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MULTILATERAL STRATEGIC COMPETITIONS: ASSESSING CHINA'S BRI AND INDIA'S IMEC

Emrah YILDIRIMÇAKAR*

Abstract

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has significantly expanded China's political and economic influence in world politics. The competition between China, India, and the United States has intensified since the announcement of the BRI. Nearly a decade after the BRI's launch, India introduced the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), backed by the United States and European Union (EU). However, India's IMEC and other expected corridors are not as comprehensive as those of China. China's BRI includes six corridors covering railways, seaways, and highways. It is also supported by substantial economic foundations such as the Silk Road Fund and Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and nearly 150 backing countries. Unlike the BRI, IMEC lacks strong financial backing and appears to primarily serve Western strategic interests. This study analyses the BRI and the IMEC initiatives to assess their future trajectories.

Keywords: *BRI, IMEC, China, India, The United States, Power competition.*

ÇOK TARAFLI STRATEJİK REKABETLER: ÇİN'İN BRI'Sİ VE HİNDİSTAN'IN IMEC'İNİN DEĞERLENDİRİLMESİ

Öz

Kuşak ve Yol Girişimi (BRI), Çin'in dünya siyasetindeki siyasi ve ekonomik etkisini önemli ölçüde genişletmiştir. BRI'nin ilanından bu yana Çin-Hindistan ve Çin-Amerika Birleşik Devletleri arasındaki rekabet giderek artmıştır. BRI'nin başlatılmasından yaklaşık on yıl sonra Hindistan, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri ve Avrupa Birliği tarafından desteklenen Hindistan-Ortadoğu-Avrupa Ekonomik Koridoru'nu (IMEC) ortaya koymuştur. Ancak Hindistan'ın IMEC'i ve beklenen diğer koridorlar, Çin'in koridorları kadar kapsamlı değildir. Çin'in BRI'si, demiryolları, deniz yolları ve karayollarını kapsayan altı koridordan oluşmaktadır. Aynı zamanda İpek Yolu Fonu ve Asya Altyapı Yatırım Bankası (AIIB) gibi güçlü ekonomik temellerin yanı sıra yaklaşık 150 ülkenin desteğiyle desteklenmektedir. IMEC ise BRI'nin aksine güçlü bir finansal temelden yoksundur ve esas olarak Batı'nın stratejik çıkarlarına hizmet ediyor gibi görünmektedir. Bu çalışma, BRI ve IMEC girişimlerini karşılaştırmalı olarak analiz ederek, bu girişimlerin gelecekteki yönelimlerini değerlendirmeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: *BRI, IMEC, Çin, Hindistan, Amerika Birleşik Devletleri, Güç rekabeti.*

*Asst. Prof. Dr., Avrasya University, Faculty of Economics and Administrative Sciences, Department of International Relations, TRABZON.
e-mail: emrahycakar@gmail.com, (<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6501-5471>)

1. INTRODUCTION

China and India are two ancient civilizations that have retained distinctive political, cultural, and economic histories to the present period (Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2011). The ancient "Silk Road" continued to connect the countries, regions, and continents to enable them to have commercial interactions with China for ages. Similarly, the ancient "Spice Road" continued to create trade-based multilateral relations with India and the rest of the world. These two great nations are once again attempting to play significant roles in the world's economy and trade connectivity with modern versions of new seaways, railways, and highways.

In modern times, the BRI and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) are two massive economic initiatives that have different lines designed to cooperate with many international actors to contribute to the world economy. Currently, both initiatives are under construction, and neither of them has reached its final step. Due to the difficulties in the political, economic, and infrastructure processes of these kinds of projects, they are not expected to be accomplished in a short period. The IMEC is a relatively new economic initiative that is designed to connect countries, regions, and continents. However, IMEC is a relatively new corridor, and it is far from the objectives of the BRI, which has six different corridors and was announced 10 years ago. The BRI has increased both the political and economic influence of China internationally, and the competition between China-India and China-US has increased noticeably since the announcement of the BRI. Almost 10 years after the announcement of the BRI, India unveiled its economic corridors with the support of the US and the EU as an alternative to the BRI.

This study tries to focus on the great power competition between China and India for the Middle East and the EU at the core of realist power theory. Both China and India have aimed to revive their ancient ways to increase their power and influence in the Middle East and the EU, along with countries along the way. There is not just one or two reasons for this rivalry. It has many different causes, depending on the targeted corridors and regions. In this context, this study aims to raise the question: to what extent can India's IMEC emerge as a viable alternative to China's BRI in shaping geopolitical and economic influence across the Middle East and the European Union?

