

La importancia de los corredores terrestres (IV): