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# India Foundation Journal

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## Editorial



## Focus: The Indo-Mediterranean: Building A Strategic Corridor for the 21st Century



## International Relations

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## International Relations



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# Navigating Chokepoints: The Indo-Mediterranean Corridor and India's Vision 2047

Dhruv C Katoch*

India aims to reach a GDP of USD 30 trillion by 2047 as part of its push to become a developed nation. This would require sustained real GDP growth of about 7 per cent while keeping inflation between 3 and 4 per cent. The target is ambitious but achievable. However, it would require a complete overhaul of its maritime trade architecture. To that end, India has launched the "Maritime Amrit Kaal Vision 2047" (MAKV 2047), which aims to transform India into a dominant global maritime power by 2047, with an investment of about USD 1 trillion. This involves expanding port capacity, upgrading domestic shipbuilding capabilities, activating inland waterways and coastal shipping, and bypassing global geopolitical chokepoints to protect trade.[1]

For India, two projects are significant for global chokepoints. To the east is the ongoing Galathea Bay Project on Great Nicobar Island, overlooking the vital Strait of Malacca. To the west is the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), a multimodal ship-to-rail network designed to bypass volatile Red Sea bottlenecks and cut transit times to Europe by 40%. The IMEC concept was announced on 9 September 2023 at the G20 Summit in New Delhi, where leaders of India, the US, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, France, Germany, Italy, and the European Union signed a Memorandum of Understanding. The IMEC comprises an Eastern Corridor connecting India to the Gulf region and a Northern Corridor connecting the Gulf region to Europe. It will include a railway and ship-rail network, along with road transport routes.[2]

Maritime trade accounts for nearly 95 per cent of India's trade by volume and 70 per cent by value. This leaves India vulnerable to disruptions at chokepoints. At present, the Mediterranean shipping route via the Suez Canal and the Red Sea connects India directly to European, North African, and North American markets. About 35% of India's maritime traffic passes through this corridor, supporting Indian exports of agricultural goods, engineering equipment, textiles, and chemicals.[3] Imports primarily consist of industrial machinery, advanced electronics, and components sourced from European trading hubs. This trade route has been heavily affected by turbulence around the Red Sea and Bab el-Mandeb, forcing vessels to reroute around the Cape. As a consequence, transit times and costs have increased.[4]

India meets most of its energy needs from the Gulf, with ships transiting the Strait of Hormuz carrying crude oil, liquefied natural gas (LNG), LPG, and chemical fertilisers to Indian ports. This route accounts for a third of India's total ship-borne trade. Earlier, it accounted for over 55 per cent of India's crude imports, but the ongoing war between the US and Iran has forced India to diversify its energy basket, reducing its dependence on this route to about 30 per cent of its energy needs.

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About 30-35 per cent of India's trade with Southeast Asia, East Asia and the Americas passes through the Strait of Malacca. The bulk is non-oil trade. Imports include palm oil, finished electronic products, semiconductors, and manufactured goods from China, Japan, South Korea, and ASEAN states. Exports largely comprise iron ore, marine products, and organic chemicals. India's protective positioning in Galathea Bay, with the ongoing construction of a deep-sea port and a transhipment hub, makes securing this trade route through its eastern gateway a key focus. For Western trade routes, the connection between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea is highly significant. This is India's strategic geography—extending from the Indian Ocean into the Mediterranean via the Gulf, the Red Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean. Secure Gulf and Red Sea routes are vital for India's commerce; the alternative is the longer, costlier Cape route. This underscores IMEC's importance in India's trade calculus, but its success would also depend on a peaceful West Asia.

While the Indo-Mediterranean is not a formal geographical region or institutional grouping, it can be conceptualised as a strategic link connecting the Western Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean via the Arabian Sea, Gulf, Red Sea, Suez Canal and Eastern Mediterranean, highlighting the interconnectedness of these growing strategic spaces. For India, it is the gateway to Europe, North Africa and the Atlantic. India can no longer confine its strategic horizon to the Arabian Sea in the West, ending at Africa's eastern shores. The Western Arc must now extend to the Mediterranean and Italy, providing a gateway to Western Europe and the Atlantic. Any instability anywhere along this chain will adversely affect India's trade, energy security and connectivity. The key driver is connectivity. The India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), through ports, railways, energy corridors, digital connectivity and supply chains, can integrate India more closely with Europe.

The security challenges, however, are immense. The ongoing US-Iran war has exposed the Strait of Hormuz's fragility, while the Suez Canal-Red Sea-Bab el Mandeb linkage is increasingly vulnerable, highlighting how easily hostile actions can disrupt global commerce. India, along with other naval powers, would need to cooperate to keep these sea links open.

The Indo-Mediterranean framework also highlights growing shared interests in energy, trade, technology, infrastructure, and maritime security among India, West Asia, and Europe. This is why Israel, Egypt, Greece, Italy, France, and the UAE can become important nodes in this wider network. It offers India an opportunity to build partnerships and strengthen its resilience during crises without establishing a formal alliance. Such a link would help counter China's expanding presence in the region and provide alternatives to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative.

India's peninsular position on the Indian Ocean gives it a geographical advantage, making it a natural connectivity hub linking the Pacific, the Indian Ocean, and the Mediterranean Sea. This would benefit South Asia, West Asia, and North Africa. India's strong diplomatic standing with Israel, the Gulf, Egypt, and the US and European powers could provide the diplomatic heft needed for such a corridor to come about. All this, of course, is predicated on peace and stability in West Asia. Importantly, we must not think of the Mediterranean as essentially Europe's southern sea. As India's strategic geography expands westward, the Indo-Mediterranean is a useful concept that can propel Bharat towards its 'viksit' status.

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FOCUS

# The Indo-Mediterranean: Mapping the Geopolitics of the India-Italy Strategic Partnership

David Scott*

## Introduction

On 20 May 2026, in a joint op-ed titled A Strategic Partnership for the Indo-Mediterranean, published across various Italian and Indian media outlets, the Indian and Italian leaders, Narendra Modi and Giorgia Meloni, welcomed "the emergence of the Indo-Mediterranean."[1] This raises two issues. Firstly, the paradigm shifts that have brought India and Italy to a common adoption of an Indo-Mediterranean strategic framework. Secondly, the nature of their Indo-Mediterranean partnership.

In 2021, Vas Shenoy spoke of "the seeds… for the creation and development of a new, expanded Indo-Mediterranean" in the context of Modi's discussions with Mario Draghi, the Italian Prime Minister, during which the two leaders announced a Strategic Partnership on Energy Transition and a Statement of Intent on Textiles Cooperation.[2] These "seeds" have since flowered with the advent of the Meloni administration in late 2022, when Italian and Indian strategic convergence over the Indo-Mediterranean directly informs their burgeoning defence and economic partnership. It also reflects their strong mutual support for economic and digital corridors across the Indo-Mediterranean.

## Paradigm Shifts

Strategic paradigms often overlap and shift. The 1980s arrival of the "Asia-Pacific" was a *Pacific Rim* initiative launched by Australia, Japan and the US, which led to the creation of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) in 1989. China joined in 1991, but India was excluded. The 2010s arrival of the "Indo-Pacific" marked a westward shift, bringing the Indian Ocean into the geographical frame and India into the political one. As a term, the "Indo-Mediterranean" has entered strategic discourse in recent years, as noted in 2021 by the previously cited Vas Shenoy.

Geographically, the Indo-Mediterranean represents a further westward shift from the Indo-Pacific. Literally, the Indo-Mediterranean could be understood as spanning the whole Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean from Singapore to Gibraltar. In practice, it has been seen as running from the Eastern Mediterranean to the Arabian Sea, from Italy to the west coast of India, as "strategic space in the making."[3] As Ambassador Gurjit Singh put it, India and Italy are "partners in peninsularity".[4] Their peninsular locations, Italy's extending into the Mediterranean and India's into the Indian Ocean, enable their mutual projection and thereby their mutual encounter. Geopolitically, their strategic neighbourhoods have expanded and now overlap across the Indo-Mediterranean. India has moved

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westwards across the Red Sea and the Mediterranean towards Italy, while Italy has moved eastwards across the Red Sea and the Arabian Sea towards India. Italy's Ambassador to India, Antonio Bartoli, has commented that "there is a common space that we could call Indo-Mediterranean, that is the link between two vital basins for our respective nations".[5]

## India: Extending Westwards beyond the Arabian Sea

India's adoption of the term Indo-Mediterranean reflects its strategic push westwards. During the 1990s, India's existing "immediate neighbourhood" focus within South Asia was overlaid with an "extended neighbourhood" outreach, initially eastwards towards South-East Asia.[6]

The Look West policy announced in 2003 was economics-oriented towards the Gulf. Modi's Act West reformulation has embraced security cooperation in the Gulf and a wider application elsewhere in the Middle East.[7] This Middle East outreach took India to the shores of the Mediterranean, where close defence ties with Israel, established in the 2000s, have accelerated under Modi, the first Indian Prime Minister to visit Israel in 2017. In 2023, India's Adani Group acquired a 70% stake in Israel's Haifa port, a designated Mediterranean anchor for IMEC, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor. Modi's visit in November 2025 brought an MoU on Defence Cooperation.

India's naval projection has been "westward-bound" this century.[8] Indian naval thinking has consequently shifted. The 2015 Indian Maritime Security Strategy (IMSS) expanded India's area of "primary interest" (identified as the Indian Ocean in the 2007 IMSS) to include the Red Sea (a "secondary" interest in the 2007 IMSS), while the Mediterranean (absent from the 2007 IMSS) was added as an area of "secondary" strategic interest.[9] This was accompanied by a maritime posture (like Italy's) to safeguard choke points and strategic conduits in the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, an extended naval theatre of operations first seen with anti-piracy deployments commencing in 2008 and strengthened in 2023, in the wake of Houthi disruption, with Operation Sankalp "safeguarding India's maritime interests."[10]

India has extended its "extended neighbourhood" into the Mediterranean. India's Minister for External Affairs, Subrahmanyam Jaishankar, emphasised in 2022, "I want to drive home the point that where the Mediterranean is concerned, it is a region of growing interest to us…. in the last few years…. there has been very visible intensification of those ties."[11] Geoeconomics is also on display. At the India Mediterranean Business Conclave, Jaishankar argued that "Mediterranean ports and maritime routes have long facilitated East-West trade", that "our task is to make history work positively in the contemporary era", and that, consequently, "we want to deepen our engagement with the Mediterranean region."[12] Moving across the Eastern Mediterranean, India has developed close security ties with Cyprus and Greece, which were consolidated during Modi's 2025 visits, with an Indo-Mediterranean rationale, tacitly, to counter close defence ties between Turkey and Pakistan. Last, but certainly not least, India has developed close ties with Italy following Meloni's visit to India in 2023.

## Italy: Extending Eastwards Beyond the Mediterranean

The Mediterranean is Italy's starting point and immediate neighbourhood, giving rise to the old Roman view of the Mediterranean as *Mare Nostrum,* "Our Sea." The Roman Empire not only controlled the Mediterranean but also held power in the upper Red Sea, at times pushing down to Yemen and the gates of the Indian Ocean. From that Red Sea position, a flourishing trade with India was established. The colonial period saw Italian colonies spread across the Eastern Mediterranean (Albania, Libya, Dodecanese), the Red Sea (Eritrea), and the Indian Ocean (Somalia). In the 1990s, the concept of a "Wider/Extended Mediterranean" (*Mediterraneo allargato*) arose in Italian naval circles, accompanied by a maritime posture (like India's) to safeguard choke points and strategic conduits: in the Persian Gulf in the early 1990s, since 2008 in the Gulf of Aden with the *Atalanta* operation, and since 2024 in the Red Sea with the *Aspides.*

Meloni extended the *Meditterraneo allargato* concept in her Press Statement with Modi in March 2023, "when we talk about the wider Mediterranean, we must consider that it extends all the way here", i.e. over the Arabian Sea to India.[13] India's ambassador, Vani Rao, reciprocated, "We welcome Italy's wider Mediterranean strategy… in which India is a key player."[14] Meloni's Italy has taken an active role beyond the Mediterranean, with high-level visits and links established with Eritrea, Saudi Arabia, Djibouti and the Gulf countries, as shown when Meloni attended the Gulf Cooperation Council Summit in 2026 as a privileged invitee. Most significantly, Italy has deepened its cooperation with India, in an accelerating and explicit Indo-Mediterranean partnership.

## An Indo-Mediterranean Partnership.

In this "Indo-Mediterranean era", Italy's and India's policies have shifted from parallel "resonance" to strategic "convergence".[15] Jaishankar's strategic logic is simple: "it makes eminent sense to connect what Italy is doing in the Mediterranean with what India is doing in the Arabian Sea for mutual benefit."[16] As Italy increasingly operates in the Indian Ocean, it cannot ignore India; and as India increasingly operates in the Mediterranean, it cannot ignore Italy. Italy plays a "growing role in India's maritime and defence calculus", and vice versa.[17]

Under Modi and Meloni's leadership, India-Italy cooperation has surged across trade, defence and emerging technologies, amid mutual talk of their "Indo-Mediterranean strategic axis."[18] A Strategic Partnership was announced during Meloni's visit to India in 2023. The following year, the joint Italy-India Strategic Action Plan 2025-2029 opened with Indian and Italian affirmations of "awareness of the unparalleled potential" of their Strategic Partnership.[19] This Strategic Partnership was formally elevated to a Special Strategic Partnership, marking a "new era" announced during Modi's 2026 visit to Italy.[20] Modi captured the personal warmth between the two leaders by presenting Meloni with a bag of 'Melody' toffees from the Indian firm Parle upon his arrival in Rome;

Meloni video-posted it on X under the nickname "Team Melodi", making it an instant viral meme! Their evident camaraderie underpinned their equally strategic deals.[21]

Jaishankar emphasises maritime strategic logic; "India, as part of its Indo-Mediterranean… our maritime interests… bring the two countries closer."[22] Maritime cooperation has been evident since 2023, with India's Navy exercising with the Italian Navy in the Mediterranean and Italy's Navy exercising with India's Navy in the Arabian Sea. The joint carrier-to-carrier exercises between India's INS Vikramaditya and Italy's ITS Cavour in October 2024, off the west coast of India, were a particularly potent and substantive moment of bilateral maritime cooperation and seapower projection. Both navies participated in the Bright Star Exercise 2025, held off Alexandria, involving other Indo-Mediterranean actors. In 2026, both countries agreed to establish a Maritime Security Dialogue focused on their shared Indo-Mediterranean space.

Defence cooperation has deepened, reflecting their Defence Cooperation Agreement signed in 2023. This represents a determined effort to move beyond the AugustaWestland helicopter issue, the order cancelled by India in 2014 following a bribery scandal involving the Italian company Augusta. Fincantieri secured contracts in December 2025 to fit heavyweight torpedoes to India's Scorpene submarines, which "fits into a broader Indo-Mediterranean security strategy."[23] Leonardo (which had taken over Agusta) and Adani agreed in February 2026 to collaborate on the production, maintenance and phased indigenisation of advanced AW169M and AW109 TrekkerM helicopters for the Indian military. In April 2026, the Indian and Italian Defence Ministers signed the *Military Cooperation Plan 2026-2027*.[24] A Defence Industrial Roadmap was announced during Modi's visit to Rome in May 2026, along with a Joint Declaration of Intent on Strengthening the Bilateral Defence Industrial Cooperation.

Italian and Indian politicians emphasise similar themes. Italy's President, Sergio Mattarella, in his official greetings to his Indian counterpart, President Droupadi Murmu, on India's Republic Day in January 2026, stressed their "converging interests, beginning with the protection of a rules-based international order, the peaceful pursuit of security and stability along the Indo-Mediterranean arc."[25] In a similar vein, Jaishankar argued in May 2025, at the National Day Reception for Italy, that "in and across the Indo-Mediterranean, as peninsular nations, India and Italy share maritime interests and a commitment to ensuring freedom of navigation and shipping."[26]

Likewise, Italy's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Antonio Tajani, argued, "We share the same concerns as natural maritime powers. In the whole Indo-Mediterranean region, we both promote the principles of freedom of navigation."[27] At the India Maritime Week in November 2025, Italy's Deputy Minister of Infrastructure, Edoardo Rixi, argued that "India and Italy share a common vision of the sea…. we are natural partners in the broader Indo-Mediterranean region…. we shape new geopolitics of the seas."[28] Their geopolitics of the sea is a Mahanian focus on seapower and chokepoint security across the Indo-Mediterranean. Geo-economics is also on the cards. Modi explained in his Press Statement in May 2026, in Rome, "as maritime powers, close cooperation between India and Italy in the field of connectivity is only natural;" to be applied across the Indo-Mediterranean through economic and digital corridors.[29]

Indian and Italian diplomats have embraced Indo-Mediterranean terms of reference for their strategic partnership. Bartoli, Italy's Ambassador to India since July 2024, argued that "we are both peninsulas projected into the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. These seas are increasingly interconnected and part of a single Indo-Mediterranean space."[30] Vani Rao, India's Ambassador to Italy since April 2024, likewise considered that "the Indo-Mediterranean… represent one vast maritime and geographical space in which we share common strategic interests" with Italy.[31] Bartoli argued that, on the geopolitical front, "Italy and India share common interests, but also joint challenges in the Indo-Mediterranean Sea [which] require our joint efforts to ensure a free, open, and prosperous Indo-Mediterranean" (FOPIM?).[32] This is a deliberate echo of the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) formulation used further east, with a common challenge to China present in both the FOIP Indo-Pacific and FOPIM Indo-Mediterranean formulations.[33]

Both Bartoli and Rao attended the Track 1.5 Indo-Mediterranean Initiative, announced at the India Forum 2024 in Rome, which was co-chaired by Vas Shenoy, appointed as the Indian Chamber of Commerce Representative in Italy in November 2023, and Senator Giulio Terzi di Sant'Agata, President of the India-Italy Parliamentary Friendship Group.[34] Shenoy and Sant'Agata agreed that the India-Italy partnership serves as "champions for the Indo-Mediterranean."[35] Both Bartoli and Rao attended the workshop Indo-Mediterranean: Italy and India, a Special Relationship, held in November 2024 by Rome's Med-Or Foundation and New Delhi's Strategic and Defense Research, "with a particular focus on maritime security and the Italian and Indian naval cooperation, the IMEC corridor project."[36]

## Economic Corridors

The India-Italy partnership makes geo-economic sense, given their self-perceived role as the two main pillars or anchors of the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), which runs from Mumbai to Trieste. This underpinned their Memorandum of Understanding on cooperation in ports, logistics and infrastructure, signed during Modi's visit to Italy in May 2026.

History from the past informs the present, as Tajani notes that "Italy and India have been for ages two natural terminals in the common Indo-Mediterranean area, tied by an intense exchange of trade."[37] More specifically, the Ambassador to India, Antonio Bartoli, noted that "Rome and India were already trading two thousand years ago… the future Indo-Mediterranean corridor IMEC, for goods and data, is a modern re-edition of an ancient route."[38] As Italy's Special Envoy for IMEC, Antonio Talò explained, IMEC was "a vision directly connected to the concept of the Indo-Mediterranean: a geopolitical reading based on seas and connections" linking India and the Mediterranean.[39]

Deliberately invoking the earlier Roman-period trade system, Italy labels IMEC la via del cotone, "The Cotton Road/Route." As Jaishankar noted in November 2023, "what, Senator, you call the Cotton Road, which in many ways is like a revival return of history…. we are very happy to see Italy there."[40] This Cotton Road invocation also ties into the Cotton Route 3-year project, which focuses on older links and was funded in 2015 by India's Ministry of External Affairs. This was undertaken as a "counter" to China's Maritime Silk Road (MSR) initiative announced in 2013, which also invoked historical flows along the old Silk Route from China to the Roman Empire.[41] New Delhi and Rome's immediate and strong support for IMEC has been dubbed a "Cotton Route alliance between Italy and India to counterbalance China."[42]

IMEC was launched in September 2023 at the G-20 summit in New Delhi. Two corridors were proposed. The first was a relatively simple *eastern* maritime corridor from Mumbai to the Gulf (UAE). The second was a more complex *northern* corridor through the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, to the Israeli port of Haifa, from which maritime routes to Italy (Taranto and Trieste) and France (Marseilles) extend. To serve the overland route from the Gulf to the Mediterranean, a railway transit network was proposed to supplement established road routes.

Both Italy and India are strong supporters of IMEC.[43] Modi explained that IMEC "is going to become the basis of world trade for hundreds of years to come, and history will always remember that this corridor was initiated on Indian soil."[44] Similarly, at the 2024 Rome Mediterranean Dialogue, Meloni noted, "Italy played a key role in launching this initiative within the G-20 and it intends to remain at the forefront."[45] IMEC serves as a counterweight to China's Maritime Silk Road (MSR), which also crosses the Indian Ocean into the Mediterranean. India has boycotted the MSR, while Meloni's government quickly withdrew from it on taking power in 2022.

## Digital Corridors

Digital infrastructure is another area for Italy-India cooperation, exemplified by the Europe-Africa-India Digital Corridor linking Italy (Genoa) to India (Mumbai). Tajani noted that "connectivity is becoming an increasingly strategic dimension of our cooperation. A significant example is the Blue & Raman submarine cable project."[46] Italy's telecommunications giant Sparkle is installing undersea cables across the Mediterranean to Haifa as part of the BlueMed wing, with a Raman wing envisaged extending down the Red Sea from Aqaba and across the Arabian Sea to Mumbai, where Sparkle signed a "strategic" partnership agreement with the Indian company Airtel in September 2024.[47] Reflecting its importance to Italian digital strategy, the Meloni government took a controlling 70% share in Sparkle in April 2026. The Blue-Raman scheme is counterpoised by China's Pakistan and East Africa Connecting Europe (PEACE) initiative; planned from Gwadar in Pakistan across to Djibouti, up the Red Sea to Egypt and then the Mediterranean. This is part of China's Digital Silk Route (DSR) initiative, which concerns both India and Italy.

## Conclusion: Looking Forward

The India-Italy strategic partnership looks set to deepen further across the Indo-Mediterranean. With India and Italy less sure of US support under

Donald Trump, and with their common concerns over China remaining evident, the strategic logic for the India-Italy partnership, mutual support, is all the more relevant. India may be the bigger partner, but both benefit.

Defence technology transfers should increase under the *Defence Industry Roadmap* agreed in 2026. Fincantieri's Landing Platform Dock expertise offers another area for collaboration with India, enabling greater Indian maritime reach across the Indian Ocean. Similarly, military exercises should increase, given India and Italy's growing deployments into each other's strategic backyards. Their 2023 Defence Cooperation Agreement awaits further, but eminently achievable, development into a Logistics Support Agreement, similar to those that India and Italy both enjoy with Japan.

Trade is likely to increase under the EU-India Free Trade Agreement, signed in January 2026, with the Modi-Meloni summit in May 2026 setting a bilateral trade target rising from €14 billion in 2025 to €20 billion by 2029. With regard to IMEC and the Digital Corridor, the Mediterranean (Italy's sphere) and Arabian Sea (India's sphere) wings of both projects are well established. However, first the Gaza conflict in late 2023 and then the Gulf War disruption of the Strait of Hormuz during 2026 have complicated the construction of IMEC's Land Rail Corridor running across the Arabian Peninsula to exit at Haifa, as well as the Digital Corridor's Aqaba-Haifa link. This is compounded by Houthi disruption of the Red Sea, first in sympathy with Hamas/Gaza in 2023 and then in sympathy with Iran in 2026. Middle East volatility makes completion of these linking landbridges all the more important, but all the more hostage to fortune outside Italy and India's control.

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FOCUS

# Beyond IMEC: The Indo-Mediterranean as an Emerging Geopolitical Macro-Space

Tiberio Graziani*

## Abstract

The growing attention to the Indo-Mediterranean reflects more than the emergence of a new economic corridor linking the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. Rather, it signals a broader transformation in the spatial organisation of international politics. This article argues that the Indo-Mediterranean should be understood as an emerging geopolitical macro-space, shaped by the ongoing transition from a predominantly Atlantic-centred international system to an increasingly polycentric global order.

Moving beyond approaches that interpret the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) primarily as an infrastructure or connectivity initiative, the article develops a broader geopolitical framework in which maritime routes, logistics, digital networks, energy infrastructure, and political partnerships become instruments through which new configurations of power are territorialised.

The analysis examines how India, the Gulf region, the Eastern Mediterranean, Southern Europe, and East Africa are increasingly forming an interconnected macro-space characterised by multiple centres of political, economic, technological, and maritime power. By proposing the Indo-Mediterranean as a geopolitical macro-space, the study contributes to the theoretical debate on the relationship between power, space, and the transformation of the international order.

**Keywords:** Indo-Mediterranean, Geopolitical Macro-Space, Polycentric Order, Connectivity, IMEC, Geopolitics

## Introduction

The emergence of the Indo-Mediterranean as a strategic concept reflects a profound transformation in the contemporary international system. Rather than a simple expansion of an existing geographical framework or the addition of a new economic corridor, the Indo-Mediterranean embodies a broader reconfiguration of political, economic, technological, and maritime interactions, driven by the ongoing redistribution of global power.

The growing prominence of the Indo-Mediterranean should be understood within the broader context of the transition from a predominantly Atlantic-centred international system towards an increasingly polycentric order. This transition is reshaping the spatial organisation of

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global politics, generating new patterns of connectivity that integrate maritime routes, logistics, digital infrastructure, energy networks, production chains, and strategic partnerships into broader geopolitical configurations.

From this perspective, the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) is neither the origin nor the sole expression of the Indo-Mediterranean. Rather, it is one of the most visible manifestations of a deeper historical process through which a new geopolitical macro-space is taking shape. Building on this premise, this article proposes interpreting the Indo-Mediterranean as an emerging geopolitical macro-space. It argues that understanding this evolving configuration requires moving beyond conventional regional approaches and analysing the reciprocal relationship between power, connectivity, and the production of geopolitical space within the emerging polycentric international order.

## The Transformation of International Order and the Emergence of New Geopolitical Macro-Spaces

The emergence of the Indo-Mediterranean cannot be understood as an isolated regional development or as the outcome of a single infrastructure initiative. Rather, it reflects a broader transformation of the international system, in which the redistribution of power is progressively reshaping the spatial organisation of global politics and the very architecture of international order. As international orders evolve, so too do the geopolitical configurations through which power is projected, connectivity is organised, and strategic interaction is structured.

Historical experience shows that geopolitical spaces are neither permanent nor solely determined by physical geography. Their strategic relevance varies with the prevailing configuration of political authority, economic interdependence, technological development, and military capabilities. The Mediterranean, for example, was the principal centre of political and commercial interaction in classical antiquity; the Atlantic acquired global centrality with the rise of European maritime expansion and the consolidation of the modern international system; similarly, the Indo-Pacific has emerged over the past two decades as the predominant strategic framework for understanding the redistribution of economic dynamism and maritime power towards Asia.

These examples suggest that geopolitical spaces are best understood as historically contingent political constructions, an understanding consistent with broader debates that have challenged purely territorial conceptions of international politics and emphasised the spatial dimension of political authority. International orders do not merely operate within geographical space; they actively produce their own strategic spatiality. Each historical configuration of international order generates a corresponding spatial organisation through which political authority, economic interaction, technological innovation, and strategic connectivity become territorially embedded. In this sense, geopolitical macro-spaces are not the passive settings of international politics but one of its principal historical products.

