiency, avoiding the operational inefficiencies that unchecked competition among Piraeus, Trieste, Marseille, and Haifa would generate (*short-term*).
- Accelerate regulatory harmonization and digital integration. To address the regulatory and customs barriers that risk making IMEC less attractive than established routes, partner states should deploy single-window customs platforms and interoperable digital infrastructure, building on existing initiatives such as the EU–India Trade and Technology Council (*short/medium-term*).
- Mobilize sustainable finance and private sector participation. To mitigate financial risks including cost overruns and funding gaps, corridor partners should structure blended finance models and risk-sharing mechanisms with embedded ESG standards, leveraging public-private partnerships to ensure long-term viability (*medium/long-term*).
- Build resilience and future-proof infrastructure. To address security threats, infrastructure bottlenecks, and climate-related disruptions, corridor design should incorporate modular construction, robust cybersecurity protocols, and contingency routing options that preserve operational continuity during crises (*long-term*).
- Integrate green hydrogen infrastructure into corridor planning. To capitalize on IMEC's potential as the world's first transcontinental green hydrogen corridor, long-term infrastructure investment should prioritize hydrogen pipeline development and electricity interconnectors linking renewable energy production in India and the Gulf with European markets, supporting the EU's Green Deal objectives (*long-term*).

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