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India-Middle East-Europe Corridor: An Endeavour to Enhance Complex Interdependence or maintain Balance of Power

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ABSTRACT

The India Middle East Europe Corridor is the proposed initiative undertaken by US, India, Saudi Arab and UAE. The initiative has majorly been received as an attempt to counter Chinas increasing influence in Middle East and strengthen India as a counter weight to Chinese ambitions. However, little has been done to give it a practical shape and speculations are rife about its potential benefits and its role in curbing Chinese influence in Middle East and providing an alternative to BRI. The following paper aims to revisit and analyse the possible objectives of the proposed project. By applying the theory of Complex Interdependence and its key characteristics, the paper concludes that rather than being a counterforce to Chinese clout, the project can be perceived an attempt to enhance complex interdependence as it aligns itself with the central defining features of complex interdependence.

Keywords: *IMEC, Middle East, Corridor Politics, Balance of Power, Saudi Arab.*

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Introduction

Trade routes have been a substantial part of human evolutionary history. The oldest trade routes like the silk road have been existing since thousands of years and have not only been a means for transport of merchandise but also ideas and culture. These trade routes form one of the most important and initial means of linking people and creating interdependence. Early peasants from the fertile crescent, then the Chinese, then the Europeans all traveled to different parts of the world and exchanges ideas due to the presence of these trade routes. In the contemporary world, the trade routes have become increasingly important as they now serve the purpose of jugular vein to national economies. The modern nation- states, especially after the establishment of integrated international economic system eye these trade routes as vital to their state interest. Hans J. Morgenthau delineates territorial sovereignty and economic wellbeing as the two prime national interests of states. When their economic interests are threatened states go to war to protect them. This has been visibly evident in the recent up flare in the red sea when US and UK took join action to dismantle threats posed to the Israel bound ships by the Houthi attacks. Similarly, the emerging and great powers are now increasingly interested in protecting their economic wellbeing by protecting their trade route. The recent announcement of formation of a new trade route known as India-Middle East Economic Corridor is a step in similar direction. The corridor is a brand new overture aimed at strengthening connections between and linking India with Middle East and further Europe. While the project is speculated to be a competitor for the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative- BRI, the potential of its actualization and prospects of its growth vis a vis Chinese BRI need a comprehensive analysis.

This article tries to explain the rationale behind the prospective corridor using the lens of complex interdependence and Balance of Power. The article outlines the key characteristics of the theory of Complex interdependence as enunciated by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye and analyses the prospects of the said corridors in light of those characteristics. The paper makes a comparison between the theory of complex interdependence and the concept of Balance of power and

concludes that the said corridor will reinforce the complex interdependency between the member states. Thus, the idea of complex interdependence stipulated by Keohane and Nye gains significantly more traction and is more adept in explaining the objectives and the possible repercussions of the project

Literature Review

The India-Middle East Corridor was announced in the G20 Summit held in New Delhi in 2023. Since then a plethora of work has been done touting the initiative as an attempt to counterbalance the growing Chinese clout and install connecting trade routes that would prove as an alternate to Chinese Belt and Road Initiative-BRI. Much work is being done to analyze the potential political, economic and strategic impacts of the prospective initiative. Another major line of academic inquiry is comparing and contrasting the two trade routes. Many authors have attempted to outline the possible points of convergences and divergences between the two projects.

Alberto Rizzi, in his thoughtful article has outlined the goals and aspiration of European states, Gulf monarchies and India with the prospective corridor. The potential of IMEC to compete BRI or provide US with strategic benefits against Beijing has also been analyzed. The author has primarily focused on the strategic objective that the states are eyeing by participating in the project (Rizzi, 2024).