The current transition towards an increasingly polycentric international order is generating precisely such a transformation. The relative diffusion of economic capabilities, technological innovation, demographic dynamism, and political influence beyond the traditional Atlantic core has produced multiple centres of strategic initiative. Within this evolving context, connectivity assumes significance that extends well beyond the construction of physical infrastructure. Maritime routes, ports, logistics platforms, digital networks, energy corridors, submarine cables, financial mechanisms, and technological standards become essential instruments through which political actors organise space and project influence. Connectivity therefore constitutes one of the principal mechanisms through which contemporary geopolitical macro-spaces are progressively formed.

The Indo-Mediterranean should be understood within this broader analytical framework. Its emergence does not stem solely from the implementation of the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor or from the growing importance of maritime trade between South Asia and Europe. Rather, it reflects the progressive integration of multiple strategic subsystems—including the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Peninsula, the Gulf, the Red Sea, the Eastern Mediterranean, and Southern Europe—into an increasingly coherent geopolitical configuration.

This perspective builds on the classical geopolitical insight that political power and geographical space are inextricably linked. However, whereas traditional geopolitical theories primarily focused on strategic regions, continental balances, and the distribution of power among states, the contemporary transformation of the international order calls for analytical categories capable of explaining the emergence of new macro-spatial configurations shaped by connectivity, technological infrastructure, transregional interactions, and multiple centres of political authority. The notion of macro-space inevitably recalls Carl Schmitt's concept of the *Großraum*; unlike Schmitt's construction, which presupposed a hegemonic power ordering the space around it, the macro-space discussed here is defined precisely by the absence of a single ordering centre.[1]

The concept of the geopolitical macro-space proposed in this article is intended as a contribution to this renewed theoretical agenda, extending contemporary geopolitical reflection on the organisation of strategic spatiality[2] by providing an analytical framework for understanding how international orders reorganise space amid polycentric transformation.

## From Connectivity to Geopolitical Macro-Space: The Making of the Indo-Mediterranean

The growing relevance of the Indo-Mediterranean cannot be explained solely by the proliferation of infrastructure projects or the expansion of commercial exchanges between South Asia, the Gulf, and Europe. Rather, it reflects the progressive convergence of multiple geopolitical dynamics that are reshaping the strategic architecture of a vast transregional area stretching from the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea.

Connectivity is a principal manifestation of this transformation, but it should not be confused with its underlying cause. Ports, maritime corridors, railways, energy pipelines, digital infrastructure, and logistics networks are not merely instruments that facilitate trade; they also help reorganise political influence, strategic interdependence, and regional hierarchies. In other words, infrastructure does not simply connect existing geopolitical spaces; it actively participates in constructing new ones.

At this point, a conceptual distinction is necessary. Connectivity refers to the material and immaterial networks that facilitate the circulation of goods, capital, information, energy, technologies, and people. In recent years, connectivity has become a central analytical concept for understanding the reorganisation of global interactions. By contrast, geopolitical integration denotes the political process by which such networks become embedded in stable patterns of strategic interaction, institutional cooperation, and long-term political alignment. Connectivity creates networks; geopolitical integration creates geopolitical macro-spaces. Infrastructure alone does not generate geopolitical space. A geopolitical macro-space emerges only when connectivity is transformed into a durable framework of political, economic, technological, and strategic relationships.

This distinction is analytically significant. Conventional approaches often treat connectivity as an essentially economic phenomenon, emphasising efficiency, trade facilitation, and market integration. While these dimensions remain important, they only partially explain the strategic significance of contemporary transregional corridors. The Indo-Mediterranean exemplifies this multidimensional process. Its emergence stems from growing interaction among several strategic subsystems that have historically been studied separately: the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Peninsula, the Gulf, the Red Sea, the Eastern Mediterranean, and Southern Europe. Increasing maritime exchanges, energy interdependence, digital connectivity, financial cooperation, technological partnerships, and security dialogues have progressively eroded the analytical boundaries separating these regions, giving rise to a more integrated strategic environment.

Within this framework, the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), formally launched via a Memorandum of Understanding signed on the margins of the G20 New Delhi Summit in September 2023, should be understood as an expression of a broader geopolitical transformation rather than its primary cause. The corridor institutionalises and accelerates trends already reshaping the region, including India's westward strategic projection, the Gulf monarchies' growing geopolitical role, the renewed strategic importance of the Eastern Mediterranean, and European actors' search for diversified economic and logistical partnerships.

The Indo-Mediterranean thus constitutes an emerging geopolitical macro-space, the coherence of which stems from the interplay of maritime geography, infrastructure development, political cooperation, technological integration, and the evolving distribution of power across Eurasia and its surrounding maritime domains.

## The Indo-Mediterranean as a Polycentric Geopolitical Configuration

The emergence of the Indo-Mediterranean illustrates one of the most significant spatial consequences of the ongoing transformation of the international order. Unlike traditional geopolitical regions, whose coherence often rested on geographical proximity or institutional integration, the Indo-Mediterranean is being shaped by the interaction of multiple centres of power, whose relationships are increasingly defined by strategic complementarity rather than hierarchical dependence.

The distinction between multipolarity and polycentrism is particularly relevant in this context. Multipolarity primarily concerns the distribution of power among sovereign states and therefore remains conceptually rooted in the Westphalian understanding of international politics. It describes a system of several major state powers whose interactions determine the overall balance of power.

Polycentrism, by contrast, offers a broader analytical framework. While states remain the principal actors, the international order is increasingly shaped by the interaction of multiple centres of political, economic, technological, financial, normative, and infrastructural power across different scales. These centres include not only states but also regional organisations, transnational infrastructure networks, financial hubs, technological ecosystems, maritime corridors, and other strategic actors capable of influencing the organisation of international space.[3]

Accordingly, multipolarity concerns the distribution of capabilities, whereas polycentrism concerns the organisation of the international order and the production of geopolitical space. This evolving configuration spans a vast maritime and continental continuum linking the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Peninsula, the Gulf, the Red Sea, the Eastern Mediterranean, and Southern Europe. Its coherence derives not from a single political authority or security architecture, but from the growing convergence of economic interests, technological cooperation, infrastructure development, maritime security, and diplomatic engagement among its principal actors.

Within this macro-space, India occupies an increasingly prominent position. Its sustained economic growth, demographic weight, technological capabilities, expanding naval presence, and proactive diplomatic initiatives have progressively transformed the country into one of the principal centres of the emerging polycentric order. India's strategic engagement with the Gulf monarchies, partnerships with Mediterranean countries, and growing participation in transregional connectivity projects demonstrate an increasingly westward geopolitical orientation that complements its established role in the Indo-Pacific.

The Gulf region has undergone a profound strategic transformation. No longer viewed primarily as an energy-exporting periphery, the Gulf monarchies have become active geopolitical actors, investing in logistics, finance, advanced technologies, renewable energy, artificial intelligence, and maritime infrastructure. Their sovereign wealth funds, global investment strategies, and expanding diplomatic networks have significantly enhanced their capacity to shape the geopolitical evolution of the wider Indo-Mediterranean.

The Eastern Mediterranean and Southern Europe occupy a strategic position within this evolving configuration. Rather than marking the western terminus of Asian connectivity, they increasingly serve as active interfaces linking European markets, North African economies, West Asian energy systems, and maritime routes connecting the Mediterranean with the Indian Ocean. The growing Indian presence in Mediterranean port infrastructure—exemplified by Adani Ports' acquisition of a controlling stake in the port of Haifa in early 2023—illustrates this evolving role. Their significance therefore derives not merely from geography but from their capacity to facilitate multidirectional political, economic, and technological exchanges.

East Africa also acquires renewed geopolitical importance within this framework. Ports, maritime infrastructure, digital connectivity, and expanding commercial relations increasingly integrate the eastern coast of Africa into Indo-Mediterranean dynamics. As maritime trade and investment intensify, East Africa is increasingly becoming an indispensable component of this broader macro-spatial configuration. These dynamics are already evident: Gulf logistics operators have invested extensively in ports along the Horn of Africa and the East African seaboard; India has framed its engagement with the western Indian Ocean through its SAGAR and, more recently, MAHASAGAR maritime visions; and the India–Italy Joint Declaration of May 2026 explicitly envisages trilateral development projects in Africa, combining India's digital public infrastructure with Italy's Mattei Plan.[4] Far from being on the periphery of the emerging configuration, East Africa is one of the arenas where the polycentric character of the Indo-Mediterranean will be tested.

The consolidation of this macro-space is, however, contingent rather than inevitable. The attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea since late 2023, which forced a substantial share of Europe–Asia trade to reroute around the Cape of Good Hope, have exposed the vulnerability of the maritime backbone underpinning Indo-Mediterranean connectivity. The stalling of normalisation processes in West Asia following the war in Gaza has likewise slowed the political alignments that IMEC presupposes. Competing connectivity frameworks—most notably China's Belt and Road Initiative and the European Union's Global Gateway—alongside persistent intra-regional rivalries further complicate the emergence of a coherent strategic configuration.[5]

External great powers may equally shape its consolidation: the United States remains a central security actor in the Gulf and may seek to embed the new connectivity schemes within existing US-centred security architectures, while Russia promotes the International North–South Transport Corridor as an alternative Eurasian axis and maintains close relations with the Gulf monarchies, notably through energy coordination. These constraints do not invalidate the macro-spatial dynamics analysed here, but they underscore that geopolitical macro-spaces are political constructions whose consolidation depends on sustained agency, not on geographical destiny.

The Indo-Mediterranean should therefore not be interpreted as a geopolitical space dominated by a single hegemonic actor. Its defining characteristic is the coexistence of multiple centres of decision-making, each with distinct political priorities, economic capabilities, and strategic interests. Cooperation and competition coexist within a framework of selective interdependence that reflects the broader logic of an increasingly polycentric international order.

This emerging macro-space differs from both traditional regional systems and classical geopolitical spheres of influence. It is neither an alliance nor a homogeneous geopolitical bloc. Rather, it constitutes a flexible strategic configuration in which multiple actors simultaneously contribute to the production of geopolitical space while preserving significant degrees of political autonomy. These characteristics make the Indo-Mediterranean one of the clearest contemporary manifestations of the transition towards a polycentric world order.

## Italy as a Mediterranean Strategic Interface

The emergence of the Indo-Mediterranean macro-space also invites a reconsideration of the geopolitical role of Southern Europe, particularly Italy. Traditional interpretations have often portrayed Italy as Europe's southern frontier or as a logistical gateway between the Mediterranean and continental markets. Such perspectives, however, underestimate the broader strategic implications of the ongoing reconfiguration of the international order. Within an emerging polycentric system, Italy's geopolitical significance derives less from its position within Europe than from its location at the intersection of multiple strategic spaces. Situated at the centre of the Mediterranean, Italy occupies a privileged position, linking the European continent with North Africa, the Balkans, the Eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East, and, via the Suez Canal and the Red Sea, the wider Indo-Mediterranean maritime system.

In this context, the notion of a strategic interface proves analytically useful. A strategic interface is more than a geographical crossroads or a logistical gateway: it designates a geopolitical space where different macro-spatial configurations intersect and interact, generating durable political, economic, technological, and security relationships. Strategic interfaces facilitate the articulation of geopolitical macro-spaces without dissolving their respective centres of decision-making. They are therefore essential to a polycentric international order, enabling differentiated forms of cooperation while preserving the autonomy of the actors involved.

This centrality is not merely geographical. It depends on the country's capacity to participate actively in the political, economic, technological, and infrastructural networks that increasingly structure the Indo-Mediterranean macro-space. Ports, logistics platforms, digital infrastructure, energy interconnections, industrial cooperation, scientific partnerships, and maritime security all contribute to redefining Italy's strategic role within this evolving geopolitical configuration. Relations between Italy and India take on particular significance in this context. Italy is today India's fourth-largest trading partner within the European Union, with bilateral trade of around €14 billion in 2025.[6]

Over the past decade, bilateral cooperation has broadened beyond traditional commercial exchanges to encompass defence, maritime security, advanced manufacturing, space technologies, digital innovation, renewable energy, and higher education. The elevation of bilateral relations to a Strategic Partnership in 2023 and the adoption of the India–Italy Joint Strategic Action Plan 2025–2029 have provided this convergence with an explicit institutional framework.[7]

In May 2026, the relationship was elevated to a Special Strategic Partnership: the Joint Declaration adopted in Rome sets a bilateral trade target of €20 billion by 2029, reaffirms both governments' commitment to IMEC—encouraging its first ministerial meeting to take concrete steps to advance the initiative in 2026—and envisages interconnected port networks through a dedicated maritime transport agreement. Significantly, the joint article signed by the two Prime Ministers for the occasion explicitly referred to the emergence of the Indo-Mediterranean as an interconnected space linking the Indian Ocean to Europe.[8] These developments reflect broader structural changes in the international system, as medium and major powers increasingly diversify their strategic partnerships beyond traditional alliance frameworks.

The Indo-Mediterranean consequently offers Italy the opportunity to develop a more autonomous and multidimensional geopolitical projection. Rather than acting exclusively within an Atlantic or European framework, Italy may increasingly contribute to consolidating a wider strategic space linking Europe with the Indian Ocean through mutually beneficial partnerships based on economic complementarity, technological cooperation, maritime security, and political dialogue.

For India, Italy is more than a European trading partner. It is one of the principal Mediterranean gateways through which relations with Southern Europe, North Africa, and the wider Mediterranean basin can be strengthened. The growing convergence of Italian and Indian strategic interests therefore illustrates how the Indo-Mediterranean is progressively fostering new patterns of cooperation that transcend conventional regional boundaries.

From this perspective, Italy should not be seen as the western endpoint of Indo-Mediterranean connectivity. Rather, it is one of the political and strategic interfaces through which the emerging macro-space acquires coherence and functional integration. Its future relevance will depend less on geographical determinism than on its capacity to formulate a long-term geopolitical strategy consistent with the evolving polycentric order.

## Conclusion

The concept of the Indo-Mediterranean reflects far more than the emergence of a new geographical label or the implementation of a major infrastructure initiative. It represents one of the most significant spatial manifestations of the ongoing transformation of the international system. This article has argued that the Indo-Mediterranean should be understood as an emerging geopolitical macro-space rather than merely a corridor of connectivity linking India, the Middle East, and Europe.

The India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor is undoubtedly one of the most visible expressions of this transformation. Nevertheless, it should be understood as part of a broader historical process rather than as its origin. The Indo-Mediterranean represents neither the replacement of existing geopolitical regions nor the establishment of a new hegemonic sphere of influence. Rather, it exemplifies the emergence of a polycentric spatial order in which multiple autonomous centres interact through differentiated forms of cooperation, competition, and strategic interdependence.

The concept of the Indo-Mediterranean as a geopolitical macro-space is intended not merely as a regional category but as a contribution to a broader theoretical understanding of the evolving relationship among power, space, and international order in the twenty-first century.

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2 *Saul Bernard Cohen,* Geopolitics: The Geography of International Relations, *2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009).*

3 *For a cognate account of the emerging order as a "multiplex world," see Amitav Acharya,* The End of American World Order *(Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014). Whereas Acharya's multiplex describes the coexistence of multiple actors, layers, and regional orders, polycentrism as employed here is a spatial category: it concerns the way an emerging international order produces and organizes geopolitical space.*

4 *"India–Italy Joint Declaration," Rome, May 20, 2026, which envisages trilateral initiatives with African partners in fields including digital public infrastructure, agriculture, health, education, artificial intelligence, connectivity, and renewable energy, in connection with India's development partnerships in Africa and Italy's Mattei Plan.*

5 *On the EU–India partnership and the Global Gateway as a connectivity axis alternative to the Belt and Road Initiative, see Michele Pigliucci, "Unione Europea e India: un partenariato strategico alla sfida delle tensioni globali," in* India: A Eurasian Power*, ed. Alberto Cossu and Tiberio Graziani (Callive Edizioni, 2026), 167–178.*

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# India, Israel and the Eastern Mediterranean: Building the Western Anchor of India's Indo-Mediterranean Strategy

Lauren Dagan Amoss*

## Abstract

Strategic competition and war are reshaping the routes linking the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean. The Indo-Mediterranean is best understood as the space formed by the movement of goods, energy and data, and by the security arrangements that sustain them. It is more than a commercial corridor. Its viability depends on infrastructure, political alignment and the ability to keep connections open during crises.

Israel is the only viable candidate to serve as the western anchor of India's Indo-Mediterranean strategy. No other node combines access to the Gulf-Levant route, an Indian-operated port asset, and a mature security and technological relationship with India. Haifa alone, however, cannot fulfil this role. Greece, Cyprus and Italy provide the anchor with European reach and redundancy; they do not replace it. The attacks of 7 October 2023, the Gaza war, disruption in the Red Sea and the wider West Asian crisis culminating in March 2026 exposed how politically and operationally fragile the proposed corridor remains.

The crises did not render IMEC irrelevant. They clarified what the project would need to survive: alternative routes, protected infrastructure, regulatory coordination and practical cooperation among regional partners. Israel can anchor the western segment only as a secure node within a wider Eastern Mediterranean network, not as a single point through which every flow must pass.

**Keywords:** Indo-Mediterranean; IMEC; India; Israel; Eastern Mediterranean; strategic connectivity

## The Indo-Mediterranean as a strategic space

The Memorandum of Understanding announced at the New Delhi G20 summit in September 2023 described the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) in functional terms. An eastern corridor would connect India with the Gulf; a northern corridor would link the Gulf to Europe via maritime routes, railways, roads, and associated energy and digital infrastructure.[1] The map, however, advanced a broader proposition. It brought together regions usually treated as separate theatres: the Indian Ocean, the Arabian Peninsula, the Levant, and the Mediterranean. IMEC thus provided a material basis for thinking about an Indo-Mediterranean space.

This article argues that Israel is the only viable

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western anchor for India's Indo-Mediterranean strategy because it uniquely combines geographic access to the Gulf-Levant segment with an established security and technological partnership capable of safeguarding the corridor's critical infrastructure. Greece, Cyprus and Italy extend this anchor into Europe; they do not constitute alternatives to it.

The Indo-Mediterranean is neither a settled region nor simply the Indo-Pacific extended westward. It is a form of *connectivity-based competitive regionalism*: trade, capital, energy and data flow through infrastructure that is itself subject to political competition. Recent studies place IMEC at the intersection of India, the Gulf, the Abraham Accords and European initiatives. Banerjee and Singh treat it as collaborative infrastructure linking North-South and South-South trade with transport, digital and energy systems.[2] The 2026 ISPI report likewise reads the corridor through the lens of diversification and supply-chain resilience.[3]

The Gulf states' ongoing ties with China prevent the Indo-Mediterranean from becoming an exclusively Western bloc. Chinese firms already operate infrastructure that could be part of IMEC, while India continues to pursue the International North-South Transport Corridor through Iran and Eurasia. IMEC adds a route to India's multi-alignment strategy rather than replacing its other options.

A western anchor must do five things. It must link the Gulf-Levant land segment to Mediterranean routes, transfer goods, energy and data across multiple infrastructure types, and connect the Levant to more than one European gateway. It must also support India's capacity to coordinate partners on standards, investment and security, and keep flows moving or restore them quickly after disruption. These are practical tests of geographic centrality, multimodal capacity, network reach, coordination and resilience. A node that concentrates traffic without providing alternatives is a chokepoint. A port without cross-border political access is an endpoint.

IMEC is more likely to supplement the Suez Canal than replace it. It can provide selective redundancy for time-sensitive, high-value trade while supporting energy and digital links.4 Banerjee and Singh's simulations also reject simplistic claims of universal gain: network expansion distributes opportunities more widely, but economic and emissions objectives create policy trade-offs, especially for Asian members.

The analysis draws on the September 2023 government announcement, policy reports published between 2024 and March 2026, and assessments of conflicts along the route. It asks why Israel is the only viable Western anchor and what conditions must be met for it to fulfil that role. It defines the anchor as an assessable strategic function rather than a geographic metaphor. For India, this approach links resilient connectivity and secure supply chains directly to the national interest.

## India's capacity to coordinate partners under regional pressure

IMEC was announced at a moment of optimism about regional integration. The Abraham Accords had created formal ties between Israel and several Arab states; I2U2 brought India, Israel, the United

Arab Emirates and the United States into a practical minilateral framework; and Washington was attempting to advance Saudi-Israeli normalisation. India's relations with both Israel and the Gulf had deepened without forcing New Delhi to choose between them. IMEC appeared to translate those diplomatic changes into infrastructure.

The attacks of 7 October 2023 and the war that followed broke the political sequence on which the proposed northern corridor tacitly relied. The original memorandum did not list Israel or Jordan among its signatories, even though the projected railway had to cross both countries to reach the Mediterranean. After October 2023, cooperation with Israel became far more difficult for Arab governments to justify publicly. Saudi-Israeli normalisation stalled, while fighting in Gaza, clashes on Israel's northern front and Houthi attacks on commercial shipping widened the conflict's geographical reach.[5]

The Red Sea crisis offered a paradoxical lesson. It complicated investment, raised insurance and transport costs, and showed that infrastructure could be targeted for political purposes. Yet it also strengthened the case for alternative connections. A corridor designed solely to reduce costs under normal conditions would be difficult to justify against established maritime shipping. A corridor that provides additional options during disruption has a different strategic rationale. This distinction explains why the language surrounding IMEC shifted from efficiency to resilience and redundancy.

The escalation of the West Asian crisis in March 2026 sharpened that logic. US-Israeli strikes on Iran and Iranian retaliation threatened energy infrastructure and shipping around the Gulf, while the Strait of Hormuz again became a focal point of global risk.[6] For India, the exposure was immediate: energy imports, trade, investment and the welfare of Indian citizens across the Gulf all depended on regional stability. The crisis also exposed an important limit to corridor thinking. A route that links several chokepoints is not resilient merely because it is new. Resilience requires spare capacity, alternative ports, interoperable procedures and institutions able to respond when a segment fails.

India's exposure can be measured. An estimated 40–50 per cent of its crude-oil imports pass through the Strait of Hormuz. In 2024–25, Saudi Arabia and the UAE supplied about 22 per cent of India's crude-oil imports and 54 per cent of its liquefied petroleum gas imports, while the UAE alone supplied roughly 13 per cent of its liquefied natural gas imports.[7] More than nine million Indian citizens live in the Gulf, and their remittances account for an estimated 38 per cent of the total remittances received by India. A regional crisis would therefore affect not only energy prices but also household incomes in states such as Kerala, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.[8]

India already has several ways to shape this environment. Its market creates demand and lends commercial weight to new connections. Indian firms can also secure positions at selected nodes, as the Adani investment in Haifa demonstrates. New Delhi's distinctive advantage, however, lies in combining security and technology cooperation with diplomacy. Its trust with Israel, relations with the Gulf, participation in I2U2, engagement with

Greece, and cooperation with the United States and Europe allow it to connect partnerships that no single regional institution presently governs. Used together, these relationships could give India a steadier strategic presence in a region where its economic exposure has long been greater than its political influence.9

India's capacity to coordinate partners is limited. New Delhi can modernise its own ports and support investment abroad, but it cannot build the missing Saudi-Jordanian-Israeli links by itself, compel Saudi-Israeli normalisation, or set European customs and rail standards. It also lacks the financial weight of the Gulf states and the infrastructure portfolio China has accumulated across the region. Its citizens and energy imports remain exposed to crises around Hormuz and the Red Sea. India must also preserve the Iran-centred INSTC to protect the strategic autonomy and flexibility at the heart of its multi-alignment. It can sponsor, invest and coordinate, but it cannot command the corridor.

Indian influence diminishes as the route moves west of the Gulf. An anchor would not give New Delhi control over that space, but it would provide a partner able to organise the transition from the Arabian Peninsula to European markets and to protect the infrastructure on which that transition depends. Israel is the only viable candidate. No alternative combines access to the Gulf-Levant segment, an Indian-operated port asset, established defence and technology cooperation with India, and the capacity to secure physical and digital infrastructure.

## Geographic centrality, multimodal capacity and security provision

Geography gives Israel its initial claim to the role. Goods moving by rail from Saudi Arabia and Jordan would reach the Mediterranean through Israel, most plausibly at Haifa. The railway from Haifa to Beit She'an already exists. What is missing is the short, politically difficult connection to the Jordanian network. Haifa matters because it is where an overland Gulf-Levant route could return to sea and divide among several European ports.

The physical gap is limited but strategically significant. The operational Haifa–Beit She'an railway is approximately 60 kilometres long. An additional 15 kilometres would be required to connect Beit She'an to the Sheikh Hussein crossing and the Jordanian network. Haifa's annual cargo capacity has been estimated at roughly 30 million tonnes, while its pre-war container capacity was reported at about 1.5 million TEU. The tonnage and TEU figures measure different forms of throughput and should be assessed separately when judging whether the port can absorb additional IMEC traffic.[10]

Indian investment turns this geographic connection into a bilateral one. By acquiring a controlling interest in the older Haifa port, the Adani Group placed an Indian operator at the prospective western end of a corridor shaped in part by Indian strategy.[11] The acquisition preceded IMEC and should not be recast as an IMEC project. Its importance lies in giving India a commercial presence in a location where it already has a diplomatic interest. It also sits alongside Chinese involvement in the newer Haifa Bay terminal and in Piraeus. IMEC's Mediterranean segment will not be insulated from Chinese infrastructure. India's more realistic aim is to avoid dependence on any single operator.

The deeper foundation is the India-Israel security and technology relationship. Years of cooperation have built trust in sectors where states do not readily share access. For IMEC, the relevant question is not which weapons system India buys from Israel. It is whether the relationship can protect ports, digital networks and maritime traffic through cyber defence, intelligence exchange, maritime-domain awareness and continuity planning. Israeli policy studies argue that this experience could improve the corridor's reliability.[12] The claim needs qualification: exposure to missile attack does not make a state a secure logistics hub. Israel's value lies in its ability to recover quickly and keep essential systems operating under pressure.

The security requirement also alters the meaning of bilateral cooperation. Corridor security is a collective-action problem: protecting a port does not secure its railway, and hardening a cable landing station does not prevent interruption elsewhere. India and Israel would therefore need to move beyond a supplier-client model towards joint standards and risk assessment with Jordan, Gulf partners and European operators. Shared threat assessments, port-recovery exercises, cyber-incident reporting and links among maritime fusion centres can begin below the level of a formal alliance. Israel meets the resilience criterion only if these arrangements lower risk across the route rather than merely strengthen Israeli assets.

Digital infrastructure also requires route-wide protection. Submarine cables carry the bulk of intercontinental data, and damage to cables in the Red Sea after the *Rubymar* was struck in February 2024 showed how an attack on shipping could interrupt data flows between Asia and Europe.[13] Israel's land bridge and the Blue-Raman cable system offer geographic diversification, but they also create new landing stations and terrestrial segments that require protection. A resilient network needs alternative landing points and repair capacity, not a single cable presented as an escape from Suez.

Blue-Raman is designed to connect India with Europe via Saudi Arabia, Israel and Italy, adding a digital layer to the corridor's ports and railways. Its strategic value also reflects competition over data routes. The China-linked PEACE cable, which connects Pakistan with Djibouti, Egypt and France, has a reported capacity of 192 Tbps. Blue-Raman should therefore be assessed not only as commercial infrastructure but also as part of India's effort to diversify secure data connections to Europe.[14]

Energy links add another layer. The Eastern Mediterranean already hosts overlapping projects involving Israeli and Cypriot gas, Egyptian liquefaction capacity, and a proposed electricity connection linking Israel, Cyprus, Greece and continental Europe. The Great Sea Interconnector has faced financial and political obstacles, but it illustrates what an Indo-Mediterranean architecture would look like: the Levant connected to the European system via Cyprus and Greece.[15] Green hydrogen remains a longer-term prospect. Electricity, gas and renewable-energy cooperation offer more immediate foundations.

