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THE GEOPOLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DEVELOPMENT ROAD IN IMEC'S FUTURE: AN ALTERNATIVE TO BELT AND ROAD PROJECT

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Abstract

At the 2023 G-20 Summit, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) project was introduced as a strategic initiative aimed at revitalizing regional trade and establishing alternative routes between the East and the West. Türkiye, on the other hand, has offered a new alternative to develop and diversify the IMEC project with its Development Road project.

The aim of this study is to analyze the IMEC project, which has the potential to be an alternative to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), alongside the Development Road route within a geopolitical framework. In this context, the Development Road route, which may influence the future of the IMEC project, is comparatively analyzed based on dominance theories. Furthermore, potential geopolitical scenarios are evaluated, and policy recommendations are provided based on these evaluations.

As a result, time and cost factors in commercial transportation between India and Europe constitute the major challenges faced by the IMEC project. Additionally, Israel's aggressive attitude towards Arab countries and Palestine stands out as another significant obstacle negatively affecting the IMEC project. On the other hand, the Development Road offers considerable economic advantages in trade routes compared to IMEC. However, ongoing political, sectarian, and military conflicts among the countries in the region pose substantial problems for the Development Road project.

Keywords: *International trade, IMEC, Development road, International geopolitics, Trade roads.*

IMEC'İN GELECEĞİNDE KALKINMA YOLUNUN JEOPOLİTİK ÖNEMİ: BİR KUŞAK BİR YOL PROJESİNE ALTERNATİF

Öz

2023 yılında gerçekleşen G-20 zirvesinde bölgesel ticareti canlandırmak ve Doğu ile Batı arasında yeni alternatif rotalar aramak amacıyla IMEC (Hindistan, Orta Doğu, Avrupa Ekonomik Koridoru) projesi dünyaya tanıtılmıştır. Türkiye ise bu projeye binaen Kalkınma Yolu projesiyle IMEC projesini geliştirmek ve çeşitlendirmek için yeni bir alternatif sunmuştur.

Çalışmanın amacı, Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi'ne alternatif olabilecek IMEC projesi ile Kalkınma Yolu güzergahını jeopolitik düzlemde politik olarak incelemektir. Bu bağlamda, IMEC projesinin geleceğini etkileyebilecek Kalkınma Yolu güzergahını, hakimiyet teorileri çerçevesinde karşılaştırmalı olarak analiz etmektir. Ayrıca, jeopolitik gelişmelere yönelik olası senaryoları değerlendirmek ve bu değerlendirmeler ışığında politika önerileri sunmaktır.

Sonuç olarak, Hindistan ile Avrupa arasındaki ticari taşımacılıkta zaman ve maliyet faktörleri, IMEC projesinin karşılaştığı en büyük zorluklardır. Bunun yanında, İsrail'in Arap ülkelerine ve Filistin'e yönelik saldırgan tutumu da IMEC projesini olumsuz etkileyen önemli bir engeldir. Kalkınma Yolu ise ticaret rotasında IMEC'e göre kayda değer ekonomik avantajlar sağlamaktadır. Ancak, bölge ülkeleri arasında devam eden siyasi, mezhepsel ve askeri çatışmalar, Kalkınma Yolu projesi için önemli sorunlar teşkil etmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: *Uluslararası ticaret, IMEC, Kalkınma yolu, Uluslararası jeopolitik, Ticaret yolları.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

From the dawn of civilization to the present day, trade has been a fundamental driver of economic and political development. The concept of trade, born from human interaction, has accelerated inter-regional interaction as needs have become more pronounced over time. Throughout history, trade routes have not only shaped global economic landscapes but also played a crucial role in cultural and political transformations. Consequently, states that dominated these trade routes have been the political and military powers that left their mark on their respective eras. The gains from these routes have increased the importance countries place on trade routes.

One of the most historically significant trade routes, the Silk Road, extended from China to Europe, serving as a vital corridor for commerce and cultural exchange. States that controlled this trade route throughout history have reaped economic and political returns. In the 21st century, the Beijing administration aimed to reinforce its position on the world stage by modernizing the Silk Road according to contemporary conditions and introduced the “Belt and Road” initiative in 2013 with its robust capital. However, the financial support provided to participating countries through extensive credit agreements has been met with criticism, with some analysts labelling it a “Debt Trap” (The Atlantic, 2021). Moreover, in 2018, former US President Trump initiated trade wars against the Beijing administration under the guise of “Unfair trade practices” (The New York Times, 2018). In light of these developments, many Western companies with investments in China have sought to shift their production bases to other countries (TRT Haber, 2022).

China’s strategic trade policy has garnered significant global attention, prompting regional powers and Western states to implement various countermeasures. In this context, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) has been developed as an alternative to China’s globally declared “Belt and Road” initiative. Designed to foster regional economic integration, IMEC aims to establish a framework for cooperation in trade and energy. With this route, India aims to overcome its regional trade difficulties, enabling the westward shipment of goods and becoming an alternative country to compete against China. From an energy perspective, Gulf countries rich in hydrocarbon reserves will be able to meet East-West energy demands through IMEC, enhancing energy security and market access. Therefore, this project has the potential to increase Europe’s energy supply diversity and reduce trade dependency on China. Globally, reducing Russia’s geostrategic power in terms of energy and trade routes is also among the possible options. Additionally, it is likely that production systems in China, expected to surpass the US economy within the next twenty years, will shift to India.