Based on realist power theory, this study argues that the IMEC should be considered not merely as an economic initiative but as part of a broader geopolitical competition. While the BRI has established itself as a global infrastructure and connectivity project with strong financial institutions, extensive multilateral support, and nearly a decade of operational experience, IMEC is still in its nascent stages with limited institutional capacity. Therefore, the study's central hypothesis is that the IMEC, lacking the financial scale, institutional backing, and multilateral support of China's Belt and Road Initiative, will function as a geopolitical tool used by India and its Western partners to reduce China's influence in the Middle East and the European Union, rather than a genuine alternative corridor.

This study is composed of five sections. In the first section, we try to give some essential information about the BRI and IMEC. In section two, it proceeds with reviews of the relevant literature and theories. The next section follows the objectives of the BRI and IMEC in the context of the China-India and China-United States rivalry. In the last section, we conclude the study by summarizing and analyzing the present and future assessments of the BRI and IMEC.

2. A REALIST PERSPECTIVE ON POWER COMPETITION: ANALYZING THE BRI AND IMEC THROUGH THE LENS OF CURRENT LITERATURE

Realism stands as the leading theory in the discipline of International Relations (IR) and Political Science. In this study, we try to evaluate power (which is defined as the capacity or ability to influence the behaviours of others or the course of events directly or indirectly) and rivalry through the lens of Realism. According to realism, one of the most important tools that enables states or international actors to reach a desired consequence is power. Power plays one of the most critical roles in global affairs; thus, power is the main concern of states. In the international arena, before making a decision, losing it or getting it needs to be calculated deeply (Lomia,2020). In this paper, we compare China and India within the broader context of power rivalry. While India is a critical ally of the United States and the West, China is one of the foremost challengers to the dominance of the United

States. Accordingly, the strategic competitiveness between China and the United States will also be discussed through the lens of the realist perspective.

As realist theory justifies, in international relations, states act according to their interests. At the systemic level, protecting their stable position and security interests is of utmost importance to states. They may be willing to try following a strategy to balance their rivals whenever they feel it is necessary (Morgenthau, 1979; Waltz, 1979). As Siddiqa (2023) reported, Waltz also argues that the international system consists of anarchy, and there is no authority or governing system to force international actors to prioritize security and peace. Thus, power plays a critical role in the United States-China relations. China's rise is increasingly altering the hegemonic unipolar status of the United States, with its advancing military capabilities and economic influence, by aiming to get a more active role in the international arena. (Siddiqa, 2023). Mearsheimer (2021) claims that military power is mainly based on population size and economic power. In this context, China will probably increase its power and presence in the coming years. Thus, a more powerful China will surely challenge the United States. China's rise has almost ended the unipolar system and even created a cold war mentality in terms of security. China is also thought to have a revisionist power role in South Asia to alter the order of the region. Moreover, China's increased influence in the region has also created an atmosphere based on economic-security divergence (Gong, 2019). In line with this argument, it is likely for the United States to support India and make it more influential in the future of South Asia, the Middle East, and the EU as a strategic counterweight to China's rising power.

In such bilateral and multilateral relations, enhanced global and regional systems, power transition, and balancing power strategies will increasingly be pursued among international actors in regard to political, economic, technological, and military objectives (Ikenberry, 2015). Realists argue that the Cold War mentality was primarily inclined to power competition in the context of gaining more subordinate states to increase the number of military alliances (Lake, 2017). Unlike the traditional power-balancing mentality, China's power-balancing concept is primarily based on soft balancing strategies and establishing more bilateral and multilateral partnerships (Yildirimçakar, 2020). The China-India rivalry is currently progressing in parallel with increasing cooperative partners. Thus, the success of initiatives and economic corridors majorly depends on the cooperation of more countries and regions.

The prominent concern for states is to be safe and stable in the international system. When they desire to increase their power and influence, they can also cooperate with a more powerful state. Although such cooperation may not be described as a power balancing, instead, it may be considered as a forged world hegemony (Waltz, 2014). Collective power, proximity, attacking capability, and armament are the main causes of perceiving threats by other states. Balancing strategies, establishing alliances, or diminishing the rival's power are the responses to these threats. However, states do not merely pursue alliance policy in terms of increasing their power (Walt, 1987). There are different ways to achieve these kinds of objectives. Therefore, China and India are trying to establish economic corridors to increase their economic influence in targeted regions and countries. However, partnerships and collaborations on these economic corridors are not the main tools of power competition, but they are significant components of multilateral power competition.