Israel meets more of the anchor criteria than any alternative. Haifa provides geographic centrality; the port, railway, cable and energy projects offer multimodal capacity; and the India-Israel relationship provides the required security and technological foundation. Network reach still depends on improved relations and functioning links with Jordan, while the full overland corridor requires progress towards Saudi-Israeli normalisation. Cyprus, Greece and Italy provide onward reach and redundancy, but none can secure or replace the Gulf-Levant segment. For India, Israel is therefore the indispensable partner for protecting the western end of its secure supply chains.

## Network reach: the Eastern Mediterranean

Haifa does not, by itself, connect India to Europe. Cargo must then move to ports capable of handling transhipment and distributing goods to European rail and road networks. Greece and Italy are therefore part of the strategic argument, not decorative additions to it.

Greece is close to the Levant and has strengthened political relations with both India and Israel. Its accession to the Three Seas Initiative in 2023 also offers a potential link between Eastern Mediterranean ports and Central and Eastern Europe.[16] Yet COSCO's control of Piraeus makes it difficult to present IMEC as a clean alternative to the BRI. Piraeus still matters. Its ownership shows that competition with China will occur within shared infrastructure networks, not only between rival corridors.

At the European end, Italy adds depth and choice. ISPI's comparison of Piraeus, Marseille-Fos, Genoa and Trieste shows that no port meets every requirement. Trieste offers rail access to Central Europe and a free-port regime; Genoa provides scale and links to northern Italy; Marseille offers another western outlet.[17] Using several ports would reduce congestion and political dependence while allowing cargo to follow its destination and type. It would also address the concern that IMEC merely replaces one chokepoint with another.

Cyprus matters for a different reason. It is not a major rail gateway, but it links the energy and security systems of Israel and Greece. Electricity interconnection, gas development and maritime cooperation give the island a role that exceeds its market size. Israel, Cyprus and Greece can form the bridge; Italy can connect it to the European interior.

India has already moved towards this broader geometry. Its engagement with Greece has expanded, and Indian strategy increasingly treats the Mediterranean as the western extension of its maritime interests rather than a distant European periphery. Italy's formal participation in the IMEC memorandum and its renewed promotion of Trieste reinforce this trend. The western anchor should thus be understood as a distributed system: Israel is its central Levantine node, while Greece, Cyprus and Italy provide that node with reach and redundancy.

The network also needs practical governance. IMEC's signatories should establish a small coordinating mechanism for transport, digital systems, energy and infrastructure protection, including Israel, Jordan and other indispensable non-signatories in technical bodies. Border-crossing times, rail capacity, port dwell time, cable-repair arrangements, insurance premiums and interoperable customs procedures would provide measurable benchmarks of performance. For India, these arrangements would turn diplomatic access into resilient connectivity with European markets.

## Resilience and political limits

The hardest problem is political. Israel cannot establish a complete overland corridor without Saudi cooperation, and Saudi-Israeli normalisation remains absent. Das's warning that the corridor places India within an unstable and asymmetric framework of normalisation is therefore well founded. The Gaza war raised the domestic cost of visible cooperation with Israel across the Arab world, while the March 2026 crisis exposed ports, railways and energy routes to direct attack. Treating normalisation as inevitable would turn a strategic preference into an analytical assumption.

Political legitimacy is not a secondary issue to be resolved after construction. A corridor marketed as a framework for regional prosperity will remain fragile if its gains accrue mainly to distant markets and large infrastructure firms. Jordan bears the costs of transit, border management and new construction; Palestinian exclusion would make the project easier to attack as an attempt to bypass the conflict rather than to change regional conditions. This does not mean that IMEC can deliver a peace agreement. It means that planners should identify concrete local benefits, including logistics employment, industrial zones, energy access and improved Palestinian trade capacity. Functional inclusion would not eliminate opposition, but it would make cooperation less dependent on elite diplomacy alone.

Phased implementation offers a more credible path than either waiting for comprehensive Saudi-Israeli normalisation or ignoring the political obstacle. Partners can improve port, border, digital and energy connections, which have independent value, develop technical standards among willing states, and preserve the option to join the full rail corridor when diplomatic conditions permit. Normalisation would enable the complete route, but it cannot replace planning.

IMEC still lacks binding commitments on financing, governance and construction. Rail links remain incomplete, border procedures are slow, and customs systems are not integrated. Private investors require predictable volumes, risk guarantees, transparent regulation, and evidence that multimodal transfers can compete on time and cost. Analysts have therefore called for private-sector participation, competition among ports and operators, and two-way trade rather than a conveyor belt serving only India-to-Europe traffic.[18]

China's position in Gulf infrastructure, Haifa Bay and Piraeus makes exclusion expensive and perhaps impossible. The Gulf states are unlikely to abandon BRI relationships for an underfunded alternative. India's national interest lies in competitive diversification, not rigid alignment: it should prevent any single state, company or route from controlling the system while preserving its own multi-alignment.

India must also safeguard its interests in Iran and the International North-South Transport Corridor. Disengaging from Iran would weaken the strategic autonomy that makes New Delhi a valuable partner. At the same time, Iranian capabilities and allied armed groups can threaten the maritime and physical infrastructure on which IMEC depends. India must manage this competition without assuming that economic interdependence will resolve security conflicts.

Israel can fulfil the anchoring role only if it reduces risk rather than concentrates it. That requires four practical shifts: completing and modernising links to Jordan; embedding Haifa in a multi-port Mediterranean network; protecting physical, digital and energy infrastructure through shared protocols; and creating benefits for transit states and neighbouring populations. These steps would advance India's national interest by combining strategic autonomy with resilient connectivity and more secure supply chains. Without them, "anchor" will remain a metaphor.

## Conclusion

Israel is the only viable western anchor, combining the necessary geography and infrastructure with a security and technological relationship that can support India's westward strategy. Greece, Cyprus and Italy are essential to the network's European reach, but they extend the anchor rather than replace it. Even so, Israel cannot fulfil this role fully without improved relations and operational connectivity with Jordan, as well as progress towards Saudi-Israeli normalisation.

India can advance this architecture by combining security-technology cooperation with diplomatic coordination, thereby translating extensive economic interests into a more visible regional presence. It cannot impose normalisation, finance every missing link, or control the regulatory systems through which the corridor must pass. The strategy therefore depends on a division of functions: India supplies investment, technology cooperation and diplomatic coordination; Israel anchors and secures the Gulf-Levant transition; Eastern Mediterranean partners provide European reach and redundancy.


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# Iran's Scepticism toward the IMEC: Geopolitical Concerns, Strategic Competition, and Regional Connectivity

Mohammad Reza Dehshiri*


## Abstract

The India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), announced at the 2023 G20 Summit, has emerged as a major connectivity initiative linking India to Europe via the Arabian Peninsula and the Eastern Mediterranean. While supporters present IMEC as a framework to enhance trade, supply chains, energy connectivity, and regional integration, Iran has responded with considerable scepticism. This article examines the geopolitical, economic, and strategic factors underpinning Tehran's reservations. It argues that Iran views IMEC not merely as a commercial project but as part of a broader geopolitical realignment associated with the Abraham Accords and emerging minilateral frameworks such as I2U2.

From Tehran's perspective, the corridor is an exclusive model of regional connectivity that strengthens the strategic positions of the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and the Israeli regime while bypassing Iranian territory. Iranian policymakers also view IMEC within an emerging "war of corridors," in which competing infrastructure initiatives—including the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—serve as instruments of geopolitical competition. Beyond concerns about lost transit revenues and reduced strategic influence, Iran advocates a more inclusive model of Eurasian connectivity in which IMEC complements rather than competes with the INSTC. Such an approach, Tehran argues, would promote regional interdependence, improve transport efficiency, and contribute to a more stable and cooperative regional order.


**Keywords:** IMEC; Iran; International North–South Transport Corridor; Belt and Road Initiative; regional connectivity; geopolitics; West Asia

## Introduction

Connectivity has become a central instrument of geopolitical competition in the twenty-first century. Infrastructure projects increasingly shape not only trade and investment but also political influence, strategic partnerships, and the regional order. Railways, ports, logistics hubs, and digital networks are now regarded as tools of geoeconomic statecraft, enabling states to enhance resilience, strengthen supply chains, and expand their regional influence.[1]

The announcement of the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) at the 2023 G20 Summit illustrates this transformation. Backed by India, the United States, the European Union,

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Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), France, Germany, and Italy, IMEC aims to connect India to Europe through integrated maritime and rail networks spanning the Arabian Peninsula and the Eastern Mediterranean. Beyond facilitating trade, the initiative promotes cooperation in energy, digital infrastructure, customs harmonisation, and resilient supply chains.[2]

While participating governments emphasise the corridor's economic benefits, Iran interprets IMEC through a broader geopolitical lens. Iranian policymakers argue that major transport corridors are inherently non-neutral, as they determine which states become indispensable transit hubs, attract foreign investment, and occupy strategic positions within regional supply chains.[3] Consequently, Tehran views IMEC not merely as a transport project but as part of a wider geopolitical realignment reshaping West Asia.

These concerns are closely linked to Iran's long-term connectivity strategy. Over the past two decades, Tehran has invested heavily in developing the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC), Chabahar Port, Bandar Abbas, and related infrastructure to position Iran as a principal gateway linking the Indian Ocean to Central Asia, the Caucasus, Russia, and Europe.[4] From this perspective, initiatives that bypass Iranian territory have implications that extend beyond commerce, affecting the country's long-term geopolitical influence.

Iranian analysts increasingly characterise this competition as a "war of corridors," in which infrastructure projects embody competing visions of regional order. Alongside the INSTC and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), IMEC is regarded as one of several major connectivity initiatives through which states pursue strategic influence and institutionalise new political partnerships.[5]

Another factor shaping Tehran's assessment is the broader political context of the Abraham Accords and the expanding cooperation among Israel, several Arab states, India, and the United States. Iranian officials argue that IMEC should be understood within this evolving regional architecture rather than as an isolated economic initiative. The inclusion of Israeli Mediterranean ports in the proposed corridor reinforces Tehran's perception that IMEC supports an exclusive model of regional integration that marginalises Iran.[6]

This article argues that Iran's scepticism towards IMEC is best understood through the lens of geopolitical exclusion. Tehran views the corridor as an infrastructure project that reroutes trade flows, strengthens rival regional actors, and diminishes Iran's strategic importance in emerging Eurasian transport networks. Nevertheless, Iran does not reject regional connectivity. Instead, it advocates a more inclusive framework in which IMEC complements existing transport initiatives, particularly the INSTC, thereby maximising regional economic integration while minimising geopolitical fragmentation.[7]

The article is organised into five sections. It first examines Iran's understanding of connectivity as an instrument of geopolitical power, then analyses Tehran's interpretation of IMEC as an exclusive regional project. It then explores the concept of the "war of corridors," assesses Iran's economic and security concerns, and concludes by evaluating Tehran's alternative vision for inclusive regional connectivity.

## Iran's Geopolitical Understanding of Connectivity

Iran's response to the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) reflects a strategic understanding of connectivity that extends well beyond economic considerations. In Iranian foreign policy, transport infrastructure is viewed not merely as a means of facilitating trade but as an instrument of national power. Railways, ports, logistics hubs, energy corridors, and digital networks shape regional influence, economic resilience, and political partnerships. Consequently, connectivity has become a key component of Iran's geoeconomic and security strategy.[8]

This perspective reflects Iran's geographical position at the intersection of South Asia, Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Persian Gulf, and the Middle East. Historically, the Iranian plateau was a major crossroads linking East and West along the Silk Roads. Iranian policymakers continue to regard this location as a key strategic asset and argue that geography can confer long-term political and economic leverage when supported by modern transport infrastructure.[9]

The importance of connectivity became even more pronounced after the expansion of international sanctions in the 2000s. As sanctions restricted Iran's access to international finance and markets, Tehran increasingly viewed transit diplomacy as a means to reduce economic vulnerability. By positioning itself as an indispensable transit hub linking the Indian Ocean to Eurasia, Iran sought to strengthen economic resilience while raising the geopolitical costs of its international isolation.[10]

These developments coincided with broader shifts in the global political economy. Major infrastructure initiatives, including China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC), and the European Union's Global Gateway, demonstrate that connectivity has become a central arena of geopolitical competition. Infrastructure increasingly serves both economic and strategic objectives by shaping trade routes, investment flows, and regional political relationships.[11]

In this context, the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC) plays a central role in Iran's foreign and economic policy. Established in 2000 by India, Iran, and Russia, the INSTC aims to link the Indian Ocean with the Caspian Sea, Russia, Central Asia, and Northern Europe through integrated maritime, rail, and road networks. For Tehran, the project is more than a transport route; it is a long-term strategy to transform Iran into a major Eurasian transit hub and to capitalise on its geographical advantages.[12]

Iran has complemented the INSTC by making substantial investments in Chabahar Port, Bandar Abbas, the Makoran coast, and national railway infrastructure. These projects aim to connect southern ports with inland markets and neighbouring regions, thereby strengthening Iran's role in regional logistics. These investments demonstrate that Tehran views infrastructure as a source of strategic influence rather than merely a source of commercial revenue.[13]

Iranian officials also link connectivity to strategic autonomy. Diversified transport corridors reduce reliance on vulnerable maritime chokepoints and provide alternative trade routes during periods of geopolitical tension. In this sense, transport infrastructure contributes directly to national security by strengthening economic resilience and mitigating the effects of sanctions and political pressure.[14]

This strategic outlook explains why Tehran assesses new regional transport initiatives primarily on their geopolitical consequences. Major corridors shape patterns of investment, industrial development, and diplomatic engagement by determining which states become indispensable transit hubs. Countries along these routes often gain political influence alongside economic benefits, whereas those bypassed risk a gradual decline in strategic relevance.[15]

Accordingly, Iran interprets IMEC not merely as another commercial route linking India and Europe, but as an initiative that redistributes geopolitical influence towards rival regional actors while excluding Iranian territory. Although Tehran does not oppose new transport corridors in principle, it argues that infrastructure projects should promote inclusive regional connectivity rather than reinforce geopolitical divisions. From this perspective, IMEC is assessed primarily by its implications for Iran's long-term strategic position rather than by its immediate economic benefits.[16]

Ultimately, Iran's understanding of connectivity underpins its scepticism towards IMEC. Infrastructure is viewed as an instrument of geopolitical competition that shapes the regional order, political partnerships, and economic influence. This perspective also underpins Tehran's growing characterisation of contemporary Eurasian infrastructure development as a "war of corridors," in which competing transport networks increasingly serve as tools of strategic rivalry rather than merely facilitating international commerce.

## IMEC through Tehran's Strategic Lens: Geopolitical Exclusion and Regional Realignment

Iran interprets the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) differently from its principal sponsors. While participating governments present the initiative as a means to improve trade, supply-chain resilience, digital connectivity, and sustainable economic development, Tehran views it primarily as a geopolitical project within a broader regional realignment. From the Iranian perspective, transport corridors are not politically neutral; they shape regional power relations, institutionalise strategic partnerships, and influence the distribution of economic and political power.[17]

This interpretation is closely linked to Iran's long-standing effort to capitalise on its strategic geography. Successive governments have sought to transform Iran into a major Eurasian transit hub by investing in the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC), Chabahar Port, Bandar Abbas, and related transport infrastructure. Consequently, a major corridor connecting India and Europe, which bypasses Iranian territory, is perceived not merely as an alternative commercial route but as a challenge to Iran's long-term geoeconomic strategy.[18]

A central concept shaping Tehran's assessment is geopolitical exclusion. Iranian analysts argue that transport corridors create durable patterns of economic interdependence by channeling trade, investment, logistics, and diplomatic engagement towards participating states. Countries along these routes often gain greater strategic importance, whereas those excluded risk gradual marginalisation. From this perspective, IMEC redistributes regional influence by strengthening alternative transit hubs and reducing Iran's potential role in Eurasian connectivity.[19]

Iranian concerns are reinforced by the political context in which IMEC emerged. Tehran associates the corridor with broader regional developments following the Abraham Accords and the expansion of cooperation among India, the United States, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Although IMEC is officially presented as an economic initiative, Iranian policymakers contend that its implementation depends on sustained political cooperation among these partners. As a result, the corridor is interpreted as an institutional expression of an emerging regional order rather than a purely commercial undertaking.[20]

Within Iranian strategic discourse, IMEC therefore represents an exclusive model of regional connectivity. Tehran argues that economically efficient transport networks should include all geographically relevant states, regardless of political differences. Iranian officials contend that excluding countries occupying central geographic positions reduces economic efficiency and reinforces geopolitical divisions. In this view, connectivity should function as a regional public good that promotes interdependence and stability rather than political polarisation.[21]

A particularly significant concern is the role assigned to Israel within the proposed corridor. Under IMEC, Israeli Mediterranean ports, especially Haifa, would become major gateways linking the Arabian Peninsula with European markets. Iranian policymakers believe that such a role would strengthen Israel's position in regional logistics, attract investment, and deepen its integration into regional supply chains. Beyond economic implications, Tehran views this development as enhancing Israel's strategic influence within West Asia.[22]

Iranian analysts further argue that infrastructure fosters long-term institutional relationships. Transport corridors promote customs harmonisation, regulatory cooperation, investment coordination, and technological integration among participating states. Over time, these arrangements strengthen political partnerships and enhance their resilience. Consequently, Tehran regards IMEC as reinforcing the broader political consequences of Arab–Israeli normalisation by embedding the Israeli regime more deeply in the region's economic architecture.[23]

International sanctions have further intensified Iran's concerns. As sanctions have constrained foreign investment and economic integration, Tehran has increasingly relied on transit diplomacy to preserve its regional relevance. Becoming a major transit hub has therefore become an important element of Iran's strategy to mitigate economic isolation. Exclusion from a high-profile initiative such as IMEC is viewed not only as a potential loss of transit revenue but also as a weakening of one of Iran's principal geopolitical assets.[24]

Nevertheless, Iran does not reject regional connectivity. Iranian officials consistently emphasise that expanded transport infrastructure can promote trade, economic development, and regional cooperation. Their principal criticism concerns the design of IMEC rather than the broader objective of connectivity. Tehran argues that integrating existing infrastructure—including the INSTC, Chabahar Port, and Bandar Abbas—into wider Eurasian transport networks would yield greater economic efficiency while reducing geopolitical fragmentation.[25]

In sum, Iran's interpretation of IMEC reflects a broader understanding of infrastructure as a strategic instrument. The corridor is seen not merely as a transport project but as part of an evolving regional order that strengthens rival actors, institutionalises new political partnerships, and diminishes Iran's geopolitical significance. These concerns underpin Tehran's broader conception of an emerging "war of corridors," in which competing connectivity initiatives increasingly serve geopolitical as well as economic objectives.

## The Emerging "War of Corridors": Iran's Perception of Strategic Competition

The announcement of the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) has reinforced an increasingly influential concept in Iranian strategic thinking: the "war of corridors." Although not a formal theory of international relations, the term is widely used by Iranian policymakers and scholars to describe the growing competition among major transport and connectivity initiatives. In this view, infrastructure has evolved from a purely economic asset into a strategic instrument through which states compete for influence, shape regional integration, and redefine the political geography of Eurasia.[26]

This perspective reflects a broader transformation in international politics. Whereas geopolitical competition traditionally centred on military power and territorial control, contemporary rivalries increasingly focus on infrastructure, trade routes, logistics hubs, energy networks, and digital connectivity. Transport corridors shape not only the movement of goods but also patterns of investment, technological cooperation, and diplomatic engagement. As a result, geoeconomics has become an increasingly important dimension of statecraft, with infrastructure serving as a means of projecting influence without direct military confrontation.[27]

Iranian analysts argue that this evolution has produced competing visions of regional order. From Tehran's perspective, the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC), China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and IMEC are not merely transport projects; they represent alternative geopolitical frameworks, each backed by distinct political coalitions and strategic objectives. The competition among these initiatives therefore concerns not only trade routes but also the future organisation of Eurasia's political and economic landscape.[28]

For Iran, the INSTC remains the cornerstone of its connectivity strategy. Established in 2000 by India, Iran, and Russia, the corridor aims to link the Indian Ocean with the Caspian Sea, Russia, Central Asia, and Northern Europe via integrated maritime, rail, and road infrastructure. Tehran regards the project as the most effective way to utilise Iran's geographical position while strengthening economic resilience and regional influence. Since 2022, cooperation with Russia has further heightened the INSTC's strategic significance as both countries seek alternatives to Western-controlled transport routes and financial networks.[29]

Against this backdrop, IMEC is seen as a competing connectivity architecture. Iranian officials generally avoid portraying the initiative as a direct replacement for the INSTC, yet they recognise that both projects seek investment, cargo flows, and international political support. Tehran therefore fears that future infrastructure financing and commercial traffic may increasingly favour routes that bypass Iranian territory, thereby reducing the strategic value of decades of domestic investment in ports, railways, and logistics infrastructure.[30]

Iran also assesses IMEC in the broader context of China's Belt and Road Initiative. Since deepening its strategic partnership with Beijing, Tehran has viewed the BRI as complementary to its ambition to become a principal Eurasian transit hub. Some Iranian analysts therefore interpret IMEC as part of a wider effort by the United States and its partners to promote alternative connectivity networks that reduce dependence on Chinese-led infrastructure and, indirectly, on Iran's strategic location.[31]

Nevertheless, Iranian scholarship generally avoids reducing this competition to a simple binary choice between rival blocs. Many analysts argue that Eurasia is witnessing the emergence of multiple, overlapping connectivity initiatives that both compete and coexist. The central concern is therefore not the existence of alternative routes but whether they are designed to encourage cooperation or geopolitical fragmentation. This distinction explains why Iranian commentators increasingly describe connectivity itself as the principal arena of strategic competition in the twenty-first century.[32]

Another important theme in Iranian strategic discourse is the securitisation of connectivity. Tehran argues that transport infrastructure can become an instrument of political pressure if participation depends on strategic alignment rather than universally accepted commercial principles. In such circumstances, connectivity ceases to function as a regional public good and instead becomes a mechanism for strengthening preferred political coalitions while excluding rival states. Iranian analysts believe that IMEC reflects this trend, as participating countries have simultaneously expanded cooperation across economic, technological, and security domains.[33]

From Tehran's perspective, exclusion from major transport networks has consequences that extend beyond commerce. Countries along strategic corridors often attract manufacturing investment, logistics, financial services, and diplomatic engagement, thereby enhancing their geopolitical influence. States outside these networks risk a gradual decline in regional relevance, regardless of their geographical advantages. Consequently, Iran views the "war of corridors" as a competition for long-term strategic influence rather than merely for transport efficiency.[34]

At the same time, Iranian scholars acknowledge that connectivity need not be a zero-sum contest. Several analysts argue that Eurasian transport would benefit more from complementarity than from rivalry. Integrating the INSTC, IMEC, and other regional initiatives into a broader multimodal network could diversify trade routes, improve supply-chain resilience, and reduce unnecessary duplication of infrastructure investment. Such a framework, however, would require a more inclusive approach to regional connectivity than Tehran currently adopts in the design of IMEC.[35]

In summary, Iran's concept of the "war of corridors" reflects a broader transformation in international politics, in which infrastructure has become a central instrument of geopolitical competition. Transport corridors increasingly shape regional influence, economic partnerships, and strategic alignments. From Tehran's perspective, IMEC is therefore not merely a commercial initiative but part of a wider contest over the future political and economic order of Eurasia.

## Iran's Security Concerns: IMEC, Regional Realignment, and the Politics of Connectivity

Iran's scepticism towards the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) goes beyond concerns about trade diversion and transit competition. Tehran regards the initiative as part of a broader transformation of the security and political landscape of West Asia. In Iranian strategic thinking, infrastructure projects increasingly shape regional alliances, economic interdependence, and security arrangements. Consequently, IMEC is viewed not merely as a transport corridor but as part of an emerging geopolitical architecture involving the United States, India, Israel, and several Arab states.[36]

A key factor shaping this perception is the evolving political landscape following the Abraham Accords and the expansion of minilateral initiatives such as I2U2. Iranian analysts argue that these developments show that economic cooperation, technology, infrastructure, and security are increasingly interconnected. From Tehran's perspective, transport corridors institutionalise political partnerships by creating long-term networks of trade, investment, and regulatory cooperation. Accordingly, IMEC is seen as reinforcing a regional order in which Iran plays only a limited role.[37]

The most sensitive aspect of the corridor concerns the enhanced position of the Israeli regime. Under the proposed route, Israeli Mediterranean ports—particularly Haifa—would serve as gateways linking the Arabian Peninsula to European markets. Iranian policymakers believe this role would significantly strengthen Israel's geoeconomic position by integrating it more deeply into regional supply chains and logistics networks. Beyond commercial gains, Tehran argues that infrastructure generates lasting political influence by encouraging sustained diplomatic, technological, and institutional cooperation among participating states.[38]

Iran also views IMEC as reinforcing the broader political consequences of Arab–Israeli normalisation. Increased economic interdependence, supported by shared infrastructure, may deepen cooperation among participating governments and make these partnerships more durable. From Tehran's perspective, the corridor therefore contributes to the consolidation of a regional order that is increasingly independent of Iranian influence.[39]

Another important concern is the securitisation of connectivity. Iranian scholars argue that transport infrastructure has become closely linked to national security because it determines access to markets, technology, investment, and strategic partnerships. In an era of geopolitical competition, railways, ports, digital networks, and energy corridors influence not only economic development but also diplomatic leverage and crisis resilience. Consequently, infrastructure planning has become an integral part of national security policy.[40]

Closely related is the notion of the weaponisation of connectivity. Tehran argues that transport networks may increasingly be organised along political lines rather than by commercial efficiency, rewarding strategic partners while excluding rival states. Although governments supporting IMEC reject this characterisation, Iranian officials contend that the composition of participating countries reinforces perceptions that geopolitical considerations played a decisive role in the corridor's design.[41]

These concerns are closely linked to Iran's transit strategy. Over the past two decades, Tehran has invested heavily in Chabahar Port, Bandar Abbas, and the Makran coast, which are key components of the International North–South Transport Corridor. Chabahar, in particular, is regarded as the cornerstone of Iran's eastern connectivity strategy because it provides direct access to the Indian Ocean outside the Strait of Hormuz. Iranian policymakers fear that if IMEC attracts future investment and cargo flows, the strategic and commercial potential of these infrastructure projects could be significantly diminished despite their favourable geographic location.[42]

Iran also assesses IMEC in light of the Strait of Hormuz's long-term significance, one of the world's most important maritime chokepoints. Although IMEC is unlikely to replace maritime trade through the Persian Gulf, Iranian analysts argue that expanding overland transport corridors could gradually diversify regional logistics. Over time, this diversification may reduce the Strait's geopolitical importance and, by extension, diminish one of Iran's longstanding strategic advantages.[43]

Overall, Tehran regards IMEC as more than an infrastructure initiative. It is seen as part of a broader restructuring of regional politics, combining economic integration, political realignment, and strategic competition. This perspective explains why Iran continues to advocate an alternative model of regional connectivity based on inclusiveness and complementarity rather than on competing geopolitical blocs.

## Iran's Alternative Vision of Regional Connectivity: From Strategic Competition to Inclusive Regionalism

Although Iran has consistently criticised the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), it does not oppose regional connectivity per se. On the contrary, Iranian policymakers argue that expanding transport networks is essential to promote trade, economic growth, and regional stability. Their principal objection concerns what they perceive as the corridor's exclusive institutional design, which favours politically aligned states while bypassing geographically central actors such as Iran. Tehran therefore advocates a more inclusive model of Eurasian connectivity in which transport initiatives complement rather than compete with one another.[44]

This vision is rooted in Iran's longstanding aspiration to serve as a bridge between South Asia, Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Persian Gulf, and Europe. Successive governments have regarded the country's strategic location as one of its greatest comparative advantages and have invested in railways, ports, highways, and logistics infrastructure to translate that geographic position into sustainable economic and political influence.[45]

The cornerstone of this strategy is the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC). Linking the Indian Ocean with the Caspian Sea, Russia, Central Asia, and Northern Europe, the INSTC remains central to Iran's economic diplomacy. Tehran argues that the corridor offers one of the shortest and most cost-effective routes between South Asia and Eurasia, while diversifying regional supply chains and reducing dependence on traditional maritime routes.[46]

Within this broader framework, Chabahar Port holds a particularly important position. Situated on the Gulf of Oman, outside the Strait of Hormuz, Chabahar provides direct access to the Indian Ocean and serves as the focal point of Iran's eastern connectivity strategy. Together with Bandar Abbas and the ongoing development of the Makoran coast, these projects aim to integrate maritime trade with inland transport networks extending towards Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Russia.[47]

Rather than viewing IMEC and the INSTC as inherently incompatible, many Iranian analysts argue that the two corridors could complement each other within a wider Eurasian transport network. Linking these initiatives through multimodal infrastructure would offer greater flexibility for international trade, strengthen supply-chain resilience, and maximise the economic benefits of existing investments. From Tehran's perspective, cooperation among regional transport projects would yield greater long-term efficiency than competition among rival corridors.[48]

This approach reflects Iran's broader preference for inclusive regionalism. Iranian officials maintain that connectivity initiatives should remain open to all geographically relevant states, regardless of political disagreements. They argue that infrastructure should serve as a regional public good, encouraging economic interdependence, reducing political tensions, and supporting sustainable development. Excluding countries from major transport networks on geopolitical grounds risks increasing regional fragmentation and reducing overall economic efficiency.[49]

Iran has sought to reinforce this vision through a more diversified approach to regional diplomacy. Improved relations with several Arab neighbours, stronger partnerships with Russia and China, and participation in emerging Eurasian institutions all reflect Tehran's effort to promote a multipolar regional order based on overlapping economic partnerships rather than exclusive geopolitical blocs.[50]

Iranian strategic discourse therefore distinguishes between competitive and cooperative connectivity. The former emphasises infrastructure as a tool for strategic rivalry and political exclusion, whereas the latter views transport networks as mechanisms for promoting shared prosperity and regional stability. Tehran consistently presents the INSTC within this second framework, arguing that long-term regional development depends on integrating rather than dividing Eurasian transport systems.[51]

Nevertheless, Iranian policymakers recognise that this vision faces substantial obstacles. International sanctions, geopolitical rivalries, unresolved regional conflicts, and competing interests among major powers continue to impede the development of an integrated Eurasian transport architecture. Despite these challenges, Tehran maintains that sustainable regional stability ultimately requires greater economic interdependence rather than competing geopolitical corridors.

In this sense, Iran's response to IMEC should not be read as a rejection of connectivity. Rather, it reflects a preference for a regional order in which transport infrastructure promotes cooperation, inclusiveness, and mutual economic benefit, rather than reinforcing political divisions.

## Conclusion

The India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) is one of the most significant connectivity initiatives to emerge in West Asia in recent years. While its supporters emphasise trade facilitation, supply-chain resilience, and economic integration, Iran interprets the project within a broader geopolitical framework. As this article has argued, Tehran regards IMEC not merely as a transport corridor but as part of an evolving regional order that redistributes strategic influence and reshapes Eurasian connectivity.

Iran's scepticism stems from its view of infrastructure as an instrument of geopolitical power. Transport corridors shape not only the movement of goods but also patterns of investment, political cooperation, and regional influence. Because Iran has invested heavily in the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC), Chabahar Port, Bandar Abbas, and related infrastructure, initiatives that bypass its territory are seen as challenges to its long-term geoeconomic strategy rather than merely alternative commercial routes.

The article shows that Tehran interprets IMEC through the lens of geopolitical exclusion. Iranian policymakers associate the corridor with broader regional realignments, including the Abraham Accords, expanding Arab–Israeli cooperation, and emerging minilateral partnerships. From this perspective, IMEC reflects an exclusive model of connectivity that strengthens rival regional actors while diminishing Iran's strategic role in Eurasian transport networks.

The analysis has also shown that Iranian strategic thinking increasingly frames contemporary infrastructure development as a "war of corridors." Competing initiatives—including IMEC, the INSTC, and China's Belt and Road Initiative—offer alternative visions of regional order in which connectivity serves both economic and geopolitical objectives. Infrastructure has therefore become a central instrument of geoeconomic competition.

At the same time, Iran does not oppose regional integration. Rather, it advocates an inclusive model of connectivity in which major transport corridors complement one another and foster broader regional interdependence. Such an approach, Tehran argues, would improve economic efficiency while reducing geopolitical fragmentation.

Ultimately, the debate over IMEC reflects a broader transformation in international politics. Connectivity is no longer merely an economic issue but a key dimension of strategic competition and regional governance. The future success of Eurasian transport initiatives will depend not only on infrastructure investment but also on their ability to reconcile competing geopolitical interests. Whether regional actors pursue rivalry or complementarity will significantly shape the evolving political and economic landscape of West Asia.

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# The Logic of Correlated Risk: Defining the Indo-Mediterranean as a Strategic Geography

Suryanarayanan Dinakaran*

## Introduction: Naming the Logic, Not the Place

A new strategic geography is taking shape along the arc stretching from India's western seaboard, through the Arabian Sea and the Gulf, across the Levant, and into the Mediterranean. Its threads are the seaborne trade of three continents, the energy that powers them, the undersea cables that carry their data, and the financial systems that settle their transactions. Strategic discourse in India and Europe has begun to call this space the Indo-Mediterranean. In a joint statement, the leaders of India and Italy described the emergence of "what might be termed the Indo-Mediterranean, an important corridor for trade, technology, energy, data and ideas tying the Indian Ocean to Europe."[1] The phrase is more than a diplomatic ornament. It recognises that a single band of physical geography now carries the systems on which two continents depend.

The temptation is to define this space as the Indo-Pacific's western extension, applying the same logic of maritime competition beyond the Arabian Peninsula. This paper argues that this temptation should be resisted, as it obscures what is genuinely new about the space and therefore disarms strategy before it begins. Naming a place is the work of cartographers. Naming the logic by which a place must be understood is the work of strategy. Mahan did not name the oceans; he named sea power. Mackinder did not name Eurasia; he named the pivot. The Indo-Mediterranean does not need another mapmaker. It needs its organising logic identified.

This paper offers a logic and gives it a name: correlated risk. The argument proceeds through five propositions, each contestable and consequential. The paper claims no new theory. It applies established reasoning, drawn from reliability engineering, portfolio theory, and the scholarship on weaponised interdependence, to an emerging strategic space. Its single contribution is that application, demonstrated through the crisis of 2026.

## Proposition I: A New Geography Exists, and It Is Not the Indo-Pacific

The claim that the Indo-Mediterranean is a distinct strategic geography must be earned, not asserted, because the obvious objection is that it is merely a sub-region of the Indo-Pacific or an arena of European neighbourhood policy. The distinction rests on three structural features that together give

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the space a logic the Indo-Pacific framing cannot capture.

The first is the absence of a hegemon. The Indo-Pacific, as a strategic construct, is organised around a single peer competitor. For the United States, India, Japan, and Australia alike, the central question is how to balance China's rising power, and the characteristic instruments are those of balance: presence, deterrence, and alliance. The Indo-Mediterranean has no such organising pole. China is present through its commercial reach, from Indian Ocean ports to the Mediterranean terminus at Piraeus, but it is not hegemonic there; nor are the United States, the European Union, India, or the Gulf states. The space is genuinely plural: several powers of comparable but partial weight, none able to impose order.

The second feature is chokepoint density. No comparable stretch of the world's surface concentrates so many critical maritime passages in such a confined space. The Strait of Hormuz, the Bab el-Mandeb, the approaches to the Suez Canal, and the contested waters of the eastern Mediterranean lie within a few days' sailing of one another, and through them passes a share of the world's energy and trade out of all proportion to their physical extent. The Indo-Pacific has its chokepoints, Malacca above all, but they are dispersed across an ocean. The Indo-Mediterranean is defined by chokepoints, strung close together along a single thread. A geography defined by the proximity of its chokepoints behaves differently under stress, because a single disturbance can affect several at once.

The third feature is the coupling of domains. Across the Indo-Mediterranean, the energy, trade, data, and financial systems do not run on parallel tracks; they run along the same physical geography. Undersea cables follow the shipping lanes through the same straits; energy flows and container traffic traverse the same passages; financial settlement tracks trade. In the wider Indo-Pacific, these systems retain some independence through sheer dispersion. In the Indo-Mediterranean, they are bundled so tightly that they constitute a single coupled system. A coupled system is defined by the fact that its parts fail together.

These three features define a category of strategic space that requires a distinct doctrine. While the Indo-Pacific asks how to balance a rival, the Indo-Mediterranean asks how to keep a coupled, chokepoint-dense system from failing all at once in a space where no one is in charge. While the Indo-Pacific rewards the accumulation of presence, the Indo-Mediterranean rewards the building of resilience. The Indo-Pacific is a balance-of-power geography. The Indo-Mediterranean is a resilience geography. They are distinct categories of strategic space, and they require different doctrines.

The structural forces shaping this geography are not transient. The gravitational shift of the world economy towards the Indian Ocean, the rewiring of the strategic map by the energy transition, the superimposition of a digital and data layer over the physical one, and the return of multipolar competition are deep currents, not cyclical fluctuations. They will not reverse with an administration or a ceasefire. The resilience geography is emerging because the foundations of the world economy, the energy system, the information order, and the balance of power are shaping it. The only open question is what logic will be brought to bear on it.

## Proposition II: The Governing Logic Is Correlated Failure

If the Indo-Mediterranean is a resilience geography, its governing strategic question is how its components fail, and specifically whether they fail together. This is the heart of the paper, and it can be stated as a principle that, once seen, is hard to unsee.

The case for connectivity infrastructure rests on redundancy. If one route closes, another absorbs the traffic; alternative corridors are an insurance policy against disruption. The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), whose Memorandum of Understanding was signed on 9 September 2023 at the G20 summit in New Delhi by India, the United States, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, the European Union, France, Germany, and Italy, is routinely justified in exactly these terms.[2] But redundancy delivers resilience only if the failure modes of the alternative are independent of the risks that disable the primary. A backup that fails for the same reason, and at the same moment, as the primary provides no protection at all.

This is not a novel insight in other fields. In reliability engineering, it is known as common-cause failure: an event that causes the simultaneous failure of two or more redundant channels, thereby defeating the redundancy intended to guarantee the system.[3] In portfolio theory, it is the problem of correlation, formalised by Harry Markowitz, who demonstrated that diversification reduces risk only to the extent that the assets held are not correlated with one another.[4] A portfolio of assets that all move together is no safer than a single holding. Applied to strategic geography, the principle is simple: two routes that pass through, or depend on, the same conflict-prone zone is correlated. Building the second does not hedge the first.

There is a counterpoint worth confronting. In 1990, Edward Luttwak argued that the post-Cold War world would see "the methods of commerce" displace military methods, with "disposable capital in lieu of firepower" and "market penetration in lieu of garrisons and bases."[5] On that expectation, corridors would be governed by the grammar of commerce. However, the corridors of the Indo-Mediterranean have instead been weaponised. As Henry Farrell and Abraham Newman have shown, states with jurisdiction over the central nodes of global networks can exploit that position through a "chokepoint effect," denying adversaries access to flows of energy, goods, and information.[6] The corridor is not neutral plumbing. It is an instrument, and coercion is applied at its nodes.

The comparative evidence supports the correlated-failure reading. The Middle Corridor across the Caspian has gained relevance precisely because it offers a route independent of both Russian territory and the volatile maritime chokepoints. A World Bank assessment concluded that it could provide resilience and route diversification for China-Europe trade, thereby shielding supply chains from geopolitical shocks.[7] By contrast, the International North-South Transport Corridor has struggled because its nodes are linked to sanctioned or conflict-prone jurisdictions in Iran and Russia, so the risks it carries are correlated with the very disruptions a hedge is meant to avoid.

## Proposition III: The 2026 Crisis Was the Proof

The theoretical case became empirical in early 2026. The sequence warrants careful attention. Following the Gaza ceasefire of October 2025, the Houthis suspended their campaign against commercial shipping, and traffic through the Red Sea began to partially recover.[8] That recovery was interrupted. On 28 February 2026, the United States and Israel launched strikes against Iran; Iran responded by attacking targets across the region and moving to close the Strait of Hormuz.[9] The waterway was effectively shut within days. The stakes were considerable: in 2025, an average of 20 million barrels of crude oil and oil products per day moved through the strait, around one quarter of the world's seaborne oil trade, while the Qatari and Emirati LNG passing through it represented almost one fifth of global LNG exports.[10] By early April, an estimated 1,000 vessels were caught in a holding pattern in and around the Gulf.[11] QatarEnergy declared force majeure on long-term LNG supply contracts as Ras Laffan output was disrupted.[12] On 28 March 2026, the Houthis fired a ballistic missile at Israel, their first attack since the ceasefire, threatening the Red Sea once again.[13] Hormuz and the Red Sea were now disrupted simultaneously, a condition without recent precedent. A conditional ceasefire was announced in April, but shipping did not recover: well into 2026, Suez Canal traffic remained roughly half of its pre-crisis peak.[14]

Here is the analytical point. The proposed overland alternatives within IMEC, the Levant leg linking the Gulf through Jordan and Israel to the Mediterranean, run through the very conflict zone whose instability closed the sea lanes. The corridor's redundancy and the risk it is meant to hedge are correlated. Had the rail spine existed in February 2026, it would have failed at the same moment and for the same reason as the maritime routes it was intended to back up. The conditional phrasing is deliberate: the IMEC rail does not yet exist. That is precisely why the point is a warning about sequencing rather than a post-mortem.

The crisis also clarifies how the corridor's benefits have been presented. The claim that IMEC will make trade between India and Europe forty per cent faster is attributed to European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's 2023 State of the Union address.[15] The companion figure of thirty per cent lower cost has no verifiable official measurement behind it.[16] Both are political projections for a route that has not been built. In a resilience geography, projected efficiency gains are worth little if they are not weighted by the independence of the route's failure modes.

The lesson is not that the Indo-Mediterranean lacks strategic value. The diversification imperative argues powerfully for it, and the crisis once again demonstrated that concentrating the world's energy and trade through a handful of narrow passages is a first-order fragility. The lesson is that the corridor's value must be built on components genuinely independent of regional conflict risk, not asserted on the basis of redundancy the geography does not in fact provide. That requirement turns the logic of correlated risk into a strategy.

## Proposition IV: The Strategy Is Sequencing by Independence

If correlated failure is the governing risk, the operational doctrine is to sequence investment by the product of standalone value and failure-mode independence. A component earns priority when it delivers benefit on its own, without waiting for the rest of the corridor, and when its vulnerabilities are uncorrelated with those already in place.

The corridor's substantive agenda can be organised around six pillars: strategic security; economic integration, anchored by the free trade agreement between India and the European Union, concluded on 27 January 2026;[17] digital and artificial-intelligence infrastructure; the energy transition; innovation and human capital; and adaptive governance. None of these pillars is presented as original. They synthesise established frameworks, including the G20 Principles for Quality Infrastructure Investment, endorsed at Osaka in 2019.[18] The contribution lies in the ordering rule applied to them, which produces three tiers.

Tier one comprises the independent foundations, the elements that stand alone and whose failure modes are least correlated with regional conflict. The India-Gulf maritime leg is already operational; bilateral India-UAE trade reached 65 billion US dollars in 2024, supported by the intergovernmental framework agreement on IMEC, signed on 13 February 2024.[19] An interoperable digital layer for trade documentation and payments can be built without laying a single rail, does not prescribe any single nation's platform, and is largely immune to land-based conflict. The western, Mediterranean section of the Blue-Raman submarine cable is complete and in service, while its Red Sea segment has been delayed due to security risks.[20] Cheapest of all and highest in leverage is a permanent coordinating secretariat: the corridor still lacks one, and creating it costs almost nothing relative to the value it would unlock.

Tier two comprises conditional investments, to be made only when specified enabling conditions are met: cross-border digital identity, port-clustered manufacturing, and the exposed segments of the data-cable network. Tier three comprises what should be held in reserve: the Gulf-Levant rail spine and the cross-Israel connection, the components most correlated with regional conflict and carrying the least standalone value until the entire chain is complete. This is not an argument for abandoning them. It is an argument for hedging them by advancing alternative routings, for instance via Egypt or around the Arabian Peninsula through Oman, thereby bypassing Hormuz entirely. Atlantic Council analysts estimate that a network of such corridors could displace roughly sixty per cent of the container traffic now vulnerable to Hormuz disruption.[21]

The financing profile reinforces the point. An Atlantic Council assessment finds that IMEC faces about 5 billion US dollars in costs to become minimally operational, with costs concentrated in the Jordan-Israel segment, exactly the leg most exposed to the conflict that closed the sea lanes.[22] Meanwhile, India has committed some 10 billion US dollars to port modernisation, and Saudi Arabia has pledged around 20 billion US dollars towards corridor-linked infrastructure, investments whose value does not depend on the Levant leg.[23] Sequencing by independence prevents states from pouring capital into the most vulnerable nodes first.

## Proposition V: India Anchors the Order Through Independent Capability

An honest analysis must address an objection. By conventional measures, India is the weakest of the major actors in the western half of this space. Its naval reach beyond the Arabian Sea is limited; it maintains no presence in the Mediterranean; and its economic weight in the Gulf, though growing, is surpassed by China's. If the Indo-Mediterranean were a balance-of-power geography, these facts would settle the question: India could not lead.

The resolution lies in the distinction drawn at the outset. In a balance-of-power geography, leadership flows from presence. In a resilience geography, leadership flows from providing the independent capabilities that keep the system functioning when parts of it fail. India's position is strong. India operates digital public infrastructure at a scale few states can match, in payments, identity, and data exchange, exactly the kind of low-correlation, standalone capability that a resilience geography rewards. It provides maritime security across the Arabian Sea and the western Indian Ocean, the eastern approach on which the whole corridor depends. Through the free trade agreement of January 2026, it anchors the corridor's economic integration with Europe. And its long tradition of strategic autonomy suits the plural governance of a space with no hegemon, allowing it to engage all parties without being captured by any.

India leads, therefore, not by being present everywhere, which it cannot be, but by owning the independent capabilities that geography rewards. This is a role that fits India's actual capabilities rather than its aspirational ones, and it is a more durable role for exactly that reason: it does not depend on parity of presence India will not soon achieve, but on leadership in capability India already holds. The weakest power by the old measure becomes the natural anchor by the new one, provided it understands geography correctly and acts on the logic that geography demands.

## The Doctrine

The five propositions constitute a single doctrine, and a doctrine, to be worth the name, must be expressible in one sentence and then unfolded. Here is the sentence. In a chokepoint-dense geography without a hegemon, strategic advantage comes not from controlling routes but from building capabilities whose vulnerabilities are independent of one another; and India's role is to anchor an open Indo-Mediterranean order by leading in precisely those independent capabilities. From that sentence, everything in this paper follows. The geography's distinctiveness makes control of routes the wrong objective and resilience the right one. The logic of correlated failure makes independence of vulnerabilities the measure of value. The 2026 crisis proves that the measure is real and that the conventional redundancy rationale is unsafe. The sequencing strategy is the doctrine's operational form. And India's role is its application to the one power whose capabilities fit the logic.

Four working principles are derived from the same sentence: independence over redundancy, because an alternative route has strategic value only if its failure modes are independent of the primary's risks; capability over geography, because influence in a non-hegemonic space belongs to the provider of resilient standalone capabilities rather than to the power with the largest footprint; sequencing over completion, because staging investment by independence keeps the corridor valuable even if the full physical link is never completed; and openness over control, because connectivity organised as a commons lowers costs for all participants, whereas connectivity organised as an instrument of exclusion invites the very coercion the doctrine is designed to escape.

## Conclusion

This paper has argued that the Indo-Mediterranean is not the Indo-Pacific extended westward but a distinct category of strategic space, a resilience geography, chokepoint-dense and without a hegemon, and that the logic governing it is the logic of correlated risk. It has argued that the redundancy on which the strategic case for the space conventionally rests is, when the alternatives' failures are correlated with the risks they hedge, no redundancy at all; that the 2026 crisis demonstrated this in a contemporary case; that the strategy the logic demands is to sequence investment by standalone value and independence; and that India's role is to anchor an open order by leading in the independent capabilities the geography rewards.

Looking towards 2050, the objective is a resilient, sequenced, and open Indo-Mediterranean order: one in which investment is staged for failure-mode independence rather than headline efficiency, in which no single conflict can sever energy, trade, data, and finance at once, and in which India stands as the indispensable anchor rather than an aspirant hegemon. The corridor's promise is real, but it will be realised only if its builders treat correlation, not distance or cost, as the variable that matters most. The 2026 crisis was a rehearsal. The lesson it taught was sequencing by independence, and that lesson is available to anyone willing to read established reasoning into a new map.[24]

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FOCUS

# Re-Engineering Eurasia: The Indo-Mediterranean Corridor and the Reconstruction of Global Supply Chains

Sandhya Jain*

The loosening of geopolitical rigidities after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War opened the way for diverse relationships between nations and a gradual shift towards a multipolar world centred on new associations such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO). This placed Eurasia, the contiguous landmass of Europe and Asia, at the centre of the emerging world order. This vast region, designated the World Island by British strategic thinker Halford Mackinder, includes Africa owing to its proximity to western Asia (the Gulf) and is now torn between the rising geo-economic ambitions and military assertiveness of the old superpowers (the United States and Russia).

Eurasia is now a virtual cauldron, but also the place where the regeneration of the new world order must take place. At the time of writing, there is no visible end to the conflicts in Ukraine or Iran. Europe is deeply divided, and parts of Africa are under stress. Hence, the move to build a new land-based trade network, amid the closure of some critical waterways (the Strait of Hormuz, the Red Sea and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait), has acquired new urgency.

This is the genesis of the Indo-Mediterranean Corridor, originally proposed as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor at the G20 Summit in September 2023. The Corridor will link India and Europe via the Arabian Peninsula through a network of ports, high-speed railways, energy pipelines (electricity cables and hydrogen pipelines) and a digital grid. India will be linked to the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Israel, Greece, Italy and France, as well as the Baltics. By avoiding contested sea lanes, it aims to enable fast, efficient movement of goods, data and resources across borders, strengthening supply chains, reducing transport costs and stimulating sustainable development. The Corridor hopes to attract investment and create jobs.[1]

## China-India ties

On August 1, 2026, India and China reopened trade via Nathu La, an ancient route that carried Indian merchants and pilgrims to Tibet, while Tibetan merchants brought wool to India. Although the Nathu La trade is relatively small and the season short, it is a lifeline for the people on the frontier, offering small traders a chance to exchange their goods, buy supplies for remote districts, and providing work for transport operators and logistics providers.[2]

Improved bilateral ties could positively impact the Indo-Mediterranean Corridor by linking all Eurasian corridors, thereby creating a web of connectivity reminiscent of the ancient routes that once connected Asia with West Asia and Europe, known as the Silk Road, a term coined by a

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German geographer in the 19th century. Nathu La was an important node on the old Silk Road.[3] In July 2026, New Delhi cleared Chinese investment in the critical power sector and negotiated a joint venture for mobile phone manufacturing. India's bilateral trade with China reached around USD 151 billion in 2025-26, leaving a deficit of USD 112 billion.

## Indo-Mediterranean Corridor

The Indo-Mediterranean Corridor aims to connect the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. It comprises two distinct corridors linking eight major stakeholders. The Eastern Corridor links Indian ports such as Mundra, Kandla and Jawaharlal Nehru Port to the Arabian Gulf via the ports of Fujairah, Jebel Ali and Khalifa (UAE) and Dammam and Ras Al Khair (Saudi Arabia), and to Jordan. The Northern Corridor connects the Arabian Gulf, particularly Saudi Arabia and Jordan, to Europe via Israel, using rail and the port of Haifa, which will link to European ports such as Piraeus (Greece). It aims to reduce logistics costs by 30 per cent and transport time by 40 per cent.

The ports will be equipped to handle high-technology trade (electronics, semiconductors, batteries, pharmaceuticals, solar modules, turbines, boilers, reactors, etc., and parts thereof). Priority will be given to completing the sections of the rail network linking the ports in the UAE and Saudi Arabia to the Israeli port. Connectivity between Haifa and the ports of Piraeus (Greece), Gioia Tauro (Italy) and Marseille (France) will be enhanced.

An important goal is to enable the Middle East to transition to low-carbon economies through green hydrogen and integrated electricity grids, and to harness its renewable energy potential. Free trade zones for solar energy could be established and used to produce green hydrogen. A high-speed digital network linking India, the Middle East and Europe will enhance data flow and financial connectivity across the regions.

Funding for this highly ambitious infrastructure project will be a major challenge. The Corridor hopes to attract regional investment by establishing seamless trade routes and ports linking India, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Jordan, Israel, and the European Union, and by mirroring the 7200-km International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC) with Iran and Russia, thereby effectively reinventing the land and maritime routes of the early centuries BC. It will complement other global infrastructure initiatives, including India's Neighbourhood First policy and the proposed Global Biofuel Alliance (launched by India on the sidelines of the G20).

In a disturbing setback before the corridor could take off, Iran's Chabahar Port, in which India has invested USD 370 million, was badly hit by the United States. It was India's gateway to bypass the troubled Strait of Hormuz. This has left the near-complete Zahedan rail project, which aims to link Chabahar with the INSTC, in limbo until the war ends and Iran rebuilds its infrastructure. As the war seems unlikely to end soon, partner countries will have to focus on peaceful zones. This is realistic, as the project involves massive cross-border construction and will anyway require multi-year timelines.

The project remains relevant even without conflict-driven closures of sea routes, as demonstrated by the Suez Canal Blockage of

March 2021, when the container ship Ever Given was beached by strong winds.[4] The six-day crisis affected hundreds of vessels and disrupted nearly 12 per cent of global trade. In 2023-24, the Red Sea was disrupted by Houthi attacks on commercial shipping. Many ships had to take week-long detours, increasing cargo costs.

Moreover, the post-COVID era led to a surge in energy and food prices across the Global South and disrupted supply chains, triggering distress migration. This affected their Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), increased debt burdens, and created significant infrastructure financing gaps. Current estimates suggest that USD 94 trillion in infrastructure investment is needed by 2040, with Asian countries requiring around USD 3.3 trillion per annum.

## Rationale for the project

Expanding conflict zones, from Russia-Ukraine and Israel-Hamas to Iran-US-Israel, and bilateral skirmishes in Africa (coupled with the current unrest in Spain over mass immigration from Morocco) highlight that every region is strategically vital. The need for land-based alternatives is imperative. The Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) was signed by India, the US, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, France, Germany, Italy and the European Union. It covered major G20 initiatives, including the Quality Infrastructure Investment (QII) principles, the Just Energy Transition Partnerships, the Global Biofuel Alliance and the High-Level Principles on Bioeconomy.[5]

The connectivity will span South Asia, BIMSTEC, ASEAN, and the Indo-Pacific to stimulate growth in developing countries through better resource utilisation, reduced trade costs, and the promotion of local industrialisation and MSMEs. It is pertinent that new large-scale projects are emerging in Central Asia, the Caspian Sea region, and the Luzon Corridor in the Asia-Pacific.