Theoretically proposed, the IMEC project has some regional problematic points. The exclusion of Türkiye, located on the trade route’s transit path, from the IMEC route results in increased transportation costs and significant time loss in transportation. Historical disagreements and aggressive policies of Israel towards Muslim countries on the IMEC route have led to questions about the project’s functionality. Moreover, geopolitical issues in Southeast Asia closely concern India, and border disputes can disrupt the country’s international balances.

Considering that national interests have historically taken precedence over international relations, persuading Indian goods to a Türkiye-centered route from a pragmatic perspective could be significant for the fate of IMEC. When Türkiye’s “Development Road Project”, proposed in 2023, merges with IMEC, it could reduce costs on the Gulf line and save time in transportation. If the Development Road completes IMEC, it would make sense for it to directly contribute to improving stability in the Middle East and to energy supply security.

This study aims to analyze the IMEC project, which has the potential to serve as an alternative to the Belt and Road Initiative, and the Development Corridor route within a geopolitical framework. In this context, the Development Corridor route, which may influence the future of the IMEC project, is comparatively analyzed using dominance theories. Furthermore, potential geopolitical scenarios are evaluated, and policy recommendations are developed based on these evaluations.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In various fields, ranging from international relations to the political methodologies implemented by states, certain fundamental political disciplines lie at the core. The methods developed and structured by countries

on these primary paradigms are important. Policymakers are driven by specific motivations that lead to the control or acquisition of certain areas, among which geopolitics stands out as one of the most critical factors. The geographical advantages derived from strategic locations bring about various forms of superiority. The resulting interaction between geography and power introduces the concept of geopolitics. Factors such as the seasonal characteristics of states, their proximity to regional or global transit routes, coastal access, and the abundance of underground resources provide significant advantages to countries (Kaya, 2022). The military, political, economic, geographical, and socio-cultural characteristics are significant factors in the strength of states. Among these, geographical location is one of the most critical factors, as it directly influences a state's strategic capabilities and policy-making processes. The position they occupy is one of the strategic elements shaping the future of a state (Doğan and Doğan, 2022). From a geopolitical perspective, both physical and human geography play a crucial role in determining state policies and outlining a roadmap in the international arena.

2.1. Geopolitics

The term "geopolitics" is derived from the Greek word "geo," meaning earth, and "politikos," meaning city or state (Taşdemirci, 1989). Rudolf Kjellen, who first used the term geopolitics, defined it as the scientific study of the state's existence in terms of geography and space (Sezgin and Yılmaz, 1965). According to German geopolitician Karl Haushofer, geopolitics refers to the relationship between the state and its location, considering the developments from the past to the present (Weigert, 1942). Geopolitics is a field that allows for the analysis of the benefits and harms created by cultural, military, political, and commercial factors developed with the geographical features that states possess on the world stage (Doğan and Doğan, 2022).

The concepts of geographical and geopolitical positions of countries are not identical. While geopolitical position encompasses geographical location, the latter remains constant as long as a country's borders remain unchanged. In this sense, the unchanging element of geopolitics is the geographical feature. The changing elements are military, political, and socio-economic characteristics, and in terms of time effects, they are expressed as the updating of the position potential (İlhan, 2021).

Projects aimed at establishing connectivity between states entail geopolitical conditions, opportunities, and risks. In this context, three core strategies emerge as pivotal: regional influence, global geopolitical competition, and economic integration. When forging economic relations through these frameworks, geopolitical calculations are inherently incorporated. Aligned with this perspective, geopolitical connectivity policy seeks to (1) enhance regionalization, (2) construct a novel international sphere, and (3) emulate politicized competition dynamics (Flint and Zhu, 2019).

2.1.1. Theories of Dominance

Throughout history, various theories have been developed on geopolitics due to the escalating military and political tensions that occur every year in the world. Among the earliest and most influential of these theories is Mackinder's Land Dominance Theory, which is based on the assumption that the world's key production resources are located on land. This theory posits that the power dominating Eastern Europe, which he named the heartland, extending from the Volga River to the Siberian steppes and then to the Iran-Afghanistan line, will dominate the world (Erenel, 2021). Asia, Europe, and Africa have been considered not as three separate continents but as a whole "World Island," and this island was thought to be the world's center of gravity (Mackinder, 1942). This idea is the basis of the modern belief that "whoever controls Eurasia controls the world." The "Rimland" theory developed by Nicholas J. Spykman revised the Land Dominance theory. According to Mackinder's theory, the state that controls the periphery of the central regions will dominate Eurasia, and the one that controls Eurasia will dominate the World Island (Europe, Asia, and Africa) (Sönmezöğlu, 1989).