Another significant contribution has been made by Arhama Siddiqa who has analysed the politics of corridors through neo-realist lens. The author has examined the potential of IMEC against the BRI. IMEC is increasingly being eyed as an American attempt to counter growing Chinese influence in Indian ocean and Middle East. The possible fallout of this corridor rivalry between US and China is sufficiently examined in the work. The author however concludes the IMEC does not pose a significant challenge to the BRI which has spread to multiple countries and account for almost 40% of the global GDP (Siddiqa, 2023).

Navdeep Suri and others have also outlined how the IMEC can contribute in the geo-political and geo-strategic imperatives of the member states. According to the authors the corridor would present new sectors of growth and cooperation

between the member states. It will help develop the railway link, telecommunications network and digital networks as well. The descriptive work highlights the role of geo-politics in the planning of the project and its geo-economic benefits (Suri, 2024).

Two complementary India-centric studies have been put forward by Dr. Punit Gaur and Debasish Das. Dr Punit has analysed the need of the corridors to enhance trade and connectivity with India. He has analysed a number of similar corridors that are situated in similar geo-political dimensions and have played decisive roles in shaping trade and connectivity across the region (Gaur, 2023). Debasish Das on the other hand has analysed the importance of the corridor in forwarding Indian interest. Three key question that the authors has covered are how the West can aid India in the context of this corridor when the Arab members are more resourceful, secondly how this corridor will situate India's position in countering China and lastly, how beneficial this project would be reinforcing India's broader goals for the region (Das, 2024).

The Asia Research Unit has also put forward a report comparing and contrasting the IMEC with BRI. The report puts forward potential challenges that the proposed project might face and have outlined potential scenarios according to the responses by the regional stakeholders and other neighbouring states (Unit, 2023).

According to Chinese Political scientist Zhu Zhiqun the IMEC project does not imply that China and India are playing a zero-sum game in global south. The author has analyzed the politics of corridor and emerging role of middle powers and global south actors in shaping the contours of global political landscape. The author has claimed that the similar notion of connectivity and development that the corridors convey portray that the world is embarking towards mutual cooperation for combined benefits. Thus, the IMEC corridor if implemented might prove to be complementary to the BRI rather than being a competitor (Zhiqun, 2023).

Another important contribution has been made by Abhinav Pandya. In his work the author has analysed whether the IMEC can become a

significant challenger to the Chinese BRI. According to the authors IMEC has the potential to become a competitor to the BRI as it will provide unimpeded benefits to the member states. India would be directly connected to Europe and Middle East. This will greatly reduce the current distance the merchandise has to travel currently and will increase India's security posture in the region as well, as the security of the eastern part of the corridor would rest with India. Furthermore, the project provides additional benefits to Israel as well. It would ease its integration in the middle east and America can achieve its objective of integrating Israel within the broader Arab network (Pandya, 2023).

Research Gap

The existing literature on the potential causes and implications of the proposed India Middle East Europe Corridor lacks sufficient theoretical backing. The present literature majorly revolves around the potential geo-strategic and geo-economic implications of the project and the responses of the regional actors towards it. The following article tried to explain the IMEC using the theories of International Relations. Using the theory of complex interdependence and the theory of Balance of power the paper attempts to highlight the rationale and the potential impact of the project in terms of complex interdependence and balance of power.

Research Question

Whether the IMEC is an endeavour to enhance 'complex interdependence' or a means to balance out Chinese clout in the region?

India-Middle East Economic Corridor

IMEC was formally announced by the Saudi Arab during the sidelines of 18th G20 Summit in India (Kumar, 2023). The 4800 km long corridor comprises of two parts, the eastern part connecting India to Gulf through sea routes and the northern part connecting Gulf to Europe (Siddiqi, The India-Middle East-Europe Corridor: A Complex Endeavor, 2023). The deal envisioning the corridor was signed by the United States of America, European union, India, Saudi Arab, United Arab Emirates, France, Italy and Germany (Rizzi, 2024).



Figure 1: IMEC Trade Routes

The proposed project is greatly perceived by the world as an American initiative to dismantle Chinese clout from the Middle East and Arabian sea and bring forward India as a leader of the developing world (Hussain, 2023). It is so because the increasing Chinese influence in the Middle East has made America wary of its waning power in the region. According to reports US had pressurized Israel and Greece to not let Chinese companies take over their ports. While Israel acceded to American pressure, Greece defended its position and has allowed the Chinese maritime giant Coscos to govern its Piraeus port (Hussain, 2023). This implies that the Chinese companies have a significant presence in Middle east and in the case of implementation of the IMEC, the stake holders will have to engage with Chinese actors both state and non-state.

The IMEC project and the rationale behind it can be gauged using two prominent theories of International Relations i.e the theory of complex interdependence which has liberalist underpinnings and the theory of balance of power with realist underpinnings. The two theories provide a contrasting explanation of the rationale behind the endeavour and offer comprehensive insights to understand the possible geo-political and geo-economic implications of the project. In in-depth analysis of the project using the key characteristics of the two theories is given below.

Understanding the concept of Complex Interdependence

The idea of complex interdependence is closely associated with the liberal school of thought and is the outcome of Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye thought process. Keohane and Nye in their book *‘Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition’* published in 1977 have talked about how the changing nature of international relations have augmented the role of interdependence and downplayed the realist explanations. The international environment of the time with Vietnam war winding down and OPEC countries using oil as a weapon, all led Keohane and Nye to ponder upon an alternative explanation that could provide a more holistic explanation and deal with the loopholes in Realist explanations. This led them to develop a theory of *Complex Interdependence* that made a profound impact on the academic and theoretical discourse and became a central component of the discussions on globalization and international relations (Walker, 2013).

Dependence has been explained by Robert and Keohane in these words:

“Dependence means a state of being determined or significantly affected by external forces. Interdependence most simply defined means mutual dependence. Interdependence in world politics refers to situations characterized by reciprocal effects among countries or among actors in different countries” (Nye, 1977).

This concept of interdependence holds that states

are so intertwined in a complex web of interdependencies that they are inadvertently effected by the actions of other states as well as non-state actors. The explanation provided a renewed vigour to the neo-liberal school of thought which was being challenged by the classical and structural realism

The theory of complex interdependence does not disregard the high-politics or the power competition in the global arena, instead it posits that the international arena has elements of both, high politics of military and hard power and low politics of economic, social and ecological concerns. They do not disregard or forego the possibility of international armed conflicts because of this interdependence (Rana, 2015). Instead they are of the opinion that complex interdependence increases the cost of war by involving multiple state and non-state actors in the inter-state relations.

Keohane and Nye have visualized three core characteristics of Complex Interdependence. These are; multiplicity of actors, hierarchy of issues and the waning importance of military force (Walker, 2013). These characteristics are elaborated below:

Multiplicity of actors or Multiple channels means that beside the governmental and official relations between states there are a variety of other un-official and informal channels that hold a great degree of sway over the way a state conducts its relations with other states and international organizations. These varied channels include, interest groups, lobbies, Multinational and transnational corporations, powerful civil society actors including NGOs and IGOs and other non-state actors. This multiplicity of actors makes the process of interdependence further entrenched and increases the number of stakeholders in decision making. The mechanism of how the multiplicity of actors will create and deepen interdependence and its application on the proposed IMEC project will be discussed in the following sections.

Second key characteristic outlined by Keohane and Nye is the idea of **absence of hierarchy of issues**. According to Keohane and Nye, in the era of complex interdependence there is no hierarchy of issues. They are of the opinion that the traditional realist idea of power centralism is no more valid. The hierarchy envisaged by realist

where the high politics of hard power and military security used to be the ultimate elements of national interests, is refuted by Keohane and Nye. Rather they hold that in complex interdependence the low politics of trade, finances, economics and investments and others have become more important and they are able to influence the issues of high politics as well. Thus, there is no hierarchy of issues and there is no concept of high or low politics. In other words, the low politics constituting trade, finances and non-traditional security and political issues have increasingly important and more prominent and can sometimes even supersede the high politics or traditional models of power and security.

The third important characteristic of complex interdependence is the **waning importance of military forces**. The decline in the dominant role of military forces is because of the complexity of interdependence between states. A military conflict with a state on one issue can put at stake humongous benefits of cooperation with the same state in other sectors. This is the prime reason why the world has seen a decline in the frequency and intensity of military conflicts. It clearly implies that due to complex interdependence and intermingling of several sectors, military or armed conflict have become an unattractive or unviable options to secure state interests (Walker, 2013).

Analyzing IMEC under the framework of 'Complex interdependence'

The theory of complex interdependence, as discussed above, has some major propositions i.e, it focuses on multiplicity of actors, it talks about merging of high and low politics, it enshrines absence of hierarchy of issue, it talks about decadence of the power and utility of military power. In the context of proposed IMEC, the prevalent assumption is that it is an ambition to counter balance the Chinese BRI. The Chinese ambassador Fu Cong, however, has claimed that China does not see proposed IMEC as a competition rather they believe on cooperation and mutual benefits and reciprocity. According to the ambassador "there is no competition, there is only cooperation". (Transcript of Ambassador Fu Cong's remarks at the Panel Discussion of the hybrid Conference on the Belt and Road Initiative, 2023). However, a brief analysis of the project using the available data on the characteristics outlined above can be made to arrive a

comprehensive conclusion.

The first key characteristic of the complex interdependence is the multiplicity of actors. By multiplicity of actors we mean the number of channels that are used between two states to maintain relations each other. These relations can be impacted and strengthened or weakened by a number of non-state actors as well. The non-state actors include NGOs, IGOs, MNCs, TNCs and other non-governmental elites. In the case of IMEC the interplay of these governmental as well as non-governmental and non-state actors is quite apparent. For instance, the IMEC is expected to pass through the Piraeus Port in Greece that is controlled by China Ocean Shipping company, a Chinese state-owned company while the Etihad rail project involves State China and China State Construction Engineering Corporation (Anwar, 2023). From this the case can be established that for IMEC to become functional, Chinese cooperation would be required to some extent.

The second characteristic talks about merging of high and low politics. This includes that the low politics of trade, finances and cooperation has become so interlinked with the high politics of power and security that they have become unavoidable. In the case of IMEC, the primary goal is to link India with the Middle East with a sea link and then Middle East with Europe through the northern part of the corridor. The corridor would provide a great boost to the intercontinental trade and by directly linking India with Europe. The planned project also includes an extensive network of undersea optic fibers and railway networks. Multiple state sponsored and private entities are expected to invest in this project (Shankar, 2023). An interesting point to note here is that this cooperation in areas of low politics has manifest repercussions in the areas of high politics as expounded by the theory of complex interdependence. For instance, the corridor has delegated the security of the project to the respective states. Thus, the security of the eastern part of the project i.e, from India to Middle East would be held by India and US (Shankar, 2023). This would greatly enhance India's security posturing in the Arabian Sea. India would be able to limit the militarization of Gawadar port under China and can limit and keep Pakistan's naval activities in the region under direct check. This would provide a huge boost to India's

conventional military power and would award him a dominant position in the Arabian sea. The second key explanation provided by Keohane and Nye that during complex interdependence the areas of high and low politics are greatly aligned and low politics gain significant importance as they directly impact the areas of high politics is further validated here. Additionally, the hierarchy established by realists that regarded areas of high politics as more important has also been abolished. In the case of IMEC this is clearly apparent.