A proposal for India-UAE undersea grid connectivity under the One World, One Sun, One Grid (OSOWOG) will link all forms of renewable energy generators, storage, and loads across continents via a transcontinental power transmission grid. Existing infrastructure will be enhanced to deliver on the International Solar Alliance's (ISA) mission of Energy Transition, Energy Security, and Energy Access, with the Corridor and OSOWOG complementing each other. The ultimate goal is to import cheaper clean energy when needed and export excess power, thereby offering the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries access to a broader and more flexible electricity supply. The current GCC Interconnection Grid connects the national grids of the six member states, with a total capacity of 2,400 MW.

Meanwhile, Egypt (not an I-M partner) has moved closer to becoming a regional electricity transmission hub for the Eastern Mediterranean by securing a deal with Greece to build the EU-backed Euro-Africa Interconnector subsea cable. The UAE could eventually link India to the GCC and to the Euro-Africa Interconnector.

The ultimate goal is to integrate Global Value Chains (GVCs) and address all tariff and non-tariff issues, including Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT). The infrastructure gap will be bridged by the G7's Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII). This aims to mobilise USD 600 billion for infrastructure projects across Africa, Europe and the Middle East and would be critical for Indo-Mediterranean Corridor projects. The Government of India has approved the Inter-Governmental Framework Agreement (IGFA) to coordinate between India and the UAE.

For India, the large European market lies at the heart of the India-EU Connectivity Partnership (2021). India's 'Neighbourhood First Policy' and 'Act East Policy' offer opportunities for India's South Asian neighbours and could help ASEAN (India is a Strategic Partner) integrate more effectively with the world through the Indo-Mediterranean Corridor by linking to the Trilateral Highway and the Kaladan Multimodal connectivity project. As several I-M partners are equally invested in trade with the Indo-Pacific, the Corridor could emerge as a viable long-term alternative for global trade passing through the region. A key element of the project is to create a Skill Corridor through collaborations among universities and the establishment of new universities. Think tanks and philanthropic bodies could contribute knowledge. The project would need expertise in ports and infrastructure, energy, multimodal connectivity, climate resilience, the blue economy, digital public infrastructure, etc., with gender-sensitive approaches.

## Digital Corridor

Digital connectivity will eventually create a financial corridor, with interoperability with existing financial systems and national payments across participating countries, such as India's UPI, for cross-border settlements. Emily Tasinato, Visiting Fellow at the Italian think tank Fondazione CSF (Centre for Studies on Federalism), observes that the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, are investing billions of dollars in data centres, cloud infrastructure, semiconductor development, and AI-driven applications.[6] Indeed, Abu Dhabi and Riyadh have positioned themselves as global exporters of computing power, with national champions such as the Emirati G42 and the Saudi HUMAIN securing deals with US firms to develop large-scale AI infrastructure.

The Gulf's strategic location at the crossroads of Europe, Africa, and Asia uniquely positions these countries as pivotal hubs in the global digital economy. They are underpinned by deep capital reserves, low-cost energy, competitive tax regimes, and innovation-friendly regulations, and they offer attractive terms for tech investment. Europe can offer technological know-how and regulatory expertise. The European Union's Digital Decade Policy programme 2030 seeks to boost resilience, competitiveness, and innovation by investing in secure data infrastructure, advancing digital skills, and promoting a sustainable and ethical digital transformation.

India enters this triangle with technological dynamism, its Semiconductor Mission and National Quantum Mission, a role in shaping global AI governance debates, and the hosting of the 2026 AI Impact Summit. India also offers a vast domestic market, an expanding digital ecosystem, and a deep pool of technology talent. The Stanford AI Index 2025 ranked India second worldwide for AI skill penetration from 2015 to 2024.

## Trade agreements

Bilateral trade agreements among the EU, the Gulf, and India will strengthen the Corridor. The EU and India signed the largest Free Trade Agreement in January 2026 (awaiting signature and ratification by the European and Indian parliaments). Brussels is New Delhi's largest trading partner, with a combined market of around USD 25 trillion.

The Gulf States account for nearly 15 per cent of India's foreign trade (USD 180 billion in 2025). Over the past decade, New Delhi has broadened its engagement beyond energy and expatriate labour to include infrastructure investment, advanced technologies, logistics, and defence cooperation. Ties with the UAE have deepened through mini-lateral formats such as the I2U2 (India-Israel-UAE-US), supported by the 2022 Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA). Defence cooperation has evolved into a formal strategic defence partnership. In fact, the India-UAE tie is the most active component of the Corridor, with significant investments from both governments.

Europe has also deepened ties with the Gulf amid concerns about energy security following the war in Ukraine. In recent years, Europe-Gulf ties have broadened to include renewables, critical raw materials, AI and hi-tech, finance and fintech, and security cooperation. The 2022 Joint Communication on a "Strategic Partnership with the Gulf" and the 2024 EU-GCC Summit are important milestones. Europe is the Gulf's second-largest trading partner after China, and Brussels is seeking bilateral Strategic Partnership Agreements (SPAs) with Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.

The Corridor has been shaped by the Abraham Accords and the I2U2 framework, and by the hope that Saudi Arabia and Israel would normalise relations, as hinted at by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in September 2023. However, the war in Gaza and alarm in Riyadh and Amman over a militarily assertive Israel have stalled progress. This underscores the need for flexible routings that could include nations not currently part of the project, such as Egypt (via the Strait of Tiran), Syria (through the Saudi-backed Silk Link project), and Turkey.

## Reviving the Corridor

Global events have spurred renewed efforts to get the corridor up and running. Talks between the Greek Foreign Minister and the Indian External Affairs Minister (February 8, 2026); the Israeli Minister of Economy and Industry (February 12, 2026); and the Indian Prime Minister and the French President (February 12, 2026) advanced the matter.[7] During Prime Minister Modi's visit to Washington in February 2025, the India-US Joint Statement (issued on February 13, 2026) declared that "The leaders plan to convene partners from the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor and the I2U2 Group within the next six months in order to announce new initiatives in 2025." President Trump called it "one of the greatest trade routes in all of history."

There are geopolitical complexities. Turkey and Egypt are important regional powers not yet included in the project. The day after the announcement, Turkish President Erdogan said, "There's no corridor without Turkey", alluding to the shipping route between Israel and Greece, which passes through waters disputed by Ankara. Moreover, the Chinese shipping company Cosco holds the majority stake in the port of Piraeus (Greece), while Italy and France have positioned themselves as alternatives.

The security environment and funding remain challenging. Saudi Arabia has committed USD 20 billion, a fraction of the USD 600 billion that partner countries have pledged to mobilise by 2027. The MoU does not impose financial obligations on stakeholder countries, and experts expect significant funding through the G7's Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment.

## The Mediterranean Gates

The Mediterranean region, especially Italy, Spain and Greece, the Nordic region and Central Europe are important to the Corridor's success. Eastern Europe has gained new geopolitical significance due to the eastern Mediterranean oil and gas discoveries, the normalisation of Israel's ties with some Arab nations and the intensifying civil wars in the Levant and North Africa.

India's External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar, highlighting the importance of the Mediterranean, said, "India's annual trade with the Mediterranean nations is about USD 80 billion. We have a diaspora here of 460,000. About 40 per cent of that in Italy." (Rome, November 2024) He identified fertilisers, energy, water technology, diamonds, defence and cyber as India's main interests and noted India's expanding defence collaboration with the Mediterranean region.[8] India hopes to link the Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific via the Mediterranean.

India's bilateral relations with Greece were elevated to a strategic partnership in August 2023. The two countries aim to double bilateral trade by 2030 and to expand cooperation in space science, biotechnology, clean energy, defence, maritime security, and cultural exchange. India's ties with Spain have also been strengthening. Spanish President Pedro Sánchez visited in October 2024 and emphasised trade, investment, tourism, culture, and multilateral diplomacy. Spain is eager to invest in India's defence production, notably through the Spanish Airbus project to produce the C-295 military transport aircraft in Gujarat, in partnership with the Tatas. Madrid supports India's participation in the Ibero-American summit (November 4-5, 2026) as an Associate Observer, which will enhance India's Latin American footprint.

The New Delhi-Rome relationship, strained during the Italian Marines case (2012), was reset by Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's 2023 visit to India. It was elevated to a comprehensive strategic relationship, with defence cooperation and military-technical research emerging as a focal area. At the Raisina Dialogue, Meloni noted that the Mediterranean Sea links the Euro-Atlantic area with the Indo-Pacific littoral.

With 110 ports, 62 commercial hubs, 20 primary commercial ports, and 16 Port System Authorities, Italy aims to achieve €700 billion in annual exports via the Indo-Mediterranean corridor.[9] Trieste is emerging as a rail hub linking the Mediterranean to Central and Eastern Europe and the Balkans. With the Blue Raman cable, a high-capacity fibre-optic network linking Europe to India and spanning France, Italy, Greece, Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Djibouti, and Oman, Italy is positioning itself as a digital hub in the Mediterranean. The "Italia Digitale

2026" programme and the Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza (National Recovery and Resilience Plan) allocate €6.7 billion to broadband and digital services, including secure cloud services and digital wallet pilots. Data-centre investments are projected to reach €30 billion by 2026.

Italy's bidirectional electricity submarine power cables (Italy–Tunisia) and the Trans Adriatic Links (Italy–Albania–UAE) facilitate the transfer of renewable power to the EU. Upgrades at the Port of Trieste are underway to support increased imports of green hydrogen, ammonia and LNG, under bilateral renewable energy projects with Gulf partners.

India–Italy bilateral trade has risen from €10.49 billion in 2021 to €14.24 billion in 2024, and is projected to reach €20 billion by 2029. In FY 2025, Indian exports of €7.1 billion were dominated by engineering goods, electronics, and organic and inorganic chemicals, while imports included machinery such as nuclear reactors, boilers, and other electrical machinery, as well as organic chemicals. Under the India–EU FTA, Italy plans a €500 million investment in 2026 in sectors such as pharma, maritime, and digitalisation to diversify supply chains along the Corridor.

There is a need to explore alternative transit points, including Cyprus and Greece (for decongestion and rapid evacuation from Haifa, Israel), and the India–Dar es Salaam–North Africa and India–Dar es Salaam–Lobito corridors.

## Africa

Africa is too large a continent and too close to Eurasia to be ignored, not to mention the wealth of its natural resources. The energy crisis caused by the wars in Ukraine and Iran prompted Algeria to begin work on its section of the Trans-Saharan Gas Pipeline (TSGP) in June 2026. Planned in the 1970s, the 4,128-km-long pipeline runs from Nigeria (1,185 km) through Niger (720 km) to Algeria (2,424 km).[10] It will connect to Algeria's existing gas network near Aoulef and extend to the Mediterranean export terminals.

Morocco is keen to compete with the pipeline. The USD 25 billion African Atlantic Gas Pipeline, a 6,900-km Nigeria-Morocco line, has an annual capacity of 30 bcm and links 13 nations along the Atlantic coast of West Africa. Morocco hopes to become the transit axis of the West African gas corridor and to strengthen its relations with the EU. Algeria has completed its 2,400 km stretch of the Trans-Saharan Highway, which will link North Africa with the Sahel markets. It connects Mediterranean ports with countries farther south and will boost intra-continental trade integration. Only the complex stretches connecting Algeria with Mali and Niger remain; a link between Niger and Chad is possible.

## Continuing the quest

Recent diplomatic visits by Prime Minister Modi have had a particular focus on Eurasia: France and Slovakia (June 2026); the United Arab Emirates, the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, and Italy (May 2026); and Israel (February 2026). He signed a number of bilateral pacts covering technology, energy security, defence, green technology, Critical and Emerging Technologies, artificial intelligence, and critical minerals. Modi's most recent tour to Indonesia, Australia, and New Zealand (July 6-11, 2026) reaches the outer circle of the globe, in a positive take on Kautilya's Mandala concept of seeking layers of friendship, leapfrogging or bypassing inimical nations.

Indonesia is critical to India's Indo-Pacific strategy. Both nations cooperate within the G20, ASEAN, BRICS, and the Indian Ocean Rim Association. India imports coal, iron, steel, and palm oil, and is keen to procure rare-earth minerals, particularly nickel (Indonesia's reserves exceed 20% of the global total), cobalt, tin, and bauxite. Joint ventures are being considered to extract and process Indonesia's critical minerals, to create more resilient supply chains.

A mechanism to settle transactions in local currencies is being pursued to reduce dependence on the US dollar. Another plan is to integrate payment systems and use AI to build digital infrastructure for payments and market monitoring. India has agreed to supply Indonesia with Russian-Indian BrahMos missile systems, Indian Astra missiles, and other weaponry. Finally, through cultural and educational diplomacy, India will assist in the restoration of Indonesia's monumental Hindu temple complex of Prambanan.

Indonesia has entered into a strategic partnership with Belarus to access the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) market.[11] Indonesia mainly exports raw commodities and semi-finished products and imports technology and capital goods. Belarus can support Indonesia's industrialisation with heavy equipment, agricultural machinery, potash fertilisers, and defence technology.

According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the Suez Canal carried 12-15 per cent of global trade in 2023, a figure that fell by 42 per cent amid Red Sea disruptions in early 2024.[12] Trade via the Cape of Good Hope increased by 89 per cent. Former Egyptian minister Khaled Hanafy opines that the success of the Indo-Mediterranean Corridor will be measured by the extent to which the Middle East becomes an economic node with added value. The World Bank's 2024 Container Port Performance Index (CPPI) ranks Port Said third, Tanger Med fifth, Hamad Port in Qatar eleventh, and Salalah Port in the Sultanate of Oman fifteenth in global rankings, despite the Red Sea crisis that year.

However, the current conflict with Iran has affected the Suez Canal. In March 2025, the Egyptian president lamented that Egypt was losing around USD 800 million per month in canal revenues due to regional disruptions. This underscores that the value of trade corridors is linked to security, stability, resilience, insurance, and political readiness. Hanafy advised that the Indo-Mediterranean Corridor must emphasise regulatory coordination, customs clearance, port-to-rail connectivity, upgraded digital services, harmonised standards, secured investments, and reduced risk of disruption.

For the Gulf region, which has suffered severe damage due to the Iran-US-Israel hostilities, the Corridor offers a grand opportunity to position itself at the heart of global trade chains by investing in manufacturing, advanced logistics services, special economic zones, clean energy, and the digital economy.

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# Chokepoints of the World: How a Handful of Narrow Waters Hold Global Commerce Hostage

Vibhuti Jha*

## Introduction

More than 80 per cent of world trade by volume moves by sea, and almost all of it is forced, at some point, through a small number of narrow passages that geography has turned into strategic bottlenecks. These maritime "chokepoints" — straits, canals, and channels sometimes only a few kilometres wide — carry oil tankers, container ships, and bulk carriers past coastlines controlled by a handful of states, non-state militias, or under contested territorial claims. Unlike most infrastructure vulnerabilities, chokepoints cannot easily be hardened, rerouted cheaply, or replaced; a port can be rebuilt in a few years, but a strait cannot be moved. That immovability is what makes them potent instruments of coercion, and why control over them — formal or informal — has been a preoccupation of naval powers since the age of sail.

When a chokepoint closes or even slows, the effects ripple out within days: freight rates spike, insurance premiums soar, fuel prices shift, and supply chains thousands of miles away seize up. A tanker delayed by three weeks does not just cost its owner money; it can leave a refinery short of crude, a power plant short of gas, or a retailer short of inventory during a critical selling season. Because so much of modern trade runs on just-in-time logistics with minimal buffer stock, even a temporary chokepoint disruption can cascade through an economy far faster than the physical distance involved would suggest.

2026 has been a brutal demonstration of this fragility, compressing decades' worth of chokepoint risk into a single year. The Strait of Hormuz has been effectively shut for months by war between the United States, Israel, and Iran — the most severe disruption to Gulf oil shipping since the tanker wars of the 1980s. The Red Sea and Suez Canal corridor, still recovering from the Houthi campaign that began in late 2023, has been rattled by a fresh blockade of Saudi ports. And in the eastern Indian Ocean, India has been quietly building military and commercial muscle around the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, precisely because it understands what happens when a rising power loses the ability to watch, and if necessary, contest, a chokepoint like the Strait of Malacca. Layered on top of all this is India's push for the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), an ambitious attempt to build an entirely new trade route that sidesteps both the most exposed sea lanes and a Chinese network of ports many in New Delhi see as a slow-motion encirclement.

This essay examines four of the world's most consequential maritime chokepoints — Hormuz, Suez, Malacca, and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands overlooking it — alongside IMEC, the

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corridor designed to reduce India's exposure to both chokepoint closures and Chinese strategic pressure. Together, they illustrate a single, uncomfortable truth about the modern global economy: its arteries run through a handful of narrow spaces that no single power fully controls.

## Why Chokepoints Matter: A Brief Anatomy of Vulnerability

Before turning to the specific cases, it is worth understanding why chokepoints carry such outsized strategic weight relative to their physical size. Three features set them apart from ordinary trade routes. First, they concentrate risk that would otherwise be diffuse: the open ocean offers ships an almost infinite number of paths, whereas a strait offers one, or at most a few. An actor who can credibly threaten it — through mines, missiles, small boats, or simply the assertion of sovereign control — affects a volume of trade wildly disproportionate to their military or economic size. The Houthi movement in Yemen, a lightly resourced non-state actor fighting a civil war, has redirected a meaningful share of world container shipping using little more than drones, small missiles, and speedboats, purely because of its location.

Second, energy chokepoints carry unique macroeconomic power: oil and gas are priced globally and consumed almost everywhere, so a supply shock at Hormuz does not stay local — it shows up in fuel prices in Tokyo, Rotterdam, and Los Angeles within days. Third, the alternatives are almost always inferior, not merely different. Rerouting around the Cape of Good Hope instead of Suez adds roughly two weeks and hundreds of thousands of dollars in fuel costs; rerouting around Malacca adds distance and is poorly suited to the largest vessels. This asymmetry is precisely what gives states and armed groups near a chokepoint their leverage: they need not block trade outright, only make the alternative expensive enough to hurt.

## The Strait of Hormuz: The World's Oil Tap

The Strait of Hormuz, a waterway barely 33 kilometres wide at its narrowest point between Iran and Oman, is the single most important chokepoint in the global energy system. In 2025, roughly a quarter of the world's seaborne crude and petroleum products, and close to a fifth of global liquefied natural gas, passed through it, feeding refineries and power grids across Asia, Europe, and beyond. No other chokepoint carries a comparable share of a commodity as globally essential as oil, which is why Hormuz has functioned for decades as shorthand in energy markets for worst-case geopolitical risk.

That importance has made Hormuz the epicentre of the most serious chokepoint crisis in decades. Since late February 2026, when a US-Israeli air campaign against Iran escalated into open war — including the assassination of Iran's supreme leader — Iran has treated the strait as a weapon of retaliation. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps issued blanket warnings that no ship was permitted to pass, laid sea mines, and boarded and attacked merchant vessels it deemed non-compliant. The toll has been severe: a tugboat sunk, more than a dozen merchant ships damaged or abandoned, two vessels captured, more than a dozen seafarers killed or missing, and port workers killed in strikes on Bahrain. The United States, in turn, imposed a naval blockade on Iran, launched an aerial campaign against Iranian missile sites and mine-laying vessels, and organised escort operations to help commercial ships navigate the strait safely.

What makes the Hormuz crisis particularly instructive is its resistance to diplomatic resolution. A ceasefire and memorandum of understanding reached in spring 2026 briefly promised to reopen the strait, but conflict resumed by midsummer as Iranian forces attacked shipping deemed non-compliant. By August, Iran's Supreme National Security Council had set out sweeping conditions for reopening the waterway: an end to the US naval blockade and sanctions, withdrawal of American forces, war reparations, and a halt to US strikes on Iran's regional allies. Gulf states have responded by forming new defence arrangements among themselves, including a "Mecca Joint Defence Pact," reflecting recognition that no single country's navy can now guarantee safe passage.

The economic outcome has been exactly what energy officials feared: fuel shortages in parts of Asia, sharply higher shipping and insurance costs, and — as the head of the International Energy Agency warned in mid-2026 — a broader threat to global energy security that will persist as long as the Strait remains a war zone rather than a normal commercial waterway. Hormuz is, in short, a reminder that even the most heavily patrolled chokepoint in the world can be closed by a determined regional power willing to accept enormous economic self-harm to do so.

## The Suez Canal and the Red Sea: Commerce Under Fire

If Hormuz is the world's oil tap, the Suez Canal is its trade artery — the shortest sea link between Asia and Europe, saving ships a multi-week detour around the Cape of Good Hope and carrying around 12 per cent of global trade in a normal year. The canal's vulnerability lies not in the 193-kilometre ditch itself, which is well defended and entirely under Egyptian control, but in its approaches: the Red Sea and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, a passage between Yemen and the Horn of Africa, within range of missiles and drones launched from Yemeni territory.

The Houthi campaign, which began in November 2023 and was ostensibly in solidarity with Gaza, showed how a lightly armed non-state actor could impose costs on global trade far beyond its size. It began with the seizure of the cargo ship Galaxy Leader and rapidly escalated into a sustained campaign against commercial shipping linked, in the Houthis' judgment, to Israel, the United States, or their allies. More than a hundred merchant vessels have been targeted, several ships have been sunk or seized, and at least a dozen seafarers have been killed. The disruption to trade was immediate and severe: container traffic through Suez collapsed from roughly 80 ships a week before the crisis to as few as 26 by early 2026, as major carriers — Maersk prominent among them — rerouted their Asia-Europe services around the Cape of Good Hope, incurring hundreds of millions of dollars in losses along the way.

Traffic began to recover in early 2026 as attacks paused for roughly three months, and new infrastructure — including a semi-automated container terminal at Egypt's Sokhna Port — was built in anticipation of a full reopening. But the respite proved temporary. In July 2026, the Houthis announced a blockade on vessels calling at Saudi Arabian ports, warning that any vessel calling at ports within their operational reach could be sanctioned or targeted. Weekly transits through the Bab el-Mandeb, which had climbed to their highest levels since December 2023 as confidence returned, fell sharply again — mainstream tanker traffic dropped by more than 40 per cent within a week. Saudi Arabia responded by increasing exports through its Red Sea port of Yanbu by roughly fivefold, and by using the Sumed pipeline to move crude overland around the most exposed stretch of water, since a fully laden supertanker cannot transit Suez without first offloading part of its cargo.

The lesson of the Red Sea crisis is that a chokepoint's security depends not only on the chokepoint itself but also on the political stability of every coastline within missile range— and that instability can be imported from a conflict, such as Gaza or the wider Iran standoff, that has nothing directly to do with shipping. It also illustrates the interconnection between the chokepoints examined here: the same Iran-aligned Houthi movement waging war on Red Sea shipping is itself a proxy actor in the broader confrontation at Hormuz, so the two crises have at times moved in tandem, with each escalation in one theatre raising the risk of escalation in the other.

## The Strait of Malacca: Asia's Indispensable Corridor

Between Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula, the Strait of Malacca funnels an estimated 25–30 per cent of global trade and nearly half of the world's seaborne oil through a stretch of water so narrow — under 3 kilometres at its tightest point, the Phillips Channel — that it is one of the most severe bottlenecks in international shipping. More than 90,000 vessels transit it each year, making it, by traffic volume, arguably the busiest chokepoint on earth. It carries oil from the Persian Gulf towards China, Japan, and South Korea, and manufactured goods the other way towards Europe and North America.

Malacca's risks differ in character from those of Hormuz or Suez. There is no single hostile state currently threatening closure; instead, the danger is a composite of piracy, the sheer density and narrowness of traffic (raising collision and grounding risks to levels unmatched almost anywhere else), and its status as a long-term geopolitical pressure point. Chinese strategists have, for two decades, spoken openly of the "Malacca Dilemma," a phrase associated with former President Hu Jintao: the recognition that China's energy and trade lifelines pass through a strait China does not control and that could, in a crisis, be interdicted by a rival navy — chiefly the United States, but increasingly India as well. Roughly 80 per cent of China's crude oil imports are estimated to transit Malacca, a dependency Beijing has spent billions trying to hedge against, including through the string of ports discussed below.

That dilemma is precisely why the strait's approaches have become an arena of quiet yet intensifying strategic competition. Malaysia controls the western flank, Indonesia the eastern and southern approaches, and Singapore sits at the confluence with the South China Sea. None wants Malacca closed, since all depend on its traffic, but each is a small or medium power navigating between larger patrons. Against this backdrop, India's posture in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which sit almost directly athwart the strait's northern and western entrances, takes on outsized significance.

## Andaman and Nicobar: India's Watch-tower on the Malacca Approaches

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands sit astride the western entrance to the Strait of Malacca, and India has spent the past two decades transforming this archipelago from a remote, lightly garrisoned outpost into its principal maritime power-projection base in the east. The islands host India's only tri-service command, uniting army, navy, and air force assets. New Delhi has been sharply accelerating investment there: a dual-use civilian-military airport on Great Nicobar under Indian Navy control, capable of hosting large transport and surveillance aircraft; reinforced runways and fuel storage on Car Nicobar; and, most significant commercially, the Great Nicobar Project — a deep-water international transhipment port at Galathea Bay designed to intercept containerised cargo moving between West Asia, South Asia, and East Asia, while giving India persistent surveillance over shipping entering and leaving Malacca.

The strategic logic is clear in Indian policy circles: Great Nicobar lies only about 230 kilometres from the strait's northern entrance, near the maritime boundary with Myanmar and Indonesia, giving India the ability to monitor — and, in a crisis, potentially contest — one of the world's most important shipping lanes. The islands also give India oversight of the Six Degree and Ten-Degree Channels, which ships must use to approach Malacca from the west.

This has been reinforced diplomatically as well as militarily. In mid-2026, India and Indonesia — which controls the strait's southern gateway — signed a new maritime safety and security framework during Prime Minister Modi's visit and agreed to jointly develop Indonesia's port of Sabang, which sits at the strait's western mouth. Analysts describe the resulting configuration as a maritime arc bracketing Malacca's western entrance from both sides. The stated aims are twofold: to give India leverage over a chokepoint that China depends on for the great majority of its energy imports, and to reduce India's reliance on any single chokepoint — including Hormuz, from which India sources a substantial share of its crude.

## IMEC: Building a Way Around the Chokepoints

If the Andaman and Nicobar buildup is India's answer to defending a chokepoint it does not own, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor is its answer to reducing dependence on chokepoints altogether — and to countering a much older, more diffuse Chinese strategy aimed squarely at India's maritime periphery. For nearly two decades, Indian strategists have warned of a Chinese "String of Pearls": a network of commercial ports and dual-use facilities — Gwadar in Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, Kyaukpyu in Myanmar, Chittagong in Bangladesh, and a base in Djibouti — those arcs from the South China Sea to the Horn of Africa and encircles India's coastline on almost every side. Individually commercial and mostly Belt and Road-financed, these facilities collectively give China's navy potential access points around India's maritime backyard.

Gwadar is often singled out as the most consequential "pearl," offering China a deep-water port on the Arabian Sea that bypasses Malacca entirely, thereby undercutting one of the few points of leverage India might otherwise hold over China's energy supply lines. India's naval response has been dubbed the "Necklace of Diamonds" strategy — an expanded network of bases, partnerships, and surveillance posts intended to counter-encircle China's access to the Indian Ocean, with the Andaman and Nicobar buildup forming the eastern anchor.