Another leading approach among dominance theories is the Sea Dominance Theory developed by British Admiral Alfred T. Mahan. According to Mahan's theory, the power that dominates the seas will be the dominant force in the world (İlhan, 1989). Additionally, it is an approach that highlights seafaring with the steamships produced after the Industrial Revolution. Mahan considered sea basins as valleys connecting continents and believed that the country controlling these valleys would also control world transportation. While land forces can penetrate a geographically limited area, the path to a world empire is argued to be tied to the seas (Ural, 2009).

In the 20th century, technological advancements led to the emergence of the Air Dominance Theory, pioneered by Italian General Giulio Douhet (1896–1930) and American aviators George T. Runner and General William Mitchell (1879–1936). The advancements in the aviation sector allowed for the development of the Air Dominance theory (Ural, 2009). According to Seversky, the developments in aviation have rendered old geopolitical theories obsolete, and advancements in aircraft and missile technology have eliminated the differences between geographical distances (Denk, 2000).

In the established land, sea, and air dominance theories in geopolitical literature, lies the desire of countries to be regional/global powers. Therefore, the economic power of countries alone is not sufficient; they need markets for the products to be produced and strategic trade routes.

3. NEW PATH TO WORLD TRADE: INDIA-MIDDLE EAST-EUROPE ECONOMIC CORRIDOR (IMEC)

Throughout history, economy-based relationships arising from necessity between people and regions have facilitated the development of trade routes. Accordingly, various trade routes such as the Tea Road, Silk Road, Spice Road, and Royal Road have emerged over time, and the countries that dominated these routes have become strategically and economically strong, becoming influential in the international conjuncture (Kazancı and Barun, 2023). The Silk Road, extending from China to Europe, has been the stage for the dominance struggle of regional and global powers for centuries. States that seized control along this route among the Chinese, Mongols, Turks, and Russians have become significant actors. China, efficiently utilizing its technological production capacity with a surplus supply, proposes the “Belt and Road” initiative to update the historic Silk Road. This project aims to revitalize the historic Silk Road and strengthen the Eurasia-Asia and Pacific-Asia corridors through trade (Tutar and Koçer, 2019). In response, the United States and other developed Western nations, seeking to preserve their economic dominance, have introduced a new trade route as an alternative to China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In this context, at the G-20 summit held in New Delhi, India, in September 2023, leaders from the United States, Saudi Arabia, Italy, Germany, France, the European Commission, and the United Arab Emirates shared the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) with the global public (Cafiero, 2023). The proposed corridor aims to facilitate the movement of goods from Mumbai, India, via maritime transport to the UAE (Dubai). From there, shipments will be transported via rail networks, passing through Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Israel, ultimately reaching the port of Haifa. The final leg of the journey will involve maritime transport to the port of Piraeus in Greece, followed by road transit into Europe. The shipment arriving in Greece is expected to be transferred by road to Europe, estimating the total length of this planned corridor to be 8166 km (Kaya, 2023).

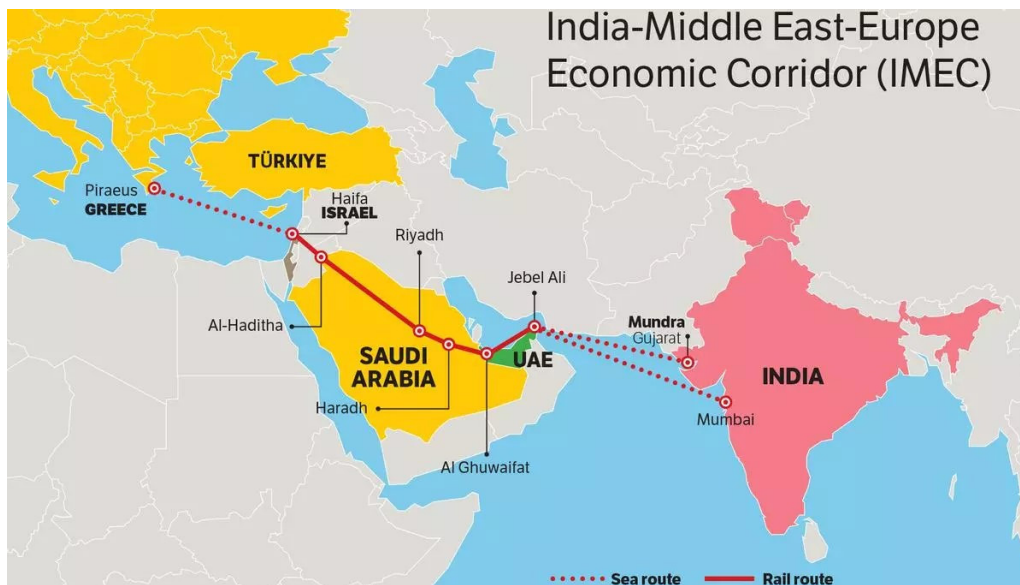


Figure 1: IMEC Project and Routes

Source: (Frontline, 2023)

One of the primary objectives is to connect the land routes identified above by railway. Additionally, it has been announced that the project will involve multifaceted infrastructure investments, including the development of new energy pipelines, electricity grids, and digital networks along the proposed transport corridor. A key aspect of this initiative is its role in facilitating hydrogen exports (White House, 2023). The planned trade route is expected to contribute to clean energy supply, job creation in participating countries, and reductions in production costs. Furthermore, digital collaboration and infrastructure investments are anticipated to foster new economic integrations across Europe, Asia, and the Middle East (Altun, 2023). The USA has declared full support for the trade route to be established (Alias, 2023), and it is expected that the project will promote the recent Arab-Israeli normalization policies. The Abraham Accords, which took place on September 15, 2020, under the leadership of former US President Donald Trump between Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Bahrain, are characteristic of supporting normalization steps in the region (White House, 2020). Additionally, the purchase of the Israeli Haifa port by an India-based company highlights the value given to the IMEC project, indicating that the relationship between Tel Aviv and New Delhi will continue over the years (Mehrotra, 2023).

IMEC has the potential to drive economic growth and strengthen connectivity, especially as countries like Vietnam and India emerge as alternative manufacturing hubs for companies relocating from China. For Saudi Arabia and the UAE, IMEC is likely to be seen not as a challenge to China but as an opportunity to diversify their economies and solidify their roles within the Middle East region (Oh, 2024). Therefore, the IMEC initiative holds significant importance in terms of the economic indicators of its member countries, particularly regarding GDP, trade openness, and infrastructure development, as key drivers of regional and global integration. These dynamics underscore the collective strength of the IMEC framework.

Table 1: Economic Indicators of IMEC Countries (2023)

	GDP (Billion Dollars)	Population (Million)	Per Capita GDP (Thousand Dollars)	Inflation Rate	Export of Goods (Billion Dollars)	Import of Goods (Billion Dollars)	External Balance (Billion Dollars)	Openness Rate in Trade
UAE	504.173	9.5	52976	-	487.778	448.688	39.09	1.857
India	3549.918	1428.6	2484	5.6	432.001	672.667	-240.666	0.311
Israel	509.901	9.7	52261	4.2	66.893	91.284	-24.391	0.310
Saudi Arabia	1067.5	33.26	32094	2.4	320.02	206.94	113.08	0.493
Jordan	50.813	11.3	4482	2.0	12.763	25.470	-12.707	0.752
Greece	238.206	10.3	22990	3.4	55.047	88.617	-33.57	0.603
Total	4853.011	1502.1	27881 (Average)	2.93 (Average)	1054.482	1326.726	-68.676	0.618 (Average)
World	10617	8000.6	13169 (Average)	5.6 (Average)	23093	24330	-1237	-

Source: The data was obtained from the World Bank and prepared by the author.

This table illustrates the economic indicators of various countries, offering insights into their global standing and strategic potential within the IMEC framework. India, with a GDP of \$3.5 trillion and a population of 1.4 billion, represents a dominant player, accounting for approximately 3.5% of the global GDP, while its per capita GDP of \$2,484 significantly lags behind the global average of \$13,169. In contrast, the UAE showcases remarkable economic efficiency, achieving a per capita GDP of \$52,976, which far exceeds global standards, despite a much smaller population of 9.5 million.

The UAE also excels in trade openness, with an openness ratio of 1.857, highlighting its deep integration into global markets. India, however, remains more inward-focused with a lower openness ratio of 0.311. Saudi Arabia contributes strategically with a GDP of \$1.067 trillion and a trade surplus of \$113 billion, reflecting robust energy exports. Jordan, although having a smaller economy, demonstrates stability with its inflation rate at 2%, in line

with developed nations, and a trade openness ratio of 0.752, exceeding the global average. Meanwhile, Greece grapples with challenges, recording a trade deficit of \$33.57 billion alongside moderate inflation at 3.4%.

Globally, IMEC countries contribute modestly, collectively accounting for approximately 5% of the global GDP and 4% of the \$25 trillion world trade volume. Their strategic focus on transportation, energy corridors, and regional collaboration could amplify their role in the global economy, fostering connectivity and unlocking growth opportunities across diverse regions. This data underscores IMEC's potential to bridge economic disparities and drive integration within the broader geopolitical landscape.

The IMEC route to be created will concentrate trade on the Asia, Middle East, and Europe line, and the shift of infrastructure investments to this area will further increase the regional and global significance of the countries. In recent years, the Beijing and Tehran administrations, which have started to attach importance to their relations with the Middle Eastern states (Euronews, 2023), are producing geostrategic policies against the USA. The envisioned IMEC project aims to maintain US geostrategic dominance while strengthening against China and Iran, which seek to expand their influence in the Middle East (Altun, 2023).

In the future, it seems likely that other countries will join IMEC. There is a possibility that Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, which are close allies of the USA in the Asia Pacific line, will be added. Considering the recent China-Taiwan tensions, it is likely that the Washington administration, which wants to squeeze China in the region, will use this card. The use of this route in trade with Western countries by technology giants Japan and South Korea suggests the possibility of the IMEC project including this region.

4. GEOSTRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF IMEC IN THE ASIA-MIDDLE EAST AND EUROPE TRIANGLE

The IMEC and the BRI represent two distinct projects with differing implications for regional and global connectivity. Initiated by China, the BRI is often perceived as a tool to enhance China's economic dominance over Asian economies. In contrast, the IMEC, proposed by Indonesia, is founded on a vision of regional cooperation and reduced dependency on Chinese infrastructure. These corridors are part of a competitive dynamic that fundamentally transforms the geopolitics and geostrategic landscapes of South Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, leaving a lasting impact on the global order (Ain et al., 2024).

Geopolitical and geoeconomic dynamics constitute the primary rationale for the IMEC initiative. This proposal emerged from the 2020 Abraham Accords and India's inclusion in October 2021 into the I2U2 group (India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States), originally formed by the US, Israel, and the UAE. The first virtual summit of I2U2 in July 2022 indicated that the initiative's focus areas would include strategic transportation links. Saudi Arabia played a critical role in the project, becoming part of the equation as efforts accelerated under US leadership to establish diplomatic ties between Riyadh and Tel Aviv (Suri et al., 2024).

The developments and the growing dominance of China on the Asian continent make the IMEC an alternative of strategic importance. The United States aims to curb China's economic and political rise and to break the expanding influence of Beijing and Tehran in the Middle East in recent years (Abudouh, 2023). Moreover, this initiative offers significant strategic advantages for India and other regional actors competing with China. India, one of the pillars of the IMEC project, has been experiencing problems with its western neighbour Pakistan due to the Kashmir issue, which has occasionally led to armed conflicts (BBC News Türkçe, 2019). Due to historical conditions and specific issues between the two countries, the administrations of New Delhi and Islamabad often come face to face. This type of instability with border neighbours has led India to seek new trade routes on the regional and global stage.

As the world's third-largest energy consumer after the United States and China, India's current energy needs are expected to increase by 50% by 2030. By 2040, India will be the country with the highest energy demand in the world (International Energy Agency, 2021). The connection of the existing IMEC route from India to the Arabian Peninsula is of critical importance. The fact that the current members of the project, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, are OPEC members plays a key role for India from an energy perspective (TÜRKDEGS, 2023). The transportation of Gulf oil and natural gas to India via tankers and LNG infrastructure investments is expected to be a lifeline for

New Delhi, securing its long-term energy needs. The recent rapprochement between India and Israel is one of the noteworthy parameters for the realization of this project (Bayram, 2023).

The Russia-Ukraine war, which began with Russia's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, has caused problems in energy supply security for many world states, especially Europe (Kesici, 2022). Europe's dependence on Russian energy has led European states to seek many alternatives during this process (İnat, 2022). In this context, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which constitute the Gulf segment of the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) project, have emerged as viable energy supply alternatives for both Europe and India. It is among the possibilities that Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, current OPEC members, will further increase their significant role in oil supply. The use of Gulf energy is important for the European Union, which wants to ensure energy diversity and minimize the impact of political fractures worldwide. In this context, the IMEC project has suitable geographical conditions for infrastructure investments and the construction of the railway line. The fact that most of the territories of the UAE and Saudi Arabia consist of deserts offers an opportunity to evaluate these idle lands. In this case, the physical and geographical conditions will not pose major problems for the investing companies. Additionally, the planned pipeline for hydrogen transportation and the internet infrastructure are likely to provide geostrategic returns for the Abu Dhabi and Riyadh administrations. Moreover, low-cost commercial and energy-oriented goods coming from Israel's Haifa Port or the Jebel Ali port in the UAE to the Gulf region could accelerate the economic cycle in the region. This situation could keep inflation at low levels in the regional countries. The shift of energy, logistics, and trade intensity to the Gulf region could further increase the strategic importance of Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Considering the US policies in the Middle East, Israel, which maintains its status as the most important partner, continues to be a strategic partner of the project due to its recent close relations with India (Chaudhuri, 2023). Therefore, the connection of the railway, optical, and hydrogen investments within the project to Israel, with the Haifa Port being a location opening to the Eastern Mediterranean, highlights the policies of the US administration.

In recent years, the Tel Aviv administration, which has taken steps towards normalization with the Arab world under the leadership of the USA, has the opportunity to turn these normalization steps into a geoeconomic partnership with this project. However, Israel's barbaric attitude and the international issue of Palestinian territories can cause fluctuations in bilateral relations with the Arab states in the project. The Arab-Israeli wars in history provide evidence for this situation. Therefore, in the international economic policy, Israel appears to be the weakest and most insecure country in the IMEC project. Israel's barbaric attitude in the ongoing instability in the Middle East for a quarter of a century and in improving the atmosphere of trust in the IMEC project is drawing attention.

4.1. IMEC's Potential in the Green Hydrogen Sector

The planned IMEC trade route is reported to include the construction of green hydrogen transmission lines that concern some member countries in the energy sector (Erin, 2023). Green hydrogen can be produced entirely from renewable energy sources (International Renewable Energy Agency, 2020). Unlike hydrogen produced from fossil fuels, which emits carbon dioxide, green hydrogen production results in water as a byproduct, contributing to air purification and emissions reduction (World Bank Blogs, 2023). Given the global problem of carbon emissions, the importance of renewable energy is increasing. Therefore, the inclusion of green hydrogen in the IMEC project emphasizes that the global warming issue is not being overlooked.