The rivalry between countries continued to be a phenomenon in global affairs. Though this rivalry has continued without interruption, the Middle East has always become one of the most critical areas for the power and influence competition of Great Powers. (Chaziza, 2024). As leverage to China's increasing influence, the United States has also prepared a plan in the context of investment, alignment, and competition by stating "We will effectively compete with the People's Republic of China, which is the only competitor with both the intent and the capability to reshape the international order while constraining a dangerous Russia" (The White House, 2022). Similarly, in 2022, President Biden stated that the United States will not leave the Middle East and will remain actively working, and they will not allow a "vacuum" in the Middle East that can be filled by Russia, China, or other international actors (China Daily, 2022). The approach of the Biden administration to the Middle East in the motto of "pivot to Asia" was mainly focused on limiting China's regional influence and strategic expansion (Shorbagy, 2024). China's reaction to the Biden Administration was "The Middle East is a land of its people, not anyone's backyard. There is no so-called 'vacuum' there" (Yusha, 2022). These kinds of claims and responses also prove that China and the United States are increasingly getting in a struggle to gain advantages in the Middle East and some other regions.

The mentality of China-United States competition is mainly based on increasing and optimizing power for security and influence (Siddiq 2023). However, according to some Chinese scholars, if China and the United States respect each other's core interests, they will continue to coexist peacefully. China should cooperate with its neighbors to build norms and rules based on a more cooperative regional order. China should agree with the reality that it took advantage of the United States-monitored international order since the end of the Second World War and got stability and economic prosperity (Zhao 2014; Wang, 2005). The BRI was not only launched by the Chinese government to increase Chinese economic capabilities but also a step to assist China in having capabilities in terms of politics and military by increasing its power and presence globally (Mearsheimer, 2019). China, therefore, needs to consider every political and militaristic movement around the globe instead of focusing merely on its own economic interests.

The United States also considers China as its principal strategic rival (White House, 2021). Another striking allegation is that the support of the United States is not only aimed at increasing the power and influence of India but also at strengthening the presence of Israel in the Middle East (Wakim, 2023). It would not be a mistake to argue that the United States and Israel have lost their image of being democratically advocating human rights and being peaceful countries with the Iraq and Afghanistan wars and Israeli attacks on civilians in Gaza and other parts of Palestine after 7 October 2023 without ending them for a long period with a ceasefire instead of calls from the UN and many other organizations and countries. The United States has also lost its credibility by backing Israel both economically and militarily. Thus, considering the conflict stemmed from the policies of Israel and the United States, it may not be easy for India to get the support of the people of the Middle Eastern countries to realize the IMEC with the assistance of Israel and the United States.

3. DISCUSSIONS ON THE POLITICS OF THE BRI AND IMEC

The BRI is a significant research topic that has been debated in International Relations, Political Science, and Economics. The BRI is an initiative that has been built to promote the cooperative logic of the Chinese government within the concept of win-win cooperation and socialism with Chinese characteristics in the framework of changing development patterns in world politics and the transformation of the new Chinese governance model in the era of President Xi Jinping. Moreover, the BRI was considered to be a necessity to strengthen the development system of China that China has carried out for its planned development policies (Liang and Zhang, 2019). The BRI is not only an economic initiative merely established to represent the interests of China but also established to consolidate China's bilateral, multilateral, and regional relations. Different from its early objectives, with the BRI, China has paid major attention to its geoeconomic objectives in the context of enhancing connectivity (Murton and Narins, 2024). The BRI is also a sign of China's increased power and huge economic capabilities, demonstrating its global standing. As it is approved by many scholars, China's recent foreign policy is guided by the logic of the BRI (Ferdinand, 2016). It is claimed that the BRI was designed by the Chinese government to be an alternative to the political and economic order shaped by Western countries (Yeung and Huber, 2024). The BRI was conceived by China as a strategy to expand China's presence in both world politics and economic affairs. One of the most important reasons that forced the Chinese leadership to launch the BRI is the expected slowdown in China's economic growth and exports based on GDP after 2012. Accordingly, the Chinese government considered that it was almost impossible for its long-standing economic growth to reach 10% annual growth again (Tekdal, 2018). As Roland (2017) justifies, the BRI does not only have economic objectives, but also it is a project of a series of strategic objectives. Shortly after the announcement of the United States' "pivot" toward Asia-Pacific, the Chinese government and elites tried to find a more comprehensive measure for such a policy targeted at limiting the increasing Chinese role in Asia and the globe. Consequently, the BRI came to the agenda to be a comprehensive economic and strategic plan as a counterattack to the politics of the United States towards China and Asia. Consequently, with the BRI, China aimed to establish a sustainable atmosphere for multilateral cooperation, including political, economic, and cultural cooperation, to adapt it to its peaceful coexistence narrative (Dunford & Liu, 2019). China has always emphasized the importance of peaceful coexistence and common development strategies, cooperating well without involving itself in the domestic affairs of third countries, while expecting the same non-interference in its own internal matters.