IMEC, announced at the 2023 G20 summit in New Delhi and involving India, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, the EU, and the US as core signatories, adds an economic dimension to that counter-strategy. The plan links India to Europe via two legs: an eastern maritime corridor connecting Indian ports to Gulf ports, and a northern corridor of rail, energy, and data links running overland through Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Israel to Mediterranean ports and beyond into Europe. Because the northern leg moves cargo by rail, it would allow India-Europe trade to bypass Suez, the Red Sea, and Bab el-Mandeb entirely — precisely the corridor repeatedly closed by Houthi attacks. Proponents have also cast IMEC as the Western-backed answer to China's Belt and Road Initiative: an alternative connectivity architecture that does not run through Chinese-financed ports.

For India specifically, IMEC serves a second, less publicised function: it provides a direct land-and-sea bridge to the Middle East and Europe that does not depend on chokepoints China can influence through its Pakistani and Sri Lankan footholds. Roughly half of India's total exports, and nearly four-fifths of its exports to Europe, currently move via the Red Sea route — a dependency the Houthi crisis has made painfully visible and that IMEC is designed to reduce. Combined with the Andaman and Nicobar posture watching Malacca from the east, IMEC gives India a second axis of connectivity to the west. Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal has described IMEC as positioning India as "a trusted bridge of global connectivity," with projected reductions in logistics costs of up to 30 per cent and transit times of up to 40 per cent.

The reality, however, has lagged well behind the ambition. As of mid-2026, IMEC remains largely in the planning and early-construction phase, three years after its announcement. Working groups have been formed among signatories; India and the UAE have signed an intergovernmental framework agreement covering a shared logistics platform; Saudi Arabia has pledged roughly $20 billion; and some component projects — rail lines, port upgrades — have broken ground independently of any unified financing mechanism. Yet there is still no dedicated funding structure, no binding US legislation, and no firm construction timeline for the corridor as a whole. Critically, its central land route runs through Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Israel, meaning its viability hinges on a degree of Saudi-Israeli normalisation that the

Gaza war has significantly complicated. The 2026 Hormuz war has, if anything, strengthened the strategic case for IMEC — but strategic logic alone has not yet translated into a fully financed, fully built alternative route. IMEC today is best understood less as an operating corridor than as a live option kept open in case Hormuz, Suez, or Malacca fail all at once.

## The Common Thread: Concentration Risk in a Networked World

Taken together, these cases illustrate a single structural problem: global trade's dependence on maritime chokepoints has not been "designed away" by decades of globalisation — if anything, it has deepened, since just-in-time supply chains and containerised shipping reward the shortest, most efficient routes, which usually means the narrowest ones. A handful of states or armed groups sitting on a few kilometres of coastline can impose costs measured in the tens of billions of dollars on the rest of the world.

Several patterns recur across Hormuz, Suez, and Malacca, helping explain why chokepoint crises have become more frequent and consequential rather than less over the past three years:

- **Escalation elsewhere spills into shipping lanes.** None of the current crises began as a shipping dispute. Hormuz was closed in retaliation for a war over Iran's nuclear programme; the Red Sea was attacked in solidarity with Gaza; Malacca's tensions stem from the much larger rivalry between China, India, and the United States. Chokepoints serve as pressure-release valves for conflicts fought primarily on land or in the air.
- **Diversion is possible, but never free.** Ships can reroute around the Cape of Good Hope, offload cargo at Sumed, or use the Sunda and Lombok Straits — but each alternative adds transit time, fuel costs, and steep war-risk insurance premiums, which are ultimately passed on to consumers.
- **Control is as much about presence as about ownership.** No state legally "owns" Hormuz, Malacca, or the approaches to the Red Sea. Yet naval presence and credible interdiction confer practical control that legal ownership never could — exactly what India is building in the Andamans and what China has built through the String of Pearls.
- **Costs fall disproportionately on distant, uninvolved economies.** Fuel shortages from the Hormuz closure have hit Asian consumers with no stake in the conflict; Red Sea disruptions have squeezed European manufacturers; a Malacca disruption would hit China, Japan, and South Korea hardest, none of which control the strait. This asymmetry is precisely what gives initiatives such as IMEC their political appeal.

## Conclusion

The security of global commerce rests on a surprisingly small set of narrow waterways, and 2026 has made clear, with unusual force, how easily that security can fracture. Hormuz shows what happens when a chokepoint becomes an active theatre of war and how difficult such a crisis is to resolve once both sides have committed to it. Suez and the Red Sea show how a determined non-state actor, equipped with comparatively cheap missiles and drones, can keep a share of global trade at risk for years, with periods of recovery and relapse tied to a conflict hundreds of miles away. The buildup around the Andaman and Nicobar Islands shows how rising powers now treat chokepoint access as a long-term strategic asset, secured deliberately in peacetime rather than improvised in a crisis. And IMEC shows the emerging, if still unproven, alternative: building new overland and maritime routes that let trade sidesteps the most exposed straits entirely, even as its own slow progress shows how hard such alternatives are to finance compared with how easy they are to announce.

None of these responses offers a complete solution. A more heavily defended Hormuz does not stop Iran from mining it; an Indian naval presence around Malacca constrains but does not eliminate the "Malacca Dilemma" for China; and IMEC, even if fully built, would carry only a fraction of the volume currently moving through Suez. What all four responses share is a recognition that redundancy, not invulnerability, is the only realistic goal. As rivalries between major powers intensify and regional conflicts continue to spill into shipping lanes never designed to absorb them, the resilience of world trade will depend less on making any single chokepoint permanently safe and more on how much redundancy — alternative routes, forward-deployed naval partnerships, and diversified trade corridors — states and shipping companies can build before the next chokepoint closes, and the one after that.

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# The Indo-Mediterranean: Recovering India's Historical Western Horizon

Manogna Sastry and Subhodeep Mukhopadhyay*

## Introduction

Contemporary discussions of the Indo-Mediterranean often present it as a novel geopolitical construct emerging from initiatives such as the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). This paper argues instead that the Indo-Mediterranean is the re-emergence of an older civilisational and maritime geography, in which the Arabian Sea, Persian Gulf, Red Sea, and Mediterranean formed an interconnected commercial and cultural network, with India as one of its principal nodes.

This geography receded from Indian strategic thought not merely because trade routes changed, but through successive strategic and conceptual disruptions. Continental volatility redirected political attention towards land defence, while European naval powers displaced indigenous Bhâratîya control of its maritime space. Colonial cartography universalised territorial categories while marginalising native frameworks of connectivity, a manifestation of what Rajiv Malhotra calls Western Universalism. Partition and subsequent security pressures reinforced this orientation, recasting West Asia from an extended maritime neighbourhood into a region viewed primarily in terms of energy, diaspora and crisis management.

IMEC should therefore be situated within the reconstitution of an Indo-Mediterranean strategic continuum rather than understood only as infrastructure or great-power competition. Viewed through this lens, India is not merely a participant but a civilisational connector whose future role depends on shaping connectivity between the Indian Ocean, West Asia and Europe.

Our paper comprises three sections. The first examines ancient Indian Ocean maritime traditions using archaeological and textual evidence. The second discusses the decline of this maritime focus in India's strategic thinking and its impact on the IMEC. Finally, we frame the Indo-Mediterranean strategic shift as a revival of India's historical western horizon, aligned with current geostrategic realities.

## Ancient Indian Ocean Region Maritime Networks: Maritime Orientation of Northwestern India

Lothal, in present-day Gujarat, exemplifies the Harappan cultural sphere's maritime orientation and the active trade in the region during that period. The Archaeological Survey of India describes the site as "a Harappan port town" in its excavation report, reflecting its maritime centrality.[1] Lothal,

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Dholavira, Kuntasi, and other centres in Gujarat linked inland production zones to the Gulf of Kutch, the Makran coast in Iran, Oman, Bahrain, and southern Mesopotamia. Etched carnelian beads, produced using specialised South Asian techniques and recovered across the Persian Gulf and Mesopotamia, indicate organised, repeated exchange rather than chance contact.

Mesopotamian cuneiform texts from the Akkadian and Ur III periods distinguish Meluhha, Magan and Dilmun as distinct participants in Gulf trade, identifying Meluhha with the Indus Civilisation on the basis of textual, archaeological and material evidence.[2] Mesopotamian records refer to Meluhhan ships, merchants, and even an interpreter of the Meluhhan language, indicating direct commercial interaction rather than merely indirect exchange via intermediaries.[3] Evidence from the 3rd millennium BCE shows that Meluhhan ships reached Mesopotamian ports, and some Meluhhans lived in Sumer. Harappan seals found at Ur, Susa, Tell Asmar, and other Mesopotamian sites, together with Mesopotamian artefacts in Harappan settlements, highlight reciprocal exchange.[4]

## Indigenous Navigational Knowledge

The traditional Western narrative that a Greek navigator named Hippalus "discovered" the monsoon is not a literal account of how navigation in the Arabian Sea began. Communities around the Indian Ocean had observed seasonal wind patterns long before Greek and Roman authors documented them. Indian, Arabian, and Gulf sailors were already navigating routes based on their understanding of seasonal winds, ocean currents, coastal landmarks, water sources, and optimal sailing conditions.[5]

The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea reflects this established maritime knowledge and identifies Barygaza (Bharuch), linked to inland production centres via the Narmada, as a major port. Together with Barbarikon, Sopara, Kalyan, and ports along the Konkan and Malabar coasts, it formed a coastal network that gathered and redistributed goods before they passed through Arabia and Egypt..[6]

## Indian Merchants at Socotra and Epigraphic Evidence in Egypt

The Hoq Cave inscriptions on the strategic island of Socotra in Yemen provide direct evidence of Indian travellers at the entrance to the Gulf of Aden. Predominantly written in Indian scripts, especially Brahmi, they record the names, origins, and affiliations of visitors who used the island as a stopover between western India, southern Arabia, the Horn of Africa, and the Red Sea. Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions from Quseir al-Qadim, the ancient Red Sea port of Myos Hormos, and Berenike likewise establish the presence of Tamil-speaking travellers in Roman Egypt, while inscriptions in the Valley of the Kings indicate movement beyond coastal trading settlements into the Nile-Red Sea corridor.[7,8,9] Findings from Bahrain, Oman, Mesopotamia, Failaka Island, and Berenike indicate that Red Sea ports were major contact zones linking South Asian trade to the Roman, Arab, and African worlds.[10,11,12]

The Muziris Papyrus also shows that commerce between southern India and Egypt was supported by credit, contracts, taxation, cargo assessment, and institutional enforcement. One side contains part of a loan agreement financing a commercial enterprise linked to southern India; the other records the fiscal valuation of a cargo imported aboard the vessel Hermapollon.[13] These transactions involved a range of stakeholders, including capital providers, shipowners, merchants, cargo agents, customs officials, warehouse operators, and purchasers.

The Indo-Mediterranean trade formed a network of institutions linking Indian production centres to coastal emporia, with sea routes connecting Arabia, Egypt, Alexandria, and Mediterranean markets. Indian merchants and sailors linked the Arabian Sea and the Red Sea, demonstrating that the Indian subcontinent played an active role in trade rather than merely serving as an endpoint of Mediterranean expansion.[14]

## Indian perspectives

Ancient Indian textual traditions treated maritime activity not as peripheral or exceptional, but as an integral component of statecraft, commerce, and political geography. The Arthaúâstra assigns the Navâdhyakc a (Superintendent of Ships) responsibility for ships, ports, ferries, navigation, customs, and maritime trade, presenting the sea as a regulated economic space through which goods, merchants, and revenue moved under state supervision. The Arthaúâstra regards the western sea (apara samudra) as part of the state's commercial geography. [15]

Sangam literature offers another important indigenous southern Indian perspective. Poems describe Yavana (Ionian) merchants arriving by sea, bringing gold and wine and purchasing pepper and other valuable commodities from ports such as Kaveripattanam (Puhar).[16] The Akanânûru and Puranânûru references to foreign gold mirror Pliny the Elder's well-known complaints about Roman bullion flowing eastward. Although independent, the Tamil poems and Pliny together offer valuable evidence of the trade connections between southern India and the Roman world.[17] The Chera, Chola and Pandya polities are portrayed as maritime kingdoms whose prosperity and prestige depended in part on ports, merchant activity and overseas exchange. The Pattinappâlai presents maritime exchange as a defining feature of urban life on the Tamil coast.[18, 19]

More broadly, Indian texts generally described the western world through peoples—Yavana-s, Pârasîka-s, Úaka-s, Bâhlika-s and Kamboja-s—rather than as a bounded "Mediterranean" region. The argument advanced here is not that premodern Indian sources possessed a concept equivalent to the modern term "Indo-Mediterranean." Rather, "Indo-Mediterranean" is employed as a contemporary analytical category for a historically demonstrable geography of interaction that modern regional classifications subsequently divided into the Indian Ocean, West Asia and the Mediterranean. The cumulative evidence presents the Arabian Sea and its western extensions as a historically layered commercial continuum, linked by repeated voyages, resident merchant communities, transferable financial practices, intermediary ports and inland transport corridors. India was therefore not a passive endpoint of Mediterranean expansion but an active centre, with ports, merchants and producers helping to shape the wider western Indian Ocean economy. [20]

## Why this Geography disappeared from India's Strategic Consciousness

The Indo-Mediterranean region, despite its historical significance, became less prominent in India's strategic outlook as political disruptions shifted focus from maritime to continental security. Over several centuries, recurrent pressures on the subcontinent's northwestern approaches increasingly competed with maritime priorities for the attention of major political formations; European expansion subsequently transformed this imbalance by progressively transferring coercive control of the sea to European powers. The emergence of the modern territorial state further consolidated this transformation in three key stages.

The first major transformation began in the 11th century with successive waves of incursions by Turco-Afghan, Persian, and Central Asian forces. The Indo-Gangetic plain and the northwestern frontier became key arenas of political competition, prompting states to prioritise cavalry, fortifications, and continental empires over maritime commerce. While ports such as Cambay and Surat remained active, maritime influence in state strategy diminished.

European expansion brought significant changes in its second stage, as the Portuguese, Dutch and British sought to control commerce through naval power, fortified ports and monopolistic companies. While Indian merchants remained active, maritime security and political authority shifted to European powers, diminishing Indian strategic control over the western Indian Ocean, which remained a trading space.

The final stage of this process occurred during British colonial rule, which reinforced geopolitical realities through new intellectual frameworks. Colonial governance required viewing India as a territorial possession, thereby transforming both its understanding and its governance.[21] British cartography transformed India into a bounded territorial entity, emphasising measurable space over historical networks of interaction.[22] The governance framework increasingly emphasised provinces, districts, borders, and territorial sovereignty. Maritime spaces, once seen as connectors, became imperial boundaries. A Western Universalist shift occurred as European ideas about maritime trade, sovereignty, and authority were regarded as universally valid.

Independent India inherited this framework under severe pressure. Partition, the Kashmir issue, refugee rehabilitation, princely-state integration, the 1962 war with China, repeated wars with Pakistan, and ongoing border disputes made continental defence a rational priority. Indian strategic thought naturally prioritised territorial integrity, border management, and conventional military threats, as these posed the principal dangers to the state's survival.

This historical experience also reveals a subtler consequence: political sovereignty does not automatically restore the native conceptual frameworks through which a civilisation understands itself. Genuine sovereignty extends beyond political independence to encompass the recovery of intellectual frameworks through which a civilisation interprets its history, geography and strategic priorities. These frameworks determine which spaces, relationships and problems appear strategically important; their persistence can therefore shape national priorities long after formal colonial rule has ended.[23]

Applied to India's western maritime horizon, this perspective suggests that the gradual disappearance of the Indo-Mediterranean from strategic consciousness reflected not only changing geopolitical circumstances but also a shift in the conceptual language through which geography itself was understood. The Arabian Sea increasingly appeared as India's western boundary, while West Asia was approached primarily through energy security, labour migration, expatriate welfare, and regional crises, rather than as an extended maritime neighbourhood. While these concerns remain strategically important, they represent a significantly different conception of India's relationship with the region. West Asia came to be understood as an external geopolitical theatre rather than as part of an extended maritime neighbourhood historically connected to the subcontinent through dense networks of exchange.[24]

Understanding this historical trajectory is essential to interpreting contemporary developments, such as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). IMEC should not be seen as a new geopolitical region or as a response to contemporary great-power competition in the region, but rather as a revival of an older maritime geography whose strategic importance was overshadowed by history.

It requires recognising that India's strategic geography has always been both territorial and civilisational, continental and maritime. The Indo-Mediterranean is best understood not as an invented geopolitical construct but as the contemporary reappearance of a much older civilisational space, whose historical coherence is once again becoming strategically visible.

## The Return of the Indo-Mediterranean: From Spice Route to Smart Corridor

Recovering a Bhâratîya maritime perspective is not an exercise in nostalgia or in recreating antiquity, but in adapting enduring geographic realities to contemporary strategy. As the global economic centre of gravity shifts towards Asia, the Indian Ocean is once again becoming the connective space linking major centres of production, energy, and consumption. Maritime transport carries over 80% of global trade by volume, and vulnerabilities in the Suez Canal, the Red Sea, and the Strait of Hormuz highlight the Indo-Mediterranean region's influence on global supply chains, energy flows, and industrial production.[25]

IMEC should be understood in light of this structural context. The 2023 Memorandum of Understanding explicitly envisages an eastern corridor linking India to the Arabian Gulf and a northern corridor linking the Gulf to Europe. Crucially, its proposed infrastructure extends beyond conventional cargo: alongside ports and railways, participants envisage electricity and digital connectivity cables, as well as infrastructure for the export of clean hydrogen.[26] IMEC is more than a transport route; it forms an economic geography that connects India, the Gulf and Europe across various strategic domains.

The older Indian Ocean networks transported high-value commodities such as pepper, textiles, and gemstones. In contrast, the emerging Indo-

Mediterranean network is likely to encompass pharmaceuticals, electronics, digital services, clean energy, critical minerals, advanced manufacturing, and artificial intelligence-related technologies. Commodities and infrastructure change, but geography remains - the Spice Route becomes a Smart Corridor. The Arabian Sea, the Gulf, the Red Sea, and the Mediterranean serve as vital links for India to access European markets and connect Gulf production with European consumption.

This is particularly important in an international system that is becoming increasingly multipolar. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar has argued that "multipolarity is here to stay", noting that no single country now possesses hegemonic capabilities across all domains and that different regions will increasingly contribute distinct forms of power and capability.[27] If this diagnosis is correct, multipolarity requires a corresponding physical architecture, not merely a description of power distribution. IMEC is a key element of the Indo-Mediterranean architecture that underpins a multipolar order, requiring multiple centres of production, finance and technology. Essential infrastructure, such as railways, ports, energy grids and digital networks, facilitates trade and communication while reducing reliance on any single external provider. Such infrastructure shapes how states access markets, technologies and information, potentially creating strategic dependence even while formal political sovereignty is maintained.

Global supply-chain disruptions highlight the risks of relying on limited transport routes. Disruptions in the Red Sea and at the Suez Canal have led to higher freight costs and longer shipping routes. In 2023, about 22% of global seaborne container trade passed through the Suez Canal, but subsequent security issues prompted significant rerouting around the Cape of Good Hope.[28] The Strait of Hormuz remains a critical maritime chokepoint, highlighting how energy vulnerabilities have shifted resilience and diversification from commercial efficiency to national strategy.

IMEC's strategic value lies in the options it creates, enhancing rather than replacing existing maritime routes. The IMEC memorandum emphasises a proposed ship-to-rail network to strengthen regional supply chains alongside current routes.[29] Diversifying infrastructure enables states to handle disruptions more effectively, select alternative routes and partners, and reduce dependence on a single logistics system.

This directly aligns with India's longstanding preference for strategic autonomy. In a multipolar world, strategic autonomy cannot rest solely on diplomatic freedom of manoeuvre; it increasingly requires infrastructural freedom of manoeuvre. A state whose critical supply chains, digital connectivity, energy flows or access to markets depend overwhelmingly on infrastructure controlled by others has less practical autonomy than its formal sovereignty might suggest. By participating in the creation of interoperable and diversified connectivity across the Indo-Mediterranean, India and its partners can expand their strategic options without requiring political alignment into rigid blocs.

## Conclusion

The relevance of India's civilisational memory lies precisely in its capacity to illuminate the future rather than to reproduce the past. We interpret this movement towards IMEC as part of a broader decolonising process and a recovery of India's historical understanding of its western maritime geography. This recovery entails distinguishing between adopting the institutions of the modern international system and regarding the conceptual frameworks from which they originated as universally applicable. Malhotra's critique of Western Universalism is valuable in this context, not primarily because it explains the historical Indo-Mediterranean—which stands firm on the textual, archaeological, and commercial evidence analysed in this paper—but because it offers a lens through which we can understand its subsequent conceptual marginalisation. Political decolonisation did not automatically lead to the revitalisation of indigenous frameworks that shaped India's understanding of its own geography. Thus, reclaiming the Indo-Mediterranean is not about dismissing modern geopolitics; rather, it's about expanding India's strategic imagination beyond the categories derived from a specific European historical experience.

India's strategic task is therefore not to reconstruct an ancient maritime order, but to recognise that an old geography has taken on new technological and geopolitical significance. IMEC offers a contemporary expression of that geography, but the broader opportunity lies in reclaiming India's western maritime horizon as a coherent strategic space. In a multipolar order, India's ability to act as a civilisational and geographic connector will depend not only on participating in corridors designed around it, but on developing the intellectual, diplomatic and material capacity to shape the architecture linking the Indian Ocean, West Asia, and Europe. The return of the Indo-Mediterranean is therefore not a return to the past, but the recovery of an old geography for a new strategic age.

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FOCUS

# The Geopolitics of Proxy Warfare in the Indo-Mediterranean: Security, Connectivity, and Economic Consequences

Nanda Kishor M. S.*

## Abstract

The Indo-Mediterranean region has become a strategic space that connects the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean, gaining increasing significance in the geopolitical, economic, and energy sectors and for the resilience of global supply chains. However, the region's economic and connectivity potential and growth continue to be threatened by an increasing number of proxy wars, state-sponsored armed groups and terrorist organisations. Proxy actors have been used as tools of foreign policy and to advance strategic aims, particularly by regional powers that may not wish to risk direct military action. These have created low-intensity conflicts involving numerous countries and kept the Eastern Mediterranean and West Asia unstable.

The article analyses the impact of proxy networks built through terrorist groups and armed militias on state institutions, maritime security, critical infrastructure, and sea lines of communication (SLOCs), such as the Suez Canal, Bab el-Mandeb Strait, and the Eastern Mediterranean maritime domain. Insurance rates have risen, global trade and supply lines have been disrupted, and foreign investors in the energy industry are uncertain about the security of their investments due to attacks on commercial shipping, ports, pipelines, and energy infrastructure. The resulting instability has diminished tourism, foreign investment, regional trade, and energy markets, and has lowered the economic potential of the Indo-Mediterranean corridor. The paper states that proxy war is now a structural issue, which poses a threat to regional order, backed by the ideology of extremism, hybrid warfare, cyber warfare and transnational financing of terrorism, and great power rivalry. This makes diplomatic conflict resolution more difficult and undermines efforts to establish cooperative regional security arrangements that could sustain economic integration. Based on recent incidents involving state-sponsored proxy groups in the Levant, the Red Sea, and the Eastern Mediterranean, the research recommends a comprehensive security policy that includes strengthening maritime cooperation, information sharing, counterterrorism cooperation, financial sanctions against state-sponsored proxy groups, and multilateral diplomacy. It views connectivity and infrastructure as key elements of sustainable prosperity in the Indo-Mediterranean, and emphasises the importance of ending the chain of proxy wars that drives instability and hinders long-term development.

**Keywords:** Indo-Mediterranean; Proxy Warfare; Regional Security; India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC); Global Trade.

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## Introduction: A New Strategic Continuum

The Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean were long treated as separate theatres for most of the 20th century, linked only by the narrow waterway of the Suez Canal. This division is crumbling. The region is now envisioned as a single strategic corridor, the Indo-Mediterranean, which connects the Indian Ocean and Europe via the Gulf, the Red Sea and the Levant. Policymakers in New Delhi, Rome, Athens, Abu Dhabi and Brussels endorse its development. Italy and India have both described the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor as the fulcrum of this new space. The Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean had long been a single region of exchange, transporting spices, cloth, ideas and religiosity from South Asia to Arabia, the Levant and southern Europe for centuries before the modern era. The novelty of this moment is that governments, not merchants, now seek to institutionalise that continuity through treaties, corridors and defence agreements. It was an organic way of doing business; now it's a state-sponsored effort in statecraft. Security becomes a high-level policy issue rather than a matter of private risk.

The idea isn't just a talking point. The economic rationale for the Indo-Mediterranean is the free flow of goods, energy, and data along these trading corridors, covering around 12 per cent of the world's trade that normally uses the Suez Canal and 15 per cent that goes through the Red Sea. This is exactly what is happening in proxy warfare. What makes the region valuable also makes it fragile: a small share of traffic is concentrated through a few narrow gateways, and a few armed groups can make using them more expensive. This article argues the following three points: First, proxy war in the region is not a transient phenomenon but a fundamental aspect of the region's security. Second, the economic injury is quantifiable and substantial, and it affects shipping, energy, investment, and connectivity. Third, without a security cooperation architecture in the Indo-Mediterranean region, the promise of an Indo-Mediterranean corridor of connectivity cannot be realised. The analysis is based on incidents documented in the Levant, the Red Sea, and the Eastern Mediterranean from the end of 2023 to July 2026.

## Proxy Warfare is a tactic

A proxy war involves using non-state armed groups (or weaker states) to achieve the sponsor's strategic objectives with minimal direct involvement. It has three attractions. It is less expensive than traditional warfare. It provides deniability, as the sponsor can claim it is not responsible for actions taken by a supposedly independent group. It allows a state to impose costs on a more formidable opponent without triggering the full consequences that would otherwise follow. However, the practice of proxy warfare is not unique to any state, with Iran being the most systematic in West Asia, having established a network of propped-up militias and movements in a corridor stretching from Lebanon to Yemen and from Gaza to Iraq over the past almost 50 years[1].

Regionally, the practice of using armed customers to influence outcomes, to exclude space for competitors, and to bargain with deniability is repeated. This is a persistent conflict, hard to attribute to a sponsor, and hard to stop through traditional diplomatic means, since the sponsor is always a step back from the conflict. The approach also poses a potential risk to the sponsor. A proxy isn't a wholly subservient machine. It has its own authority, its own incentives, and its own appetite for risk, and the less you control, the more likely it is to do things you didn't expect. This escalation-control issue lies at the core of proxy warfare. One wrong move by a militia, one wrong ship, or a hit on the wrong rocket, and patrons can find themselves in a fight they didn't sign up for. The economic impact is a burden on all of us, irrespective of who instigated the attacks, and that's why the Indo-Mediterranean shouldn't consider proxy violence as another country's affair.