Green hydrogen has the potential to be a significant alternative in sectors with high emission outputs, such as iron-steel, chemical, and transportation, in achieving decarbonization. Global investments in green hydrogen have reached 1.1 billion dollars, with the USA accounting for 44% and the Asia-Pacific region for 33% of this figure (Çağatay, 2023). In this era of intensifying global warming, the steps countries take to reduce carbon emissions are crucial. Accordingly, by 2050, it is projected that green hydrogen will account for 12% of the world's total energy consumption, fostering a new competitive landscape in global energy markets. China has nearly 30 projects based on green hydrogen for emission-free energy. Germany aims to increase its clean hydrogen capacity under its "Hydrogen Strategy" plan. Indian Prime Minister Modi has stated that green hydrogen will be an important

building block for India's energy independence by 2047 (World Economic Forum, 2022). If successfully integrated into a green energy system aimed at sustainability, the fundamental development paradigm of protecting the environment can be realized. IMEC offers the opportunity to minimize the supply-demand imbalances that occasionally occur in the energy market, specifically for member countries (Shahid, 2023). However, despite its positive aspects, the existing problem areas of IMEC pose obstacles to the project's progress.

The rationale behind this idea lies in the significant potential for solar energy production in both India and the Gulf States. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates possess vast, barren deserts that receive constant sunlight, which can be harnessed and converted into electricity or green hydrogen. Hence, IMEC could serve as a corridor facilitating the export of renewable energy from these countries to Europe. Additionally, digital connectivity cables could enable the export of India's IT services to Europe and Western Asia (Suri, et al., 2024).

5. POSSIBLE PROBLEMS AREAS IN THE OPERATIONALIZATION OF IMEC

Certain factors have historically enhanced the importance of trade routes. These include the geopolitical positions of countries, the energy potentials of the countries along the route, and the stable conditions, security, and logistical infrastructures along the route, which further strengthen the strategic positions of existing trade routes. From this perspective, the efficient and effective operation of the IMEC roadmap necessitates the use of both land and sea routes.

Large container ships (ULCVs) used in maritime trade carry approximately 20,000 to 25,000 twenty-foot equivalent units (TEUs) or 10,000 forty-foot equivalent units (FEUs). An FEU container is 12.2 meters long, and a TEU container is 6.1 meters long. If it is desired to unload containers with a train consisting of 40 wagons, each carrying 2 TEUs, 250 trains will be needed. Each train is assumed to be 580 meters long (1 wagon = 13.7 meters × 40 wagons + a 32-meter locomotive). This equates to 15 container ships, 22 bulk carriers, 8 car carriers, 35 tankers, and 13 different types of ships passing through a canal every day. Additionally, considering the time loss due to transferring containers unloaded by ships from India to Dubai and then to Israel's Haifa port by sea, the Gulf railway line investment for product transportation is expected to be around 1500 km. Railway maintenance costs, train refueling, costs of trains and wagons, transit fee agreements between the countries the line will pass through, and the financial burdens of operating both ports are also factors. Furthermore, the fact that rail transport is approximately 3.5-4 times more expensive than sea transport should not be overlooked (Köse, 2023). The railway investments to be made for the implementation of IMEC and the use of the sea route twice on the India-Gulf and Gulf-Europe lines create time losses and significant cost burdens. Additionally, the presence of Iran-backed Houthis, tensions between Israel and Hamas, disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean trade route between Türkiye and Greece, and the status of Cyprus raise questions for the regional countries.

Considering India's geographical position, it is a fact that there is a commercial connection impasse (Shahid, 2023). The region's historical, political, and cultural structure clearly demonstrates this. As Bastiat (1997) stated, "If goods do not cross borders, soldiers will," which better emphasizes the region's propensity for a hot conflict environment. In today's world, it is a fact that investments go to safe and stable places. India's border issue with Pakistan and the current chaotic situation in neighbouring Afghanistan pressure the New Delhi administration to achieve its economic goals. If the IMEC project is successfully implemented, a reduction in regional tension is a strong possibility. Furthermore, as Kaya (2023) mentioned, India's goal of becoming a global power in the near future is significant for the New Delhi administration, and competition with China is important (Kaya, 2023). The IMEC project holds a strategic position in balancing the tension between the West and China. As Europe's powerful countries restructure their geo-economic relations with the Middle East, IMEC expands its regional attraction. Especially the plan to finance IMEC by private companies highlights the conditions of the free market economy (Burton, 2023). Therefore, not only the IMEC countries but also the neighbouring countries need to establish stability to build a secure environment in the Middle East.

Although bilateral relations between Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and China have recently deepened, the IMEC project may curtail Beijing's ambitions to expand its geopolitical and economic influence in the Middle East (Mehrotra, 2023). However, Chinese policymakers continue to adopt strategic measures to safeguard their economic and political foothold in the region. Thus, the acquisition of a 67% management right

of Greece's Piraeus port, one of the sea routes of the IMEC project, by China's COSCO Shipping Group in 2016 (Yeping, 2023), means that the Athens administration will be politically squeezed between China, India, and the US administrations. Additionally, China's investments in the route included in the "One Belt, One Road" project have been ongoing for years. This project, based on the revival of the historical Silk Road, strengthens Beijing's hand in terms of financing, investment, and experience. China's ability to finance projects directly through state funds enhances the initiative's sustainability. On the other hand, the implementation of the IMEC project through private sector investments could slow down in the event of the slightest political or military tension in the region. In this context, the Israeli-Palestinian issue and Iran-Israel tensions create problem areas for the project.