The last key assumption stipulated by Keohane and Nye is the waning importance of military. As outlined above, in the situation of complex interdependence the state interests and non-state actors are so intertwined that it becomes increasingly costly for them to engage in military conflicts. As for China and India, the two are involved in power projection but do not go towards military conflict due to the number of actors involved in the multifaceted relations. This however, does not imply that military has lost all its utility and the conflict and competition has vanished. It implies that in the with the deepening of relations between states, the concept of hard power and its importance has taken a back seat but are still relevant for the purpose of power projection and possibility of the world system to revert towards military conflicts and wars.

Balance of Power and IMEC

The theory of Balance of Power is an offshoot of the realist thought. The basic premise of the theory is that in the world system there is always an acrimony towards a potential hegemon. If a state goes for unbridled power maximization the other states feel threatened and are forced to take counter measures to balance the power of the emerging hegemon and protect themselves from its dominance (Wolforth, 2007). There are several types of balancing that states go for. These include internal balancing, external balancing, direct balancing, indirect balancing, automatic balancing and manual balancing. The major mechanisms used by states for the purpose are buck passing and bandwagoning whereas the tools used for balancing are alliance formation, partition and compensation and emulation. Buck passing entails that smaller power rather than themselves trying to balance the great power try to pass the buck and rely on other states for the purpose of

balancing. Band wagoning on the other hand entails that rather than balancing against the emerging hegemon the weaker state join it (Lobell, 2014).

The decision to go for balancing the power of a potential adversary depends upon two factors according to Ivan Savick and Zachary C. Shirkey (Savic, 2006). These are intentions and capabilities of the rising hegemon. Mearsheimer argues that since the intention of a state can never be ascertained, so states gauge the capabilities of the rising power to decide whether to go for balancing or not. If the capabilities of the state are such that it can dismantle or threaten the interests of other states, the go for the decision to balance. This would obviously be manual balancing.

IMEC Under Balance of power

The IMEC Corridor can be analysed using the Balance of Power theory. The main assumption to be tested is that whether United States of America is aiming to counter Chinese clout in the region using the corridor. To test the hypothesis, assumption of Balance of power theory can be applied.

Firstly, as Mearsheimer holds that for balancing to occur the capabilities of the emerging power need to be gauged. In the case of China vs America, the Chinese although a great economic power with comparable military might does not have the physical or military capabilities to challenge American dominance as of yet. Its military expenditure has however increased but it is still not comparable to the American military. Moreover, the Chinese throughout history have not adopted aggressive or confrontational policies. The current Chinese posturing appears a bit more aggressive but the state still adopts a non-confrontational attitude and is more inclined towards cooperation and mutual benefits. Also, the Chinese response towards IMEC has been moderate and non-aggressive. China has indirectly hinted that it opens to cooperation and combined

efforts for the benefit of the people of member states of IMEC and BRI. Moreover, the complementary structures and cooperation between rival states is not against the established norms of international system and have been practiced by multiple states at multiple occasions. Thus, the premise of the confrontation between IMEC and BRI and the case for their competition lacks sufficient ground. Also, the

Conclusion and Analysis

From the above discussion, it can be concluded that the proposed India-Middle East-Europe corridor will significantly help establish complex interdependence that would relegate the importance of high politics and would bring forward area of low politics as the major determinants of international politics. The interlinked and entertained interests of the number of actors, both state and non-state, increase the cost of competition and rivalry while the cooperation and complementary efforts greatly increase the benefits for all the actors. Moreover, taking into account the current developments on the project, the theory of Balance of power does not provide sufficient or convincing arguments to claim that IMEC is an endeavor to balance out Chinese clout in Middle East and Arabian sea. Even if the project was intended to do so, the current Chinese presence in the region and the control of the regional ports by China would present a significant roadblock on the way. Moreover, the regional actors like Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates would not discard of China to join the Western camp as they are wary of the American impulsive policies and decisions. China, too has been lukewarm in its response to the IMEC and has hinted towards his intentions of cooperation. Thus the overall outlook the situation presents justifies the assumptions of the theory of complex interdependence and aligns itself with its key characteristics.

Conflict of Interest

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