## The Proxy Landscape After 2024: Weaker but Wilder

This marked an abrupt shift in the Indo-Mediterranean proxy landscape from 2023 to 2026. After the Hamas attack on Israel on 7 October 2023, Israel systematically attacked its regional partners. In late 2024, a ceasefire was observed in Lebanon following catastrophic losses suffered by Hezbollah, including the deaths of its leader, Hassan Nasrallah, and most of its command[2]. The collapse of the government of Bashar al-Assad in Syria put an end to the land route that Iran had used to resupply Hezbollah. The government of Bashar al-Assad was defeated by Israel in June 2025[3], and a wider war between Israel, the United States and Iran erupted in late February 2026, with a ceasefire being consolidated through a memorandum of understanding on 14 June 2026[4]. The tightly controlled network of satellites that Tehran once controlled has become a more informal group of players[5]. Some components remain dangerous. The Houthis in Yemen have been the most impactful in the maritime domain, precisely because they are far from Israel and the terrain in Iraq is difficult to neutralise. Their remaining proxies retain their missiles, drones and naval mines, and their smaller control centres make their operating patterns unpredictable and difficult to deter[6].

## Chokepoints Under Pressure

The most noticeable example of proxy warfare in the region has been the attack on maritime chokepoints. Many of the world's largest shipping companies diverted around the Cape of Good Hope[7] to avoid the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, which is roughly twenty-nine kilometres wide at its narrowest point. The Bab el-Mandeb Strait had been the target of the campaign since November 2023, when the Houthis launched over a hundred attacks on shipping, including the sinking of at least two vessels and the killing of several seafarers, in solidarity with Palestinians in Gaza[8]. This has been the pattern since then: pause and relapse, in line with the broader conflict. When the war between Israel, the United States and Iran broke out in late February 2026, the Houthis resumed their attacks, then paused again after the Gaza ceasefire in June 2026[9]. By July 2026, Houthis' threats against Saudi-associated shipping and an announced naval blockade had once again brought the region to a crisis[10]. The lesson is that the chokepoint risk is now chronic[11]. It always goes up and down with the political tide, but it never goes away entirely. A second front is the Eastern Mediterranean. This uncertainty is a major disincentive to investment in Israel's offshore gas fields[12], which are projected to produce approximately 4.7 billion cubic metres of gas annually, or a third of the country's total gas needs[13]. For an energy province Europe had hoped would free it from Russian gas, this insecurity is a clear obstacle to investment. It's not confined to offshore platforms. Subsea pipelines, export terminals and the modern electric and data cables that criss-cross the Eastern Mediterranean are all soft targets.[14] A proxy can target them with drones or naval mines at low cost. The asymmetry of high costs of infrastructure and low costs of arms is the maritime side of proxy warfare[15]. This is because the major energy companies still invest in the basin despite this shadow, with Chevron approving a new investment in an Israeli gas field in January 2026, indicating the size of the prize and the magnitude of the risk of any disruption that would put it in play[16]. The safety of these assets is thus closely tied to the broader issue of making the Indo-Mediterranean into a reliable energy corridor for Europe.

## The Economic Ledger

The economic impact of this instability is neither abstract nor small. It shows up in insurance, rerouting, trade volume, energy, and investment. The first indication is insurance[17]. Before the escalation in mid-2025, war-risk costs for voyages to the southern Red Sea reportedly rose by as much as 60 per cent for ships with strong Saudi connections, not counting additional expenses for fuel, crew, or delays. Redirection exacerbates the burden[18]. The fiscal impact on Egypt has been severe, as the share of east-to-west traffic using the canal has fallen to approximately 18.7 per cent, down from the pre-crisis figure of about 80.2 per cent[19]. After a brief dip in early 2026, the canal's performance recovered slightly, with revenue climbing to approximately 449 million dollars in the first weeks of 2026, compared with 368 million dollars in the same period of 2025[20], but still well below the previous day's record[21].

The costs extend beyond transit. Regional uncertainty would deter investment in Eastern Mediterranean gas, and in the ports, pipelines, and connectivity hubs it relies on, and would immediately affect prices if the Bab el-Mandeb Strait closed, cutting off Saudi oil exports to Asia. The disruptions also show in trade volumes. The cost of maritime container transport didn't fall only on the states along the route; according to data cited by the International Monetary Fund, maritime container transport through the region fell by nearly a third in early 2024 compared with the same period a year earlier, as carriers shied away from the Red Sea. The stigma of being a war zone deters tourism, FDI and regional trade, reinforcing the perception of risk and, in turn, slowing the very development that would make the region more stable. The eventual effect is to weaken the economic dynamism that underpinned the Indo-Mediterranean idea, turning a potent growth centre into a source of global price.

## Connectivity at Risk: IMEC and the Indo-Mediterranean Promise

The flagship of the Indo-Mediterranean vision is the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor. Eight partners, including the European Union, France, Germany, India, Italy, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and the United States, announced it at the G20 summit in New Delhi on 9 September 2023 and regard it as a more secure and diversified alternative to the congested Suez route and China's Belt and Road Initiative. Indian officials estimate that it could reduce logistics costs by up to 30 per cent and transit time by up to 40 per cent[22]. But the corridor is largely paper-based. It remains in the feasibility and planning stage as of early 2026, while some national projects, like the Gulf rail and port projects, are already underway[23]. It has one major political drawback. The corridor's "Gulf leg" relies on the cooperation between Israel and Saudi Arabia, which has become much more difficult to achieve in the wake of the Gaza war and the wider regional conflict[24].

Another drawback is financial. The European gateways, Trieste and Marseille, are vying to become the Mediterranean landing points for the corridor, and, consequently, the security and connectivity maps converge most closely at these gateways, as all flows will pass through the contested waters discussed above. In this sense, proxy warfare and connectivity are directly linked. No corridor linking the Levant and the Gulf can be funded, insured or completed while the region is in constant turmoil due to proxy attacks. No investor will invest in an infrastructure project that might be the object of a takeover, and no government will risk its political capital on an infrastructure project vulnerable to attack by force[25]. Proxy warfare does not just impede existing commerce. It denies the future architecture envisioned for the Indo-Mediterranean, whose rationale is that the corridor is more of an enabler than a substitute for regional security.

## The Structural Turn

The Indo-Mediterranean conflict has moved beyond a few isolated cases to become a structural status quo, aided by several reinforcing mechanisms. Ideological extremism provides a constant supply of recruits and an excuse for violence beyond any single ceasefire. The combination of regular and irregular military operations in hybrid warfare allows sponsors to gauge the force and then disavow responsibility. Cyber operations have broadened the battlefield to ports, shipping systems, and energy grids, where a compromise in the cyber domain can affect physical trade. Finally, external patronage for regional actors will be found in transnational financing, which follows informal circuits and illicit trade, while the probability of international action will be reduced after the disappearance of the Syrian land route from Iran. These mechanisms combine to make proxy conflict a self-propelling mechanism that defies traditional conflict resolution.

## Toward a Cooperative Security Architecture

If the conflict is a proxy war, the answer is a proxy war. Five elements are essential, and their value lies in their combination, not in any individual element. The first is cooperation at sea. The Indo-Mediterranean chokepoints are a common interest, and protecting them requires a concerted naval presence, escort arrangements, and rapid response by littoral and user nations. One building block is the evolving partnerships between India and the West of Suez, as described in the emerging partnerships between India and Greece, Cyprus, and Israel, but only if they are grounded in tasks, not symbols[26].

The second is information sharing. Maritime domain awareness (MDA), the real-time monitoring of vessels and threats, can be effective only if shared among navies, coastguards, and commercial operators. A common threat picture also reduces mistaken targeting, which has contributed to higher insurance prices.

The third is counterterrorism coordination. All intelligence on proxy networks, their leadership and logistics should be consolidated, and enforcement should be uniform across jurisdictions to prevent proxy networks from exploiting gaps in the system. The fourth is monetary pressure. Targeted sanctions, together with measures against informal financing and smuggling that support proxy networks, can increase the cost of a proxy model. This tool is evident in the three European states that reimposed U.S., European, and UN sanctions on Iran in August 2025, but its success will depend on enforcement[27].

The fifth is multilateral diplomacy. Symptoms can be controlled through sanctions and naval presence, but only through diplomacy can the underlying political conflicts, foremost the yet-to-be-solved Israeli-Palestinian issue, be resolved, conferring proxies with their cause. The relentless Houthis' recidivism of their attacks whenever the Gaza ceasefire was violated clearly shows that the maritime issue is intertwined with the political one.

## Conclusion

The Indo-Mediterranean indeed holds real promise as a trade, energy, and data link between the Indian Ocean and Europe, with India, the Gulf, and southern Europe as pivot points. This promise is genuine, and it's reflected in major states' willingness to invest in it, as with IMEC, an initiative. However, this promise comes with the condition of proxy war. Instability in the Red Sea, pressure on the Eastern Mediterranean, and the paralysis of the IMEC route show that instability in one part of the system increases the costs of the whole system. The clear results, including increased insurance, diverted trade, canal revenue loss and a loss of investment, are not transient events but symptoms of a structural problem.

The connectivity agenda is not the humanitarian side dish to resolving the proxy conflict. It is its prerequisite. Otherwise, the Indo-Mediterranean will remain a corridor of potential rather than prosperity. The argument has a practical twist for India, in particular, which sits at the eastern end of the space and has invested a portion of its economic destiny in going westwards. New Delhi cannot create a secure route to Europe if it does not secure one itself. It is not charity to others; it is an expression of its own growth, driven by its interest in maritime cooperation, stable energy supplies, and open sea lines. The Indo-Mediterranean will finally be made secure – if it is – by the states that most need it to be successful, through mutual action and a shared interest in the stability of the area, not as a favour to be bargained for.

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FOCUS

# Leveraging Geography into Strategic Partnership: Indo-Italian Regional Ambitions in the Indo-Mediterranean

Arnav Joshi & Carlo Angrisani*

## Abstract

The Indo-Mediterranean has been formalised through high-level communication between New Delhi and Rome, yet scholarship has not kept pace: existing literature examines Italy's Indo-Pacific tilt, India's extended neighbourhood, IMEC's economic architecture and Chinese port diplomacy in the Mediterranean, often in isolation. This article sits at the intersection of these themes, taking the Indo-Italian dyad as its unit of analysis. Drawing on neoclassical realism, it explains the causal mechanism by which two peninsular states at either end of the Suez–Red Sea–Arabian Sea continuum convert geography into strategic influence: independent doctrinal codification through India's MAHASAGAR vision and Italy's Enlarged Mediterranean, joint naming of the space between them, and material institutionalisation through naval, corridor, digital and industrial cooperation. Locating the drivers in domestic recalibration rather than great-power competition, it argues that IMEC's under-institutionalised condition is not an obstacle to influence but its opportunity structure: in a corridor that carries no freight, agenda-setting and recognition accrue to whoever anchors the process.

## Introduction

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's state visit to Rome in May 2026, which elevated Indo-Italian relations to a 'Special Strategic Partnership,' marks the formal emergence of what both governments now call the 'Indo-Mediterranean.' The joint declaration signed by Modi and Meloni anchored this ambition, linking connectivity via the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), maritime security, and industrial and energy cooperation, positioning the two states as co-architects of a maritime continuum stretching from the Arabian Sea to Southern Europe. Behind the diplomatic vocabulary lies a more substantive shift: two states, geographically distant and structurally different, are progressively building an infrastructure of cooperation across a space that neither had, until recently, treated as a shared strategic theatre.

Existing accounts explain this rapprochement largely in reactive terms – as Italian alignment with wider European engagement in the Indo-Pacific, or as Indian projection into an "extended neighbourhood" driven by strategic competition with China. These readings capture part of the picture but miss its most interesting dimension. The

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convergence between Rome and New Delhi is anchored in independent domestic recalibrations, with India's MAHASAGAR vision and Italy's Enlarged Mediterranean, resulting in a structural symmetry between two peninsular states that, from asymmetric positions of power, share an interest in managing the maritime space between them.

This article explains the causal mechanism by which geography is leveraged as a strategic influence: a peninsular position at either end of the Suez-Red Sea-Arabian Sea strategic space, leading to official renaming and bilateral material institutionalisation through naval deployments, connectivity, and economic and technological exchanges. Drawing on neoclassical realism, it examines how maritime cooperation, resilient supply chains, industrial co-development via IMEC, and technological connectivity via digital cables result in greater access, agenda-setting influence, and recognition for both states. It concludes by assessing the vulnerabilities of such bilateral strategies to regional turbulences such as Red Sea disruption, the 2026 Iran conflict, and IMEC's structural fragilities.

## Relevant Literature & Theoretical Framework

Scholarship on the 'Indo-Mediterranean' can largely be attributed to Scott, who analyses the term's origin in his geopolitical account and grounds its contemporary use in the economic architecture of the IMEC.[1] Scott views India and Italy as "China-concerned states" that balance Beijing's influence through their own maritime power projection, and concludes that the Indo-Mediterranean is a "strategic space" rather than a region, where realist competition prevails.[2] The rest of the relevant IR scholarship remains siloed, with Indian scholars theorising about Modi's maritime policies, including IMEC in the Mediterranean, while Italian scholars explain Rome's Indo-Pacific tilt and yet others measure Chinese port diplomacy.[3] However, the Indo-Mediterranean has not been analysed using the Indo-Italian dyad as the unit of analysis, and this article, which sits at the intersection of the above themes, aims to fill that gap. Applying a neoclassical realist lens,[4] it lays out the causal mechanism used by the two anchor states to leverage geography into strategic influence. This lens explains the role of domestic drivers in Rome and Delhi in the shared codification and material institutionalisation of the Indo-Mediterranean, as well as the role of their security elites in operationalising the architecture to secure greater status.[5] The 'Indo-Mediterranean' joint naming is essential here, as it lowers the legitimacy costs of the two anchors' presence in each other's home basin – what Larson and Shevchenko term 'social creativity.'[6] This piece contributes by demonstrating the converging logic of Indo-Italian strategic, maritime, economic and technological architecture in the following sections.

## Strategic Convergence: India

India's westward maritime tilt is not merely a reaction to balance Chinese port diplomacy in the Mediterranean, but a continuation of the strategic tradition of securing the country's western boundary. Scholars such as K. M. Panikkar insisted that Indian security rested on command of the Arabian Sea, a view echoed by the present crises in the Gulf and Red Sea littorals.[7] The current strategic apparatus has evolved from the "extended neighbourhood" framing, which extends from the Suez Canal to Singapore in the east, to the "Link West & Act West"[8] policies, which have led to expanded bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the Mediterranean, especially through IMEC in 2023.

The SAGAR doctrine, upgraded to MAHASAGAR (Mutual and Holistic Advancement for Security and Growth Across Regions) by PM Modi in 2025, is a holistic regional strategy to strengthen India's maritime legacy beyond the Indo-Pacific.[9] The Modi–Meloni op-ed of May 2026 then codified the interconnectedness of the Indo-Pacific and the Mediterranean, giving official endorsement to a space whose emergence stemmed from Indian and Italian security elites' framing of it as beneficial to its co-architects.

Three domestic factors contribute to the 'Indo-Mediterranean'. The first is an energy and connectivity imperative. Europe is India's largest trading partner, and the Red Sea disruptions of 2024–25, which tripled transport costs, followed by the closure of the Strait of Hormuz, made route diversification a necessity rather than a preference. IMEC is crucial to Indian economic growth, as a direct, secure link with Europe is the prerequisite for the institutional mechanism of the India-EU Free Trade Agreement (FTA) of January 2026 to operationalise.[10]

Secondly, the industrial and technological development of an Atmanirbhar Bharat greatly benefits from Italian defence, shipbuilding and energy partnerships – co-development and technology transfer in naval and defence equipment, and electrolyser manufacturing for a National Green Hydrogen Mission backed by 2.5 billion USD in investment.

Thirdly, it exemplifies a rising power's drive for greater status by co-authoring a strategic corridor, thereby legitimising Indian agency to manage it more effectively, while quietly aligning with Italy to reshape the regional structure for mutual gain. Indian security elites, thus, invoke this strategic corridor at multiple international academic fora, such as the Indian Ocean Conference and the Mediterranean Dialogue, to gain legitimacy and a seat at the table deciding the future of a consequential strategic theatre.[11] Such power projection through MAHASAGAR is not without competition from Chinese port diplomacy and India's own infrastructure being in the developing stages, but the bilateral commitment remains strong even from the western anchor, as discussed in the next section.[12]

## Strategic Convergence: Italy

Italy's turn towards the Indo-Mediterranean is best read not as an external adaptation to great-power competition, but as the outcome of a domestic recalibration of its strategic identity, which has been maturing for over a decade. The doctrinal antecedent is the older concept of the Enlarged Mediterranean (*Mediterraneo allargato*), developed within the Italian Navy in the 1980s and progressively adopted into official strategic doctrine from the 1990s – a framework that defines Italy's maritime area of interest as a continuum extending from the central Mediterranean through the Red Sea into the western Indian Ocean and the Gulf.[13]

What is new is not the doctrinal framework but the seriousness of its operational and political mobilisation. Italy has not published a dedicated Indo-Pacific strategy comparable to those of France, Germany, or the Netherlands; its 2022 contribution to the EU Indo-Pacific strategy remains the closest formal statement of intent.[14] Yet the absence of a single doctrinal document coexists with a densely populated field of practice: naval deployments, ministerial visits, industrial agreements, and connectivity initiatives, taken together, mark a coherent reorientation.[15]

Three domestic drivers explain the trajectory. First, an energy and connectivity imperative: the post-2022 decoupling from Russian gas made the Mediterranean-African corridor central to Italian energy security, and the Mattei Plan for Africa was designed to consolidate Rome's role as a southern hub for energy and infrastructure linking Europe, Africa, and the space beyond Suez.[16]

Second, an industrial and technological imperative: Italian defence, aerospace, and shipbuilding firms such as Leonardo and Fincantieri require growth markets and integration into resilient supply chains, which India – with its industrial scale, indigenisation drive, and stable demand pipeline – can offer on an unprecedented scale. Third, a status and positioning imperative: the exit from the Belt and Road Initiative in late 2023 opened both a symbolic and a strategic space that Rome has filled by reframing itself as a connecting middle power capable of anchoring the western end of a new corridor architecture, rather than as a marginal participant in projects designed elsewhere.[17]

Read together, the Indian and Italian doctrines describe the same water from opposite directions. MAHASAGAR extends India's horizon westward beyond the Indian Ocean; the Enlarged Mediterranean extends Italy's eastward past Suez into the Gulf and the Arabian Sea. Each had reached towards the other's basin before either government named the space between them — which is why the joint naming in May 2026 codified a convergence rather than creating one. The India–Italy Joint Strategic Action Plan 2025–2029, adopted in November 2024 and reinforced by the elevation to a Special Strategic Partnership in May 2026, provides the diplomatic scaffolding.[18]

## Building the Corridor

The corridor is built on three main pillars. These are

- Maritime cooperation.
- Industrial & technological architecture.
- From position to strategic influence & recognition.

## Maritime cooperation

Maritime cooperation provides the clearest empirical evidence of Indo-Italian operationalisation in the Indo-Mediterranean. The pattern, consolidated since 2023, is one of reciprocal projection: Italian naval assets deploying into the Indian Ocean, Indian naval assets into the Mediterranean, with joint exercises, port calls, and now permanent consultation mechanisms formalising a continuum that both navies had treated as two separate theatres.

The Italian projection eastward peaked in 2024 with the deployment of a Carrier Strike Group centred on ITS *Cavour* and the frigate ITS *Alpino*, complemented by the independent deployments of ITS *Raimondo Montecuccoli* and the training ship

ITS *Amerigo Vespucci*.[19] The five-month deployment crossed the Mediterranean, Red Sea, Gulf of Aden, and Indian Ocean, with port calls in ten countries and a joint exercise with the Indian aircraft carrier INS *Vikramaditya* and its air wing in October 2024. The *Cavour* deployment marked the first Italian carrier presence in the Indo-Pacific and translated the doctrinal notion of the Enlarged Mediterranean into operational reality, thereby merging the Mediterranean with the Indo-Pacific as a shared strategic theatre.

The reciprocal Indian projection into the Mediterranean follows a parallel logic. In August 2025, the Indian stealth frigate INS Tamal called at Naples and conducted a PASSEX with the Italian Landing Helicopter Dock ITS Trieste.[20] In September 2025, INS Trikand called at Taranto during its Mediterranean deployment and participated in Exercise Bright Star 2025 in Egypt – a US Central Command-led multilateral exercise involving Egypt, the United States, Italy, India, and others, thereby materially anchoring Indo-Italian maritime cooperation within a wider regional security architecture.[21] Earlier engagements, including the 2023 Passing Exercise between ITS Francesco Morosini and INS Sumedha off Sardinia, indicate that reciprocity has been a pattern since the early 2020s, rather than an isolated phenomenon.

Beneath these high-profile deployments lies a denser layer of routine cooperation: humanitarian and disaster-relief coordination, anti-piracy operations in the Gulf of Aden, and information exchange on maritime domain awareness. The institutional scaffolding was formalised in May 2026, when the Special Strategic Partnership introduced a bilateral Dialogue on Maritime Security and committed both governments to examining a feasibility framework for an annual, high-level, structured military dialogue.[22] Crucially, naval cooperation has now developed a distinctive industrial spine. Fincantieri's long-standing partnership with Cochin Shipyard on Indian Navy fleet renewal, together with its subsidiary WASS's 2,000 crore contract for Black Shark Advanced heavyweight torpedoes to equip India's Kalvari-class submarines, signal that maritime interoperability is being embedded in shared production, technology transfer, and long-term rather than episodic industrial commitments.[23]

## Industrial & technological architecture

Indo-Italian positioning across the corridor's economic and technological layers has advanced considerably faster than the corridor itself. At the corridor's Mediterranean exit, Adani's 2023 acquisition of a controlling stake in Haifa Port established an Indian commercial presence where the northern land route returns to the sea. In February 2026, Adani Ports signed an MoU with the Port of Marseille Fos, explicitly framed around IMEC, proposing an "IMEC Ports Club" to coordinate ports along the route – Indian economic positioning convening the corridor's European harbours.[24]

Italy has, in Trieste, a strong structural candidate for the corridor's European terminus. Trieste is the northernmost Mediterranean port directly linked by rail to central Europe, and its free-port status allows goods to be stored and re-exported without entering EU customs territory.

Rome sought to turn this into a strategic claim, appointing Ambassador Francesco Maria Talò as Italy's IMEC special envoy in April 2025, one of only two appointments among the eight signatories. Indo-Italian efforts converged at an IMEC forum in March 2026, hosted in Trieste by Deputy PM Tajani and attended by India's Deputy NSA Pavan Kapoor, to advance the Indo-Mediterranean strategy.[25] Though Trieste has unique advantages, it is a contested terminal, with France pushing for Marseille and Piraeus weakened by Chinese majority ownership.[26]

The digital layer is the corridor's only functioning trans-regional infrastructure, jointly owned. Sparkle, in strategic partnership with Airtel, activated the Blue-Raman cable between India and Genoa, which is deeply embedded within the IMEC digital corridor.[27] Its routing bypasses the Egyptian chokepoint through which most Europe-Asia data has historically passed and stands against China's PEACE cable, which bypasses India entirely, running from Gwadar to Djibouti up the Red Sea.[28] While the corridor's overland segment remains politically foreclosed, data already flows along its projected geography, and the standards governing that traffic, like routing, interoperability, and data governance, are being bilaterally shaped now.

The corridor's physical spine, meanwhile, has advanced unevenly and largely outside collective direction: Saudi Arabia's north–south railway reached the Jordanian border at Al-Haditha in March 2026; the northern land bridge's key prerequisite, built on national grounds rather than under an IMEC mandate. Beneath the corridor-specific machinery lies the commercial rationale that sustains it. Bilateral trade reached 14.25 billion euros in 2025, making Italy India's fourth-largest EU trading partner. The May 2026 Summit set a 20 billion euros target for 2029, pending implementation of the India-EU FTA, which ensured demand for the corridor. The two also agreed to convene an IMEC Ministerial in 2026, alongside a Defence Industrial Roadmap committing both sides to co-production and a critical minerals MoU — supply-chain instruments for a corridor conceived to carry resilient trade rather than volume alone.[29] Energy follows the same logic, with jointly funded green hydrogen research linking India's National Green Hydrogen Mission to Italy's position as Europe's southern energy gateway.[30] Thus, influence and agenda-setting power here precede freight; whoever supplies continuity to the strategic corridor will potentially shape construction timelines, financing mechanisms and administrative frameworks, with India and Italy in a position to exploit such opportunities.

## From position to strategic influence & recognition

The mechanism's output can be assessed against three indicators. Access is the most tangible: India holds a controlling commercial position at Haifa, and Italy has secured a carrier-level presence in the Indian Ocean, with reciprocal Indian port calls at Naples and Taranto. Neither state possessed operational reach into the other's basin a decade ago; each now exercises it at the other's invitation. Agenda-setting is where the dyad's advantage is starkest. Of the eight IMEC signatories, only France and Italy have appointed special envoys, and the May 2026 declaration made Rome and New Delhi the visible sponsors of the corridor's only scheduled collective decision-point. Where there is no secretariat, no financing mechanism and no construction timeline, continuity of political investment substitutes for institutions, and those supplying it shape what the corridor becomes.

Recognition is the most partial and the most instructive. External Affairs Minister Jaishankar invoked the Indo-Mediterranean in Rome in November 2024, eighteen months before the joint op-ed; C. Raja Mohan, writing from Singapore, identified a new Indo-Mediterranean region emerging through connectivity, commerce and geopolitics; and an American proposal for an "IndoMed Quad" comprising the United States, UAE, India and Italy treats the dyad as cornerstone actors in an Indo-Mediterranean order. Meloni's invitation to the December 2025 GCC Summit and her proposed GCC-MED Summit indicate Gulf acknowledgement of Rome's bridging role. Yet neither the European Union nor the Gulf states have adopted the term officially, and it has no institutional referent. A named space with two sponsors and no members remains a claim in progress — but the claim is being recognised by others, which is what distinguishes naming from assertion.

## Limits and Fragilities

The Indo-Mediterranean is being constructed in an exceptionally hostile regional environment. Between February and July 2026, the corridor's maritime segment came under sustained pressure at each of its critical junctures. The February 2026 Israeli-American air campaign against Iran, followed by Tehran's partial closure of the Strait of Hormuz, constrained the corridor's Gulf gateway.[31] In late July, after a nine-month pause, Houthi forces resumed attacks in the Red Sea, imposed a maritime embargo on shipping to and from Saudi ports, and drove traffic through Bab el-Mandeb down by over a third within days. A suspected Iranian drone strike on a floating LNG unit at the Egyptian port of Damietta then brought the disruption into the Mediterranean itself.[32] Overlaying these acute pressures is a structural one: the halt to Saudi-Israeli normalisation since October 2023, which has effectively frozen IMEC's projected overland northern segment.[33]

The structural implications are significant. The Indo-Mediterranean, in its IMEC dimension, was conceived as a hedge against precisely the kind of chokepoint disruption that has now materialised on both ends of the corridor simultaneously. Its eastern segment depends on Gulf hubs located beyond Hormuz; its western segment depends on the Red Sea passage under Houthi pressure; and the Mediterranean terminal itself is no longer immune. A corridor designed to circumvent chokepoint risk finds itself materially dependent on the chokepoints most exposed to disruption, while the alternative overland routing remains politically foreclosed.[34]

Three further vulnerabilities qualify the anchors' agency. First, the corridor's middle belongs to others: its viability rests on the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Israel and Egypt, sovereign actors whose calculations neither Rome nor New Delhi can control, and whose consent no bilateral partnership can substitute. Second, capability constrains ambition — India's Mediterranean presence remains episodic, and its western port infrastructure is incomplete, while Italy's naval commitments are stretched across the Enlarged Mediterranean and NATO's eastern flank, and Rome cannot deliver on trade or customs commitments that lie with Brussels. Third, the partnership rests conspicuously on leadership convergence; personal alignment is an asset that institutions must outlast, and the Joint Strategic Action Plan's review mechanisms remain young.

