



## India and the World

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### Connectivity and geopolitics: The IMEEC initiative

A new multilateral infrastructure initiative was announced on the sidelines of the G20 summit in New Delhi on September 9. The initiative is called the India-Middle East-Europe-Economic Corridor (IMEEC). It is supposed to eventually connect India and Europe via the Gulf region, through railway lines, fibre optic cables, and hydrogen pipelines. The IMEEC has an Eastern and Western leg. In the former Indian ports will be connected with the United Arab Emirates through container shipping lines. From the UAE ports, rail connections will stretch to the Haifa port in Israel, which in turn connects ports in Greece or Italy.

The IMEEC initiative shows how fast the conversation on connectivity cooperation between states has moved during the last decades. Fifteen years ago, connectivity was all about addressing infrastructure deficiencies in order to enhance economic opportunities and increase integration in a globalised world economy. Today, however, long-term strategic goals and current foreign and security policy priorities are as much a part of the conversation as is economic growth. The Covid-19 pandemic, Russia's war against Ukraine, and the supply chain concentration to China, has made decision-makers across developed and developing economies increasingly vigilant against the possible instability of flows of commodities, food, data, critical materials, or energy. It is hitting home in national capitals that not only are the geographies over which flows travel at risk of becoming securitised and inaccessible, but the institutional and normative architecture that underpins these flows could also become dominated by powers through diplomatic efforts and technical standard setting. No matter if you are representing an emerging or emerged economy, you will need to ensure that access to vital assets remains open and resilient.

In times when geopolitics is accentuated, it is even more necessary to pro-actively engage with others in international connectivity cooperation. This is one of the reasons why IMEEC is of particular interest. The IMEEC MoU has as many as eight signatories, of whom the US is the only extra-territorial power. The initiative is partly a product of new partnership-building in South and West Asia, where the I2U2 formation (India-Israel-UAE-US) has played a critical role. It is telling in this regard that the dialogue between National Security Advisors of some of the participants has been critical, while the economic sense of the initiative is still debated.

Governments clearly see the private sector as a crucial partner in financing and implementing this new vision. In the Arabian Sea, on both the Indian and the Emirati side, companies like DP World will be key implementers. Haifa Port of Israel, meanwhile, is owned by Adani – who is reportedly also interested in buying ports in Thessaloniki and elsewhere in Greece. While valid questions are being raised about the current business case for IMEEC, many within the strategic establishments of the partner countries are also convinced that the case for a securitised zone of connectivity will only increase with time, as grid interlinkages and hydrogen pipelines become part of the energy landscape of West and South Asia.

The EU, which is one of the European signatories alongside the member states France, Italy and Germany, has been keen on emerging as an international connectivity partner. The EU has

launched the Global Gateway as its main initiative in this regard. There are ambitious targets set for how much money the Global Gateway could raise, but the initiative is more than a funding instrument – it is providing focus to the EU’s external action, coordinates various ongoing efforts, and streamlines funding streams. The areas of cooperation identified within the Global Gateway framework go beyond physical infrastructure, to include digital, health, research and education, transport, climate and green energy. It is a principled initiative, and builds on shared values of “democracy, freedom, rule of law, and respect for human rights” and operational principles of transparency, viability, inclusivity, and sustainability. These are not just nice words but serve to shape the normative and institutional architecture, which underpins the connection of discreet geographies. In a world influenced by systemic rivalry and the competition between models, capacity-building by EU experts in partner countries carries certain importance.

Tellingly, with regards to IMEEC the parties commit “to establish coordinating entities” to cooperate in handling technical, financing, and regulatory standards. Trust and capacity building in different verticals create an added and significant value to the physical connections, which the initiative will establish.



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