Huang (2016) claims that the BRI is also established to have a significant role in the economic development of several regions and the globe to ensure win-win cooperation to achieve jointly built prosperity by adopting four principles (openness, harmony, inclusiveness, mutual benefit and win-win for all parties) to enhance trust and friendship among the countries and regions. In this context, the BRI distinguishes itself from other international cooperations by including all interested parties both regionally and globally. Some scholars also think that with almost 31% of the global GDP and 61% of the world population, the BRI takes into account almost every undertaken political and economic interaction that the Chinese government aims to achieve currently and in the future under the concept of the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and the "21st-Century Maritime Silk Road" (Zou, et al., 2021). Furthermore, the BRI is also considered to play a critical role in the internationalization of the RMB. As it is widely known, the RMB is not used as one of the main currencies in the international arena, and the RMB has a relatively poor performance compared to China's overall economic development (Tekdal, 2018). With the help of the BRICS and the BRI, the RMB is likely to be more international in the near future.

As widely discussed internationally, the BRI has multidimensional political and economic objectives. With the inauguration of the BRI, China's political and economic influence in South Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, and its neighbourhood has remarkably increased. China aimed to play a more critical role in the economic and commercial architecture of the global economy by demonstrating its development strategy to countries that want to cooperate with China (Huang, 2016). Another important reason is that China aimed to get rid of its dependency on the Malacca Strait. With the accomplishment of the BRI, China will have six different ways to export Chinese goods across the world (Tekdal, 2018). In particular, with the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor (CAAWAEC), China might significantly limit its dependency on the Malacca Strait. Moreover, China can be a more critical player in world trade in the context of controlling different ways of connectivity in the 21st century as political instability is breaking out suddenly and in almost every region. Accordingly, some scholars also argue that China is using the BRI as a component of its political norms by providing loans and investments. China has provided the BRI participant countries with approximately \$600 billion in economic support to make the BRI cooperation more convenient (Marcoux and Fleury, 2022; Canuto, 2024). Though the BRI has been added to the Chinese constitution, it is not clear whether the BRI investments will be regulated or protected by law. Even they can play an arbitration role in disputed relations between China and other states (Chaisse and Kirkwood, 2020).

As for the IMEC, it is a newly established project composed of two economic corridors. Therefore, there are not many academic studies on IMEC. As it is claimed, the IMEC is planned to start from India, reach the United Arab Emirates, and pass through Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Israel. It then travels from the Israeli port of Haifa to the Greek port of Piraeus to reach the EU. Another important corridor supported by India is the North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), which passes through Iranian territory and reaches Central Asia, then passes through the Caspian Sea and Russia, and reaches the EU with approximately 7200 km in length (Khan, 2023). Some scholars claim that the INSTC was launched by India in 2015, about two years after the announcement of the BRI, as a corridor that will enable India to reach Central Asian and European countries by connecting India to Iran and Russia through the Chabahar port. The main reason for this corridor is the unfriendly relations between India and Pakistan, which is an obstacle for India to reach the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus (Ali and Khan, 2024). However, if the IMEC fails to achieve success, India's second corridor, the INSTC, with a well-designed plan, is likely to serve as an alternative by providing connectivity to the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the EU through the territories of Iran and Russia.

According to Qian (2022), India has developed its multilateral development strategies by following the New Delhi Declaration on the Principles of International Law Related to Sustainable Development (ILA Declaration). It contains seven principles related to national and international good governance, economic and social environmental objectives, the use of natural resources, inter and intra-generational equity, ecosystem, human rights, health, and all-round sustainable development. To this end, India needs to be a more responsible power by establishing good political and economic cooperation with the external world. Accordingly, the objectives of IMEC are to connect India and the Middle East by sea. It is planned to reach the EU again by road and railway through the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Israel. According to Rizvi (2023), upon completion of IMEC, there will be a wide connectivity network for about 50% of the global economy and 40% of the global

population. Unlike China, India does not have the rich economic resources to provide economic and infrastructure assistance to organize or finance economic and infrastructure projects in more regions and countries. As argued, India can benefit from the influence of the United States to gain reliability in its regional and global affairs (Tambi, 2023).