Cooperation has nonetheless deepened through the disruption rather than despite it: the elevation to Special Strategic Partnership was agreed while Hormuz was already constrained, the torpedo contract was signed as the Iran conflict escalated, and the Cavour deployment had already crossed the corridor amid active Red Sea hostilities.[35] This suggests the partnership is not contingent on the corridor's original blueprint. Its viability will instead depend on the anchors' capacity to co-architect the corridor's evolution — including alternative routing through Fujairah, Salalah and Duqm outside Hormuz, hardened Mediterranean port infrastructure integrated with the Mattei Plan, and layered supply-chain redundancy under conditions of permanent instability — and on whether adaptive capacity outlasts accumulating stress.

## Conclusion

The Indo-Mediterranean is not a region that India and Italy discovered, but a strategic space they are assembling — and the mechanism by which they do so runs from position through doctrine and naming to institutionalisation. Each state's westward or eastward turn stemmed from domestic recalibration rather than external adaptation: MAHASAGAR and the Enlarged Mediterranean were codified independently and converged only when both governments named the water between them. That naming did work of its own, lowering the diplomatic cost of each navy's presence in the other's basin and creating a domain in which the two hold anchor position by definition.

What follows is an influence that does not wait for the corridor to open. In a space with no secretariat, no financing mechanism and no agreed terminus, the states that provide continuity—envoys, ministerial sponsorship, cable routing, port coordination—shape what the corridor becomes. Scott's under-institutionalised strategic space is, on this reading, not an obstacle to influence but its opportunity structure.

The claim is testable and should be tested. If the first ministerial does not convene, if envoy-level commitment remains confined to Paris and Rome, if the European terminus settles elsewhere, or if the term is not adopted beyond its two sponsors, the anchoring argument fails. What the period since 2023 shows is not that the Indo-Mediterranean has been built, but that two states at its extremities have positioned themselves to determine how it is.

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# Reimagining India's Western Theatre in an Age of Strategic Disruption and Transition to a New World Order

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## Introduction: The Crisis of Existing Strategic Frameworks

International politics is undergoing a structural transition unmatched since the Soviet Union's collapse. The geopolitical certainties that characterised the post-Cold War era are giving way to a far more complex strategic environment, marked by great-power competition, technological disruption, fragmented supply chains, economic coercion, maritime insecurity, and the weaponisation of trade, finance and critical technologies. These changes are not isolated developments; they are interconnected manifestations of a broader transformation in the architecture of global power.

Traditional geopolitical analysis remains largely organised around geographically bounded regions - Europe, the Middle East, South Asia, Central Asia, and the Indo-Pacific. These constructs served an important analytical purpose in earlier eras, when strategic interactions were primarily determined by territorial proximity and military geography. Today, however, the density of economic, technological, logistical and maritime interdependence has fundamentally altered the character of strategic space.

A disruption in the Red Sea rapidly drives up freight costs for Indian exporters. Tensions in the Strait of Hormuz immediately affect India's energy security and inflation. Political instability in Afghanistan affects India's overland access to Central Asia. Israeli innovation contributes to India's defence modernisation, while sovereign wealth funds from the Gulf finance infrastructure, technology and renewable energy projects across India. Although these developments occur in different countries, they generate immediate and interconnected strategic consequences for India.

The central argument of this paper is that these developments should no longer be analysed as discrete regional events. They constitute components of a single strategic ecosystem. Existing analytical frameworks illuminate important aspects of this environment but fail to explain the increasingly systemic interactions among maritime security, continental connectivity, technology, finance, logistics, and diplomacy.

The Western Strategic Continuum is proposed

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as a response to this intellectual gap. It is not a replacement for existing geopolitical theories but an integrative, India-centric framework that explains how strategic systems interact across the western approaches to the Indian subcontinent.

## From Classical Geopolitics to Functional Strategic Geography

Strategic thought has evolved alongside changes in technology, economics and political power. Kautilya's *Arthashastra* emphasised the dynamic nature of interstate relations, arguing that alliances and rivalries should be understood in terms of shifting interests rather than permanent ideological commitments. His relational understanding of power anticipated many features of contemporary strategic behaviour.

The industrial age produced the classical geopolitical theories of Halford Mackinder, Alfred Thayer Mahan and Nicholas Spykman. Mackinder highlighted the strategic importance of continental control through the Heartland Theory. Mahan emphasised the centrality of sea power and maritime commerce. Spykman argued that the Rimland was the decisive arena of geopolitical competition. While these theories differed in emphasis, they shared a common assumption: geography was primarily understood in terms of territory.

The Indo-Pacific concept marked a major intellectual advance by recognising the strategic integration of the Indian and Pacific Oceans. It reflected the growing importance of maritime connectivity and economic interdependence. Yet even the Indo-Pacific framework pays relatively little attention to the western strategic environment, stretching from the Eastern Mediterranean to Central Asia.

The Western Strategic Continuum builds on these traditions but argues that twenty-first-century geography is increasingly functional rather than territorial. Power no longer flows solely through land or sea; it flows through ports, logistics hubs, undersea cables, digital infrastructure, financial systems, technology ecosystems and resilient supply chains. Strategic geography is therefore increasingly determined by connectivity rather than proximity.

In this context, the paper introduces Functional Geography as an India-centric framework that organises strategic space by the interaction of economic, technological, maritime, energy and security functions rather than by conventional political boundaries. Regions become strategically contiguous not because they share borders but because developments in one produce direct consequences in another.

## The Western Strategic Continuum: An India-Centric Theory of Twenty-First Century Strategic Geography

The central proposition of this paper is that India's western strategic environment should no longer be understood as a collection of independent regions, but as an integrated strategic ecosystem in which developments across the Eastern Mediterranean, the Levant, the Gulf, Iran, the Strait of Hormuz, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia interact continuously. The Western Strategic Continuum (WSC) therefore represents a strategic systems framework rather than a geographical construct.

Unlike traditional geopolitical models that organise analysis around sovereign boundaries, the WSC defines strategic space through interconnected functions. Its analytical focus shifts from states to networks, from territory to systems, and from regional boundaries to strategic interdependence. It is not intended to replace existing concepts such as the Indo-Pacific or Eurasia, but to complement them by providing an India-centric framework for understanding developments to India's west.

The defining characteristic of the Continuum is functional interdependence. Energy security depends on maritime stability. Maritime security enables connectivity. Connectivity facilitates trade and investment. Technology strengthens defence capabilities. Economic statecraft reinforces diplomacy. In turn, diplomacy creates the political confidence necessary for long-term economic and technological cooperation. These domains do not operate in isolation; they reinforce one another through continuous interaction.

This interconnectedness has become increasingly evident over the past decade. Attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea significantly increased freight costs for Indian exports to Europe. The escalation around the Strait of Hormuz immediately affected international energy markets. Instability in Afghanistan affected India's continental connectivity via Chabahar. Israeli technological innovation strengthened India's defence ecosystem, while sovereign wealth investments from the Gulf accelerated infrastructure and digital transformation in India. Each development occurred in a different geographical location, yet all had direct consequences for India's national power.

The Western Strategic Continuum therefore argues that the strategic question facing Indian policymakers is no longer "Where is India's western neighbourhood?" but rather "Which interconnected strategic systems directly shape India's national power?"

## The Original Theoretical Contributions of the Western Strategic Continuum

The principal contribution of the Western Strategic Continuum lies not merely in redefining a geographical space, but in introducing a coherent conceptual vocabulary for analysing twenty-first-century geopolitics. The framework advances seven interrelated concepts that together constitute an original theory of strategic geography.

**A. Functional Geography**

Traditional geopolitics measures geography primarily by territorial proximity. Functional Geography holds that strategic relevance increasingly stems from the interaction of functions rather than physical distance. Ports, maritime corridors, digital infrastructure, financial centres, technological ecosystems, energy networks and logistics chains collectively organise strategic space. Under this framework, regions become strategically contiguous when developments in one generate measurable consequences in another.

Accordingly, the Eastern Mediterranean, the Gulf, Iran, Afghanistan and Central Asia constitute a single functional strategic space for India, as they collectively shape energy security, maritime trade, technological cooperation, continental connectivity and economic resilience.

**B. Strategic Gravity**

Building on Functional Geography, the WSC introduces the concept of Strategic Gravity. Whereas classical geopolitics associated power with territory, population or military strength, Strategic Gravity explains why certain locations exert influence disproportionate to their physical size by concentrating multiple strategic functions. The Strait of Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb, the Suez Canal, Jebel Ali, Chabahar and Haifa are not strategically important because of their geography alone. Their influence derives from the convergence of maritime commerce, logistics, energy flows, finance, technology and geopolitical competition.

Similarly, financial centres such as Abu Dhabi and Dubai, technology ecosystems in Israel, sovereign wealth funds across the Gulf, and semiconductor and artificial intelligence clusters are emerging centres of Strategic Gravity that increasingly shape global strategic behaviour. Strategic Gravity therefore extends the meaning of geopolitical power beyond military geography to encompass infrastructure, technology, finance and connectivity.

**C. Continuum Effects**

Perhaps the most original theoretical innovation of the WSC is the concept of Continuum Effects. Traditional strategic analysis often treats crises as geographically contained events. The WSC argues, by contrast, that strategic disruptions propagate through interconnected systems, producing cascading consequences that transcend their point of origin.

A conflict in the Gulf may increase shipping insurance premiums, alter freight rates, reduce investor confidence, disrupt energy markets, affect Chabahar's commercial viability, influence Afghanistan's trade options, reshape India's continental strategy and alter diplomatic calculations across Central Asia. The original event is maritime. Its consequences become economic, then technological, then diplomatic, and finally geopolitical. This process constitutes Continuum Effects. Understanding these cascading interactions enables policymakers to anticipate second- and third-order strategic consequences rather than merely responding to immediate crises.

**D. Strategic Interdependence**

The twentieth century emphasised Strategic Depth - territorial buffers, spheres of influence and military space. The twenty-first century increasingly rewards Strategic Interdependence.

Strategic Interdependence refers to the deliberate creation of multiple political, technological, logistical and economic relationships that reduce dependence upon any single corridor, alliance or partner while enhancing national resilience. India's simultaneous participation in IMEC, the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC) and Chabahar illustrates this principle. These initiatives should not be viewed as competing projects but as complementary components of a diversified connectivity strategy that enhances resilience and preserves strategic autonomy.

**E. Strategic Redundancy**

Closely related is the concept of Strategic Redundancy. Rather than seeking a single optimal supply chain or transport corridor, states increasingly build multiple interoperable alternatives capable of absorbing geopolitical shocks. For India, this means that IMEC, INSTC, Chabahar, Duqm, Haifa and maritime partnerships across the Gulf should be understood collectively as elements of one integrated strategy rather than as isolated infrastructure projects. Redundancy becomes resilience. Resilience becomes strategic power.

**F. Adaptive Legitimacy**

Contemporary diplomacy increasingly engages political authorities on the basis of strategic necessity rather than formal recognition. The WSC conceptualises this phenomenon as Adaptive Legitimacy.

India's calibrated engagement with Afghanistan following the Taliban's return to power illustrates this principle. Without extending formal diplomatic recognition, New Delhi reopened its technical mission and expanded practical engagement to safeguard humanitarian interests, connectivity and regional stability. The concept also offers a framework for analysing evolving regional engagement amid political transitions elsewhere, including in Syria. Adaptive Legitimacy does not replace international law; rather, it explains how states pragmatically manage relationships amid political uncertainty.

**G. Networked Strategic Balancing**

The WSC further argues that the rigid alliance structures characteristic of the Cold War are increasingly being replaced by Networked Strategic Balancing. States maximise resilience by participating in multiple overlapping strategic networks simultaneously.

India exemplifies this approach through strategic partnerships with the United States, France, Israel, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Japan, while maintaining dialogue with Russia, Iran and Central Asia through forums such as BRICS and the SCO. Rather than indicating inconsistency, this multidirectional diplomacy is a deliberate strategy to preserve strategic autonomy within an increasingly fragmented international system.

## The Six Strategic Systems of the Western Strategic Continuum

The Western Strategic Continuum argues that twenty-first-century geopolitical competition is increasingly organised around six mutually reinforcing strategic systems rather than by geography alone. These comprise:

- **The Security System** – encompassing military deterrence, maritime security, intelligence cooperation, counter-terrorism, and emerging domains such as cyber and space.
- **The Logistics System** – including ports, multimodal transport corridors, aviation, shipping, strategic chokepoints, and resilient supply chains.
- **The Economic System** – trade, finance, sanctions, sovereign wealth funds, energy markets and investment.
- **The Technology System** – artificial intelligence, semiconductors, quantum technologies, cyber infrastructure, unmanned systems and digital public infrastructure.
- **The Political System** – diplomacy, governance, coalition building and adaptive legitimacy.
- **The Societal System** – diaspora networks, labour mobility, education, narratives and public diplomacy.

The strategic significance of these systems lies not merely in their individual importance but in their interaction. A disruption in one system rapidly propagates across the others, triggering cascading Continuum Effects. The Western Strategic Continuum therefore supplants the traditional image of separate geopolitical theatres with that of a dynamic strategic ecosystem, in which constituent systems continuously reinforce, reshape and influence one another.

## India's Grand Strategy within the Western Strategic Continuum

The Western Strategic Continuum is more than an analytical construct; it provides a framework for formulating India's grand strategy in an era of strategic disruption. It seeks to integrate maritime security, continental connectivity, technology partnerships, economic statecraft and diplomacy into a coherent strategic architecture. Unlike traditional approaches that compartmentalise these domains, the WSC argues that they are mutually reinforcing instruments of national power.

As India aspires to become a Viksit Bharat by 2047 and to emerge as one of the world's leading economic and technological powers, its western strategic theatre assumes unprecedented importance. Nearly 95 per cent of India's merchandise trade by volume moves by sea, and around half of its crude oil imports originate in West Asia. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has become one of India's largest trading partners. Nearly ten million Indians reside across the Gulf, forming one of the world's largest overseas communities and reinforcing economic, technological and societal linkages.

Consequently, India's western approaches can no longer be viewed simply as an external neighbourhood. They constitute a strategic extension of India's own economic and security architecture.

## Maritime Security: Protecting India's Strategic Lifelines

The maritime domain underpins the Western Strategic Continuum. India's prosperity depends on secure Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) stretching from the Arabian Sea through the Gulf of Aden, the Red Sea, the Suez Canal and the Eastern Mediterranean. These routes carry not only energy but also manufactured exports, critical minerals, food supplies, digital infrastructure and commercial shipping.

Within the WSC, maritime security is no longer confined to naval deterrence. It encompasses maritime domain awareness, cyber resilience, the protection of undersea communication cables and offshore energy infrastructure, resilient logistics networks, and cooperative maritime security arrangements. The attacks on commercial shipping in the Red Sea in 2024 demonstrated how a localised security challenge could generate global economic consequences, including higher insurance premiums, rerouting vessels around the Cape of Good Hope, and significantly higher freight costs. India's SAGAR doctrine (Security and Growth for All in the Region) aligns naturally with the logic of the Western Strategic Continuum. It reflects an understanding that maritime security is a regional public good that underpins economic prosperity, connectivity and strategic stability.

## Connectivity as Grand Strategy

One of the central propositions of the Western Strategic Continuum is that connectivity is no longer merely an economic activity; it has become an instrument of geopolitical influence. Infrastructure projects increasingly shape strategic alignments, supply-chain resilience and regional power balances. Accordingly, India's objective should be to avoid exclusive reliance on any single corridor and to develop multiple, complementary and resilient connectivity networks.

Three initiatives illustrate this strategy:

- **The International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC)** provides India with diversified access to Russia, Central Asia and Europe through Iran and the Caspian region.
- **Chabahar Port** remains indispensable for continental connectivity to Afghanistan and Central Asia while bypassing Pakistan.
- **The India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC)** integrates maritime transport, rail infrastructure, digital connectivity and clean-energy networks linking India with the Gulf and Europe.

These initiatives should not be viewed as competing geopolitical projects. Through the lens of the Western Strategic Continuum, they represent complementary elements of a diversified connectivity architecture designed to enhance strategic resilience and preserve India's strategic autonomy. This reflects the broader concept of Strategic Redundancy: creating multiple interoperable pathways to ensure continuity under conditions of geopolitical disruption.

## Strategic Gravity and India's Overseas Infrastructure Strategy

The concept of Strategic Gravity also underscores the growing importance of India's overseas commercial investments. Historically, ports were viewed primarily as commercial assets. Within the Western Strategic Continuum, they are understood as strategic nodes that organise logistics, finance, technology and geopolitical influence. India's expanding overseas infrastructure footprint illustrates this evolution.

The Adani–Gadot consortium's acquisition of Haifa Port has given India its first significant commercial presence in the Eastern Mediterranean, complementing IMEC's objectives and extending India's maritime reach beyond the Suez Canal. Chabahar remains India's continental gateway to Afghanistan and Central Asia, while participation in the Colombo West Container Terminal and cooperation with Duqm in Oman further strengthen India's logistics network across the Indian Ocean. Taken together, these investments signal the emergence of an Indian overseas infrastructure strategy spanning the Mediterranean and the Arabian Sea. Rather than isolated commercial ventures, they constitute interconnected strategic assets that contribute to supply-chain resilience, diversified connectivity and geopolitical influence.

## Economic Statecraft and the Indian Commercial Footprint

Perhaps the most underappreciated aspect of India's rise is the remarkable expansion of Indian private enterprise across the Gulf. The United Arab Emirates has emerged as India's principal commercial gateway to West Asia, Africa and Europe. More than 80,000 Indian-owned businesses operate in the UAE, supported by a diaspora of nearly four million Indians. These enterprises span logistics, healthcare, retail, construction, banking, advanced manufacturing, technology and financial services.

Major Indian companies—including the Tata Group, Adani Group, Larsen & Toubro, Infosys, TCS, Wipro, Lulu Group, Landmark Group and Aster DM Healthcare—have become integral to the Gulf's economic transformation. Their activities generate employment, facilitate technology transfer, strengthen supply chains and reinforce India's long-term strategic presence. The WSC therefore broadens the concept of economic statecraft. National influence is no longer exercised solely by governments but increasingly through private enterprise, sovereign wealth partnerships, innovation ecosystems and transnational business networks.

## Technology and Atmanirbhar Bharat

Technology is the principal strategic multiplier within the Western Strategic Continuum. Artificial intelligence, cyber resilience, autonomous systems, quantum technologies, semiconductors and digital infrastructure increasingly determine both military capability and economic competitiveness.

Israel occupies a central position in this technological ecosystem. Defence cooperation has evolved from procurement to joint research, co-development and technology transfer across missile systems, electronic warfare, cyber security, unmanned systems and artificial intelligence. Simultaneously, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar are investing heavily in advanced manufacturing, AI, digital infrastructure and knowledge-based industries, creating opportunities for deeper collaboration with India's expanding technology ecosystem.

These developments directly support the objectives of Atmanirbhar Bharat, which aims to enhance indigenous capabilities through innovation, domestic manufacturing, technology transfer and research collaboration. Within the WSC, technology is not a standalone sector but the connective tissue linking maritime security, logistics, defence industrialisation and economic growth.

## Afghanistan: The Continental Pivot

No country illustrates the logic of the Western Strategic Continuum more clearly than Afghanistan. Traditionally seen primarily as a security challenge, Afghanistan should instead be understood as the continental pivot linking India's maritime and Eurasian strategies. Its significance stems not merely from geography but from its role in wider networks of connectivity, logistics and regional trade.

India's long-standing development engagement, spanning the Afghan Parliament, the Salma Dam, highways, healthcare, and education, has generated enduring goodwill among the Afghan people. Following the Taliban's return to power in August 2021, New Delhi adopted a calibrated approach, reopening its technical mission while maintaining its security concerns. This pragmatic engagement reflects the WSC concept of Adaptive Legitimacy, in which strategic engagement is shaped by functional necessity rather than formal diplomatic recognition alone.

For India, Afghanistan is not merely a frontier state; it is the bridge linking the Arabian Sea's maritime systems to the continental networks of Central Asia. Its future stability is therefore inseparable from India's broader connectivity strategy via Chabahar and the INSTC.

## Strategic Autonomy through Networked Partnerships

The Western Strategic Continuum ultimately reinforces India's long-standing doctrine of strategic autonomy. Rather than choosing between competing geopolitical blocs, India has cultivated productive partnerships with Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Oman, Egypt, Iran and Afghanistan, while deepening engagement with the United States, Europe, BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

This multidirectional engagement exemplifies the WSC's concept of Networked Strategic Balancing. In an increasingly fragmented international system, resilience stems from diversified partnerships rather than exclusive alliances. The objective is not neutrality but the maximisation of strategic options. This approach uniquely positions India among major powers. It enables New Delhi to act as a bridge between regions, institutions and competing strategic networks while preserving its freedom of action.

Theoretical Significance, Policy Implications and the Future of India's Grand Strategy

The Western Strategic Continuum is proposed not merely as another regional framework but as an original contribution to the evolution of strategic thought. Just as Sir Halford Mackinder's Heartland Theory explained the geopolitical dynamics of the industrial age, Alfred Thayer Mahan illuminated the importance of maritime power, Nicholas Spykman redefined the significance of the Eurasian Rimland, and the Indo-Pacific concept reflected the maritime integration of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, the Western Strategic Continuum seeks to explain the changing character of strategic geography in an era defined by interconnected systems rather than isolated territories.

Its principal innovation lies in recognising that twenty-first-century geopolitics is no longer organised primarily around contiguous regions or military alliances. Instead, it is structured by the interaction of strategic systems spanning logistics, technology, finance, maritime security, political legitimacy, economic statecraft and societal networks. Strategic influence increasingly derives from the ability to organise, protect and shape these systems rather than from territorial control alone. The Western Strategic Continuum therefore marks a transition from classical geopolitics to systems geopolitics.

## From Strategic Geography to Strategic Systems

For much of the twentieth century, geography was treated as a relatively static determinant of power. Mountains, rivers, coastlines, and territorial buffers shaped military planning and alliance structures. Strategic advantage depended on controlling physical space. The twenty-first century presents a markedly different reality.

Today, geography acquires strategic significance through the density of networks that traverse it. A narrow maritime chokepoint such as the Strait of Hormuz influences global energy markets by concentrating maritime trade and energy flows. A port such as Haifa acquires geopolitical importance by connecting the Mediterranean to emerging connectivity initiatives such as IMEC. Chabahar derives strategic value by linking India's maritime strategy with its continental access to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Likewise, digital infrastructure, undersea communication cables, financial centres and artificial intelligence ecosystems increasingly exercise geopolitical influence comparable to traditional military assets. Accordingly, the Western Strategic Continuum advances a broader understanding of strategic geography in which connectivity has become as important as proximity.

## Policy Implications for India

The Western Strategic Continuum offers a practical framework for India's long-term strategic planning. Several policy implications follow. First, India should adopt the Western Strategic Continuum as an integrated analytical framework for national security planning. Institutional structures often continue to examine West Asia, the Gulf, Afghanistan and Central Asia separately. While administrative specialisation remains necessary, strategic planning should increasingly recognise the functional interdependence among these regions. Energy security, maritime strategy, technological cooperation, connectivity and diplomacy should therefore be analysed collectively rather than through isolated bureaucratic lenses.

Second, India should continue to build strategic redundancy across connectivity corridors. The International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC), the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), Chabahar Port and India's expanding maritime partnerships should be seen as complementary rather than competing initiatives. Diversified connectivity reduces vulnerability to sanctions, conflict, maritime disruption and geopolitical coercion. This approach reflects the principle of Strategic Redundancy developed within the WSC.

Third, India should strengthen its overseas infrastructure strategy. Strategic investments in ports, logistics hubs and industrial corridors should become a permanent component of India's foreign policy. The acquisition of Haifa Port, participation in the Colombo West Container Terminal, the development of Chabahar and expanded cooperation with Duqm illustrate the emergence of such a strategy. Collectively, these assets extend India's strategic reach from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean and enhance supply-chain resilience.

Fourth, technology partnerships should become a central pillar of national strategy. Within the Western Strategic Continuum, technology is not merely an economic sector but a strategic enabler. India's collaboration with Israel in defence innovation, artificial intelligence, cyber security and unmanned systems, together with expanding partnerships with the UAE and Saudi Arabia in advanced manufacturing and digital infrastructure, complements the objectives of Atmanirbhar Bharat and strengthens India's long-term strategic competitiveness.

Fifth, economic statecraft should become an integral component of grand strategy. The activities of Indian businesses across the Gulf, sovereign wealth partnerships, infrastructure investments and digital cooperation increasingly reinforce India's geopolitical influence. The more than 80,000 Indian-owned businesses operating in the UAE, together with the broader Indian commercial presence across the Gulf, constitute strategic assets that complement formal diplomacy and enhance India's economic resilience.

Finally, India should preserve strategic autonomy through diversified partnerships. The Western Strategic Continuum reinforces India's long-standing commitment to multi-alignment. Rather than viewing the international system through rigid alliance blocs, India should continue to pursue what this paper describes as Networked Strategic Balancing, deepening partnerships with the United States, Europe, Israel and the Gulf while maintaining constructive engagement with Iran, Russia, Central Asia and the wider Global South. This approach maximises strategic flexibility and reduces vulnerability to geopolitical fragmentation.

## Conclusion: Towards an India-Centric Theory of Strategic Geography

The transition currently reshaping international politics is more profound than a redistribution of power among states. It is a transformation of the architecture through which power is generated and exercised. Military capability remains indispensable, but it is increasingly complemented, and in many cases conditioned, by resilience across logistics, technology, energy, finance, maritime connectivity, digital infrastructure and economic statecraft. The defining feature of the contemporary strategic environment is therefore not simply the interdependence of regions but the interdependence of strategic systems.

The Western Strategic Continuum offers an India-centric conceptual framework for understanding this transformation. By integrating the Eastern Mediterranean, the Gulf, Iran, the Strait of Hormuz, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Central Asia into a single strategic ecosystem, it provides a more comprehensive explanation of how developments across these regions collectively shape India's national security, economic resilience and geopolitical influence.

Its theoretical contribution extends beyond defining a new strategic theatre. Through the concepts of Functional Geography, Strategic Gravity, Continuum Effects, Strategic Interdependence, Strategic Redundancy, Adaptive Legitimacy and Networked Strategic Balancing, the framework provides an integrated conceptual vocabulary for analysing twenty-first-century geopolitics. Together, these concepts explain why disruptions propagate across regions, why infrastructure has become an instrument of power, why connectivity increasingly determines strategic advantage, and why resilience now depends on participation in multiple overlapping networks rather than on exclusive alliances.

For India, the implications are profound. The country's western approaches are no longer peripheral to its strategic outlook; they are central to its emergence as a leading global power. Secure maritime routes, resilient connectivity, advanced technology partnerships, overseas infrastructure investments, trusted commercial networks and diversified diplomatic relationships together form the foundations of India's future grand strategy.

Looking ahead, the Western Strategic Continuum also presents a broader intellectual proposition. If the twentieth century was defined by the geopolitics of territory and the early twenty-first century by the geopolitics of oceans, embodied in the Indo-Pacific, the coming decades are likely to be characterised by the geopolitics of interconnected strategic systems. In that evolving landscape, the decisive question for states will no longer be who controls the greatest territory, but who most effectively shapes the networks through which energy, technology, capital, information, logistics and influence flow.

The Western Strategic Continuum seeks to provide India with the conceptual framework for understanding and ultimately shaping that emerging strategic order.

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