Türkiye, a pivotal actor in both regional and global affairs, remains a subject of diplomatic disputes with neighbouring states and continues to navigate contentious issues such as the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) disputes in the Eastern Mediterranean. Türkiye, which has been excluded from the IMEC project, has not remained indifferent to this project and has put forward the "Iraq Development Road" project using its geostrategic and geoeconomic position.

6. EXPANSION OF IMEC: IRAQ DEVELOPMENT ROAD PROJECT

The close diplomatic and military ties between Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and Pakistan, particularly exemplified by the "Three Brothers" military exercise in 2021, have raised concerns in India, given its longstanding disputes with Pakistan. In fact, the New Delhi administration has supplied arms to the Armenian army against Azerbaijan (Yalçinkaya, 2023). In light of these developments, it is thought-provoking that Türkiye is not included in the IMEC route, considering both its problematic diplomatic relations with the Western world and its close ties with Pakistan. Against this backdrop, Turkish policymakers have actively promoted the Development Road Project as a viable alternative to IMEC. This project allows for a revision of the IMEC route to the Development Road, shortening the sea route and reducing the investment costs for new infrastructure on the Arabian Peninsula.

The planned route involves a 1200 km long railway and road investment to Basra's Faw Port, which is expected to become the largest port in the Middle East (Karaalp, 2023). The line, connecting important Iraqi cities such as Diwaniyah, Najaf, Karbala, Baghdad, and Mosul, and then to Türkiye, is planned to reach Europe (TRT Haber, 2023). Strategically, the Development Road Project serves as a complementary initiative to both the "Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)" and the IMEC corridor, thereby enhancing regional connectivity. Additionally, regional countries such as Türkiye, Qatar, and the UAE have committed to investing in the route extending from Basra to Türkiye (Karataş, 2023).



Figure 2: Development Road Project

Source: (Hayes, 2024)

Considering the time and commercial costs, shifting the route from the UAE port to Basra and then connecting it to the Development Road appears to be more profitable than the IMEC's plan of twice using sea transportation between India-UAE and Israel-Europe. The under-construction Faw Port will be Iraq's first open-sea port. Efforts are being made to make the port suitable for heavy cargo ships, aiming to increase commercial traffic in the Persian Gulf (Duman, 2023: 34). If Faw Port is built deeper than the Suez Canal, it is calculated that the traffic in the Red Sea will shift there (ORSAM, 2023a). The Development Road is expected to reduce the transit time for goods between China's Shanghai port and the Netherlands' Rotterdam port from thirty-three to fifteen days, thereby increasing trade between Asia and Europe (Hasan, 2024).

The developments enhance the importance of the Development Road, which is both safer and shorter in time compared to the Suez Canal. Thus, Iraq's regional position is strengthened in the current international conjuncture (ORSAM, 2023b). Furthermore, Türkiye's geographical position, serving as a bridge on trade routes and a safe route in the energy supply chain for centuries, places the Ankara administration in a strategic position. The 21st-century expansion of highway, bridge, railway, and port infrastructure underscores the efficiency and security of Türkiye's transportation corridors. Türkiye has announced preparations for an operation against the PKK/PYD terrorist organization, which could pose an obstacle to the Development Road in northern Iraq (BBC Türkçe, 2024). The planned military operation will make the route of the Development Road more secure. The opening of the Ovaköy border gate on the Türkiye-Iraq border is also among the plans, highlighting the importance for the future of the project. The decision to open the Zangezur corridor following the Second Karabakh War will increase Türkiye's geopolitical/geoeconomic importance and enhance trade efficiency by reducing transportation costs and time savings of the Belt Road project. In this context, Türkiye will become a regional/global transfer center between East and West with the implementation of the Development Road project.

Despite the advantageous aspects of the Development Road in terms of land dominance, there are also risky aspects. The first is the presence of the Houthis in Yemen, which poses a significant risk to international trade following Israel's conflicts with Palestine. The Houthis have attacked many trade ships going from the Red Sea to the Suez Canal. As a result, an International Maritime Coalition led by the United States was established to ensure the safety of maritime trade (Reuters, 2023). The second geopolitical risk is political developments such as the 1st and 2nd Gulf Wars and the US invasion of Iraq in 2000 (BBC News Türkçe, 2023). The third is the geopolitical handicaps of the Development Road project, including China's strategic steps with investments in Central Asian countries, the Russia-Ukraine War, the increased risk of war in the Middle East due to Israeli barbarism, and the instability in regional policies caused by the Taliban administration. These events have destabilized Iraq's political structure. The country has been insecure for the last 20 years due to uprisings by minorities, Iranian influence due to the Shiite population, and various terrorist organization structures. Despite these adversities, Iraq, rich in oil resources, can achieve economic gains with the new trade route to be opened by the Development Road project. China, which purchases 45% of Iraq's oil, is expected to view the Development Road favorably (Duman, 2023). Iraq, highly dependent on oil for its economy, is striving to create new revenue streams. In this regard, the Development Road is of strategic importance for Iraq. The project's implementation is expected to generate an annual revenue of 4 billion dollars, with long-term economic returns in areas such as industry and employment being even higher. The Development Road, being more local compared to the Belt Road and IMEC, will contribute to the development of regional countries (Karataş, 2023).