The United States supports the IMEC since it is expected to serve the interests of the United States in the Middle East and the whole of Asia. Some scholars argue that India felt relatively disappointed with a strategy based on security and economy when China announced that it would establish new corridors with Pakistan, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and other strategic routes of the BRI (Darshana, 2020). As in the realist concept, the rising power of a rival is perceived as a corresponding loss for its rival (Mearsheimer, 2001). Thus, India felt insecure when China was increasing its bilateral and multilateral relations with the countries near or targeted regions for India's future strategic, political, and economic objectives. Another critical factor that created challenges for India and made India launch IMEC is Pakistan. India-Pakistan relations are not smooth; thus, Pakistan is cooperating with China by allowing China to use Pakistan's Gwadar port and cooperating with China to create an important alternative way for the BRI by establishing the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). Since the Gwadar port is located near the Baluchistan region, it is not practical for India to benefit from it. The tense relations between Iran, Israel, and the United States may bring challenges to India-Iran cooperation. However, to reduce this risk, India persuaded the United States in 2019 to make Iran's Chabahar port free from the sanctions of the United States (Kashif and Koch, 2024). However, with Israel's attack on Iran, the so-called "12 Days War" started in June 2025. Iran declared the United States as a directly involved party in the conflict. Consequently, the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East has become even more unstable than before.

As it is justified by some scholars, one of the most important objectives of the IMEC is to expand India's multilateral influence in the Middle East and the EU by enhancing its connectivity with India. With the backing of the United States, India not only wants to diminish the impact of China in the Middle East and EU, but it also aims to be able to compete with China's rising power in terms of politics, economy, and investments (Das, 2024). As Khan et al. (2024) and Shinde (2023) acknowledged, a critical challenge of the IMEC is the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine, which can jeopardize the pre-construction and post-construction of this economic corridor. Israel-Arab relations could be better if a new conflict had not started in October 2023 between Israel and Hamas. However, the continued asymmetric conflict and the Israeli army's unceasing attacks despite the UN and other countries' calls for a ceasefire have the potential to affect the development and the stability of the Middle East. This also sabotaged the efforts of the United States to normalize Arab-Israel relations (Baabood, 2024). In fact, the United States' role in stopping the war is far from reality, and it is a kind of hypocrisy. As the United States both prevents the United Nations from taking measures against Israel's attacks and provides Israel with arms and war materials (Aljazeera, 2024). Thus, India's IMEC seems to have stopped moving forward temporarily due to the Israel-Palestine conflict. With the ongoing attacks of Israel on other countries, it may turn the world into the Third World War, too. Without a constant solution of these conflicts, the region will probably not reach a safe and stable position.

In the name of the BRI, China aims to influentially use the five pillars of policy that it asserted for the development process of the BRI in the name of coordination in policy, connectivity in infrastructure projects, ensuring unimpeded trade policies and financial support, and increasing the connection of people (Huang, 2016). With this characteristic, the BRI is thought to be better designed to attract international actors to participate more easily in it. On the contrary, India currently lacks these kinds of systemic-level arrangements. However, it should be noted that the IMEC is a relatively new corridor, and it will probably be discussed more in the academic community in the coming years for its advantages and disadvantages. It may also have some fundamental changes in the future to reach a wider scope of participants and a more reasonable route.

4. THE COMPARISON OF THE BRI AND IMEC IN THE CONTEXT OF STRATEGIC COMPETITION

The trade war between the USA and China, which started with the Trump administration, forced China to pursue a hostile policy against many of the allies of the United States (Zou et al., 2022). While the United States has also aimed to increase the power and influence of its partners and allies by developing different strategies to make them compete with China and diminish China's power and influence in the international arena. This

competition has mostly come to the agenda with China’s increasing influence in South Asia and the Middle East, especially based on strategic economic and infrastructure projects (Zhao, 2024). Indeed, China has focused more on implementing the BRI. As a result, BRI could play a more strategic role in Chinese foreign policy in the context of ensuring that China has more alternatives to reach targeted foreign markets. Although there are some risks, such as political and financial, that should be well evaluated. However, China’s efforts to help economically underdeveloped regions seem to be welcomed by almost every international actor (Huang, 2016). As for IMEC, some scholars argue that there may be some political and economic contradictions that may prevent India from cooperating with other IMEC partners, but they will eventually cooperate with India with the help of Western powers (Elmali, 2023; Siddiqa, 2023). However, different from the IMEC, BRI is based on a people-to-people interaction policy to attract actors and enhance cooperation between parties. To this end, in 10 years, from 2013 to 2023, China carried out education, agriculture, public health, and poverty reduction based on more than 1,600 foreign aid projects to demonstrate China’s credibility and friendship to all participant actors all around the world (Zhao, 2024).

China-India competition in the Middle East is also a competition between China and the United States. Since the United States has unrest with the rising influence of China in the Middle East, Africa, Central Asia, and the EU (The White House, 2022). For India, a more powerful China is a threat to its multilateral interests not only in the Middle East and the EU but also in South and Southeast Asia. Accordingly, the United States and India can cooperate to limit the increasing impact of China both regionally and globally. However, the choice of the IMEC to pass through Israeli territories is a strategic mistake for India. If the IMEC rotation had been well designed, it could have created more critical challenges for China. The current road is far from being a safe route for international trade and economic corridors. Although it is a newly established corridor, it faces the risk of attacks by other groups in the Middle East, as recently seen with the incidents in the Suez Canal in response to Israel’s long-standing assaults on Gaza. Such conflicts are unlikely to cease unless Israel and the United States revise their policies regarding the future of the Middle East and the Palestinian people.

Tablo 1: The comparison of the BRI and the IMEC

BRI	IMEC
Established in 2013	Established in 2023
Composed of 6 corridors	Composed of 2 corridors
Has financial supporters such as AIIB and Silk Road Fund	There are no financial supports officially declared yet
Received support of 150 Countries except the USA and some EU countries	Received support of the USA, EU, and some Middle Eastern countries
Provides funds and financial support to infrastructure projects	Has not announced any kinds of funds and financial support

Source: Author’s own source

China has the potential for investments for the BRI supporters; however, India does not seem to have such opportunities for now. In the establishment period of the BRI, China may also face some critical issues that create risks, such as financial sustainability risks stemming from cross-country projects, international policy coordination, and some other geopolitical risks (Huang, 2016). On the other hand, countries such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE are critical for the IMEC. However, they are excessively important for China’s BRI, too, particularly in supplying China’s energy requirements and bilateral strategic relations. Without the cooperation of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, China may also face challenges in meeting its energy needs. Since Iran is not sufficient for China’s energy requirements (Yildirimçakar, 2023). Thus, the role of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Iran is extremely important for China and India in the context of increasing their influence and completing their critical economic corridors. It should be noted that if the United States and Israel attack Iran once again, it may force Iran to close the Strait of Hormuz, which has the potential to create a challenge for both China and India. On the other hand, to make the BRI more attractive, China endeavors to effectively use its soft power strategies and provide assistance to some countries and regions to achieve its long-term political and economic objectives. As Zhao claims, “China gave assistance to the construction of the headquarters of the African Center for Disease Control

and Prevention. Chinese institutions and enterprises have trained 350,000 talents of all kinds for the participating countries. Taking vocational education as an example, more than 400 Chinese and foreign higher vocational colleges and universities have cooperated in running relevant programs. China has set up 27 Luban workshops in 25 participating countries, training high-end technical and skilled workers for the local communities.” (Zhao, 2024).

China has launched the BRI to strengthen the cooperation between Southern countries, too. This policy has underscored China’s role and its sense of responsibility as a leading economy among developing nations. In this context, approximately 150 countries and over 30 international organizations have agreed to sign agreements with China to cooperate under the BRI framework (Zhao, 2024). However, it is not easy for China to change its current position in South Asia by positioning itself as the region’s main actor in strategic and security issues. As Gong (2019) argues, China has lost its confidence due to Southern China’s disputes. As a result, the United States remains one of the most influential actors in the region, developing bilateral and multilateral cooperation as leverage for China’s intention to change the status quo in the region. However, the loss of preeminence and popularity in the Global South has deeply worried the United States in recent years. Indeed, not only the United States but also some Western allies of the United States have lost their credibility in the eyes of many developing countries in the world because of carrying out double standards in their international affairs in terms of human rights, security, political and economic issues (Zhao, 2024). This incredibility has continued to be a critical issue for many Middle Eastern states, too. Especially for the politics of the United States and its Western allies carried out in the Iraq and Syria wars and currently the West-backed Israel attacks on Gaza, Lebanon, Yemen, and Iran (Abumbe et al., 2024).

The United States-China competition is not limited to India alone; the United States has also established AUKUS, a trilateral cooperation with Australia and the UK, to be more effective in Indo-Pacific politics in the future. (US Secretary of Defense, 2023). Another collaboration of the United States is I2U2 (Cooperation among India, Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States), which was established to change the balance of power in favor of the West. I2U2 is also claimed to be a new QUAD that may increase tensions between China and the USA, both in the Middle East and the Indo-Pacific (Tamer, 2022; Shorbagy, 2024). On the other hand, what China aims to do is to emphasize competition with rivals instead of pursuing a policy based on the destruction of rivals. This was defined by Chinese President Xi Jinping in the context of China’s strategic goals for 2021 (Siddiq 2023). India has shown its opposition to the BRI since the establishment of the BRI and its component, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC). India’s reaction to CPEC stems not only from its rivalry with China but also from India’s claim that some of the regions through which the BRI passes belong to India (Siddiq 2023).

Currently, China has more advantages than India in the countries of the EU and the Middle East. While China accounts for 16.2 percent of the EU’s total product trade, India-EU trade is well below China’s, accounting for only 2 percent of all EU trade (European Commission, 2021). As can be seen from these data, neither the USA nor the EU is satisfied with China’s current position in the EU economy. In this context, it seems that the USA and the EU will continue to create difficulties in exporting goods produced by China to the United States and the EU. Although India is not yet a major exporter to the EU or the leading economy in South Asia, its economic and strategic position in the region is growing significantly. To compete with China, India aims to have more projects in the Southeast Asia region, such as the Asian Highway Network, with the support of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), and India-Myanmar-Thailand. The tripartite highway (IMTTH) was strategically organized to reach Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. In addition, the Mekong-India Economic Corridor was also planned to link India and Myanmar. (Gong, 2019). In the context of its “Act East” policy, India aims to increase its economic and military capabilities versus China. Regarding these strategic objectives, India has also enhanced its economic relations with the organization in South Asia, namely the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), to increase Indian influence in the Indo-Pacific (Pant, 2018), as well as balance China’s power and presence in South Asia.

BRI is also believed to enhance China’s global financial and monetary integration. This will probably increase China’s global e-commerce competitive capabilities, too (Johnston, 2018). The BRI is also believed to increase

China's global and regional influence; however, it is not probable for the BRI to set up a China-centered order in the Pacific and South Asia. In addition, it is also claimed that China has not increased its trust despite expanding people-to-people exchange policies across the world (Gong, 2019). Compared with China, India is not able to finance mega projects of all participant countries and provide them with economic assistance to solve infrastructure issues (Gupta, 2020: 54). Another important issue that concerns India is the increasing role of China in South Asia. As Thaliyakkattil (2019) justifies, the United States has become the most important actor in regional affairs in South and Southeast Asia for a very long period. China has created a challenge to the supremacy of the United States in the region by increasing its own economic and diplomatic influence. However, the domination of the United States continues to be unique in the region. (Shambaugh, 2018; Gong, 2019). China's increasing influence and its close engagement with South Asian nations will ultimately diminish India's dominant position in the region. However, it is still hard to claim that India has a dominant position in South Asia. It could be more reliable to claim that China's increasing influence in the region may limit India's ambition to get a dominant position in the region or China's influence may limit the leading role of the United States, which is a critical ally of India. Therefore, the South and Southeast Asia regions will also continue to be a component of the rivalry between China, India, and the United States in the future.

India, as one of the fastest-growing economies, will not be willing to be left behind China in the context of enhancing its political and economic presence in the EU, South Asia, and the Middle East. Therefore, to achieve its global objectives, India aims to seek alternatives with the assistance of its Western allies, such as the US, Israel, and the EU. This strategy will likely continue in line with India's goals of enhancing its cooperation capabilities with Gulf countries, especially with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (Yildirimçakar, 2025). The IMEC currently seems limited to two lines to reach Europe and the Caucasus with relatively fewer international actors. However, China's BRI strategy is not limited to some countries and regions; it is open to all countries, regions, and international organizations (State Council of the PRC 2015). This concept makes the BRI more attractive to almost all international actors. Moreover, Middle Eastern countries will probably not be willing to lose China as such a huge purchaser of Middle East oil (a purchaser of almost 40 percent of Middle East oil). In addition, in 2023, China and Iran signed a Strategic Partnership Cooperation for the next 25 years (Yildirimçakar, 2023). By doing so, China not only aims to expand its power and presence in the Middle East but also it aims to guarantee its energy needs for the coming decades.

There are several financial supporters of the BRI. For instance, the Silk Road Fund, which is established to finance the BRI infrastructure projects, and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which is established to support BRI countries financially. They are established mainly to support the BRI. In this framework, the AIIB is considered to provide the BRI with \$100 billion in economic support, lending to the participant countries. The Silk Road Fund is planned to provide \$40 billion in financial support. Moreover, the Eximbank, the China Development Bank and BRICS New Development Bank are other financial supporters of the BRI in the context of accelerating the accomplishment of the BRI (Roland, 2017). Although there are not many countries on the IMEC line that need economic and infrastructure support from India. However, India's lack of such an opportunity may make the IMEC less attractive to other participating countries in the future. At present, India does not appear to have such economic backers for the completion of the IMEC. Whereas India can offer such opportunities to participating countries with the financial assistance of the United States and the European Union (Leonova and Khatri, 2023).

Along with India, the IMEC is also established as a tool of a strategic plan that is supported by the United States and the EU to counter China's BRI. Accordingly, Italy is claimed to have left China's BRI after it became a part of the agreement signed among India, the United States, Italy, and some other EU member states (Rossi, 2023). However, the way that the IMEC is designed to pass is creating challenges for its completion. Some of these challenges even have the potential to stop the corridor. One of the most critical factors of these challenges is the political issues between Israel and Palestine, and Israel and the Arab countries. Accordingly, due to such a long time of Israeli attacks on the Gaza Strip despite the warnings of international organizations, on one hand, it creates risks for IMEC; on the other hand, it makes the BRI more reliable for the future. (Sładkowski et al., 2024). To this end, if India fails to establish the IMEC versus China's BRI because of Israel's irresponsible stand, India will not be able to be a critical rival of China in the near future. On the other hand, the so-called debt trap policy

concerns some countries, and it may create a setback for some countries to cooperate with China in the future. However, in parallel with their need for Chinese investment and soft loans, many countries in Asia and South Asia welcomed China's BRI (Ali and Khan, 2024). In this context, considering China's loans and investments as a component of the debt trap policy seems a bit unreasonable. However, another critical issue affecting China-based concerns for many countries is the imbalanced trade volume of bilateral relations, and it is always growing in favor of China. (Gong, 2019). If China follows a relatively more balanced strategy with countries that have important commercial relations with China, such concerns may not be a matter of discussion for these countries in the future. Thus, the BRI may continue to attract more cooperative countries than the IMEC, which is in its initial establishment phase.

5. CONCLUSION

The rivalry over economic corridors and initiatives is not limited to China and India; it also reflects a broader competition between China and the United States. Western powers, particularly the United States and several European countries, are increasingly uneasy with China's growing influence at both regional and global levels. As a result, the United States and the European Union have supported India in becoming a viable competitor to China in regional and international affairs. In line with this objective, the United States seeks to contain China's influence and limit its global reach. Following Israel's attack on Iran in June 2025 and the ensuing regional uncertainty, the potential closure of the Strait of Hormuz by Iran has once again brought China's and India's economic corridor strategies to the forefront of global discussion. In this context, the future of the Development Road project jointly proposed by Türkiye and Iraq has also become a subject of intense debate.

China and India are both developing countries striving to play a more active role in the global economy by enhancing trade connectivity and leveraging their large populations and labor forces to access broader markets. Compared to the IMEC, the BRI was launched a decade earlier and represents a much broader and more comprehensive initiative. It comprises six distinct corridors and is supported by more advanced financial institutions than those backing the IMEC. In addition, during the first two years of the BRI, up to 2015, China established the Silk Road Fund, and three years later, in 2016, it launched the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to provide financial support for partner countries willing to cooperate with China. By contrast, India has not yet initiated any comparable financial mechanism or institution to support countries interested in cooperating with it, either within the first two to three years of its own initiatives or to date. The IMEC does not appear to be solely aligned with India's strategic interests. Notably, it seems to largely serve the political, economic, and strategic objectives of the West, particularly those of the United States. In contrast, the BRI offers far greater opportunities to its participating countries. China is not reliant on a single route; rather, it has developed multiple alternatives. Therefore, if one corridor is obstructed, China can utilize others to maintain its commitment to international trade connectivity. Another significant advantage of the BRI is that, before reaching its final destination in the European market, it offers tangible benefits to many participating countries along the route in Central Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Economically, India currently lacks the capacity to offer similar levels of opportunity or financial support to its partners. Given that the IMEC is still a relatively new initiative, India, alongside the support of the United States and the European Union, needs to develop compelling incentives to enhance the feasibility of the project. Nevertheless, since the IMEC is designed to pass through Israeli territory, its successful implementation appears doubtful, especially considering Israel's current policies, which contribute to widespread instability throughout the Middle East.

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