The Development Road also offers complementary opportunities to China's Belt Road project. Various initiatives by the Beijing administration to expand its current geostrategic influence could lead to changes in US policies in the Middle East. If the United States actively supports the Development Road without ceding influence to China, it could strengthen regional stability and maintain a dominant presence in Middle Eastern trade networks. Additionally, the tense relations between the US and Iran in the region could be alleviated through the Development Road project, establishing new dialogue channels within the framework of a win-win policy.

7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

When analyzing international trade from a geopolitical perspective, the Land Dominance Theory is prioritized over the Maritime Dominance Theory in terms of transportation speed. However, the Maritime Dominance Theory prevails when considering cost efficiency. As understood from the study, the combined use of land and sea routes in transportation can extend the transportation time. Meanwhile, the Air Dominance Theory remains primarily utilized for security purposes in regions where trade occurs, as high transportation costs significantly limit the commercial viability of air routes.

Analyses regarding the future trajectory of the global economy suggest that China's economy is poised to surpass that of the United States. Furthermore, Beijing's strategic policies aimed at realizing this projection have heightened concerns, particularly among the U.S. and Western nations, prompting them to explore alternative economic and geopolitical strategies.

Consequently, the geopolitical battles underlying trade route projects are driven by the U.S.-China rivalry. Economically, the continuously growing China is formulating policies on both global and regional levels to develop the historic Silk Road. Meanwhile, the U.S. aims to restrict China's sphere of influence and maintain its global dominance by leveraging India, an emerging power in the Asia-Middle East equation, as a buffer state.

BRI is known for its extensive geographical reach, encompassing approximately 150 countries. These countries are primarily underdeveloped or emerging economies, making BRI a truly global effort. On the other hand, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) is intended to cover around 20 countries, particularly in the Middle East and Europe. These economies tend to be more developed compared to the member states of the BRI. Therefore, BRI's reach is significantly broader in comparison to IMEC (Raja, 2024). Thus, the IMEC and Development Road projects, which are likely to become subjects of international political contention, encompass geopolitical issues involving both land and sea routes.

Due to the various energy-related issues experienced by Europe in recent years because of the Russia-Ukraine war, the IMEC project can expand its operational scope. In this context, IMEC holds a significant position for Europe to breathe easier both commercially and politically. The Gulf route will provide supply diversity and reduce dependence on Russia while meeting Europe's energy demand. One of the objectives of IMEC, the promotion of green hydrogen, is expected to contribute to the development and export of renewable energy between regions. By uniting the Europe-Gulf-Asia regions under mutual commercial interests, economic integration and closer energy ties can be achieved through a "win-win" policy.

As with any large-scale initiative, the IMEC project presents certain critical challenges and uncertainties. The necessity of conducting sea transportation twice between India and Europe prolongs the transportation time. Additionally, the substantial capital investment and high infrastructure costs associated with constructing new trade routes raise concerns regarding the project's long-term feasibility and economic viability. Furthermore, historical tensions between Israel and the Arab states in the Gulf region pose a significant challenge to the sustainability of IMEC. Israel's recent attacks on Palestine have disrupted regional prosperity and political stability, casting doubt on the project's feasibility in the coming years. Thus, the ongoing Palestinian issue could potentially cause renewed tensions among regional residents. The continental shelf of the Eastern Mediterranean, forming part of the Gulf-Europe route, occasionally leads to tensions between Türkiye and regional countries, negatively impacting the Mediterranean dimension of trade transportation. Additionally, Türkiye's strong bilateral relations with Pakistan could create friction with India due to the ongoing Kashmir dispute (Yalçinkaya, 2023). This could result in IMEC opting for the Gulf route over the Türkiye-centric Development Road route.

The "Development Road" project by Türkiye and Iraq presents a significant alternative to IMEC's Gulf route. Given that national interests take precedence over permanent alliances in international relations, redirecting the IMEC route to Europe via Iraq and Türkiye, rather than relying on the costly and time-intensive Gulf route, appears to be a more pragmatic and economically viable approach. Türkiye's geographical bridging role and its substantial infrastructure investments from past to present could save IMEC considerable costs. However, the Development Road project also faces international challenges.

Regionally, while the political instability in Iraq is not as severe as the long-standing tensions between Israel and Arab states, the internal turmoil Iraq has experienced in recent years raises substantial concerns. The Gulf operations led by the U.S. in past years have been one of the significant reasons driving Iraq into an unstable state. The presence of various paramilitary and terrorist groups in the region poses a separate problem. Iran, which has tense relations with the U.S. in the region, is among the main actors. However, incorporating Iran into diplomatic negotiations through the Development Road initiative and potentially securing a mutually beneficial trade agreement could serve to de-escalate tensions. This would be particularly relevant given Tehran's current geopolitical isolation due to its controversial support for the Kremlin amid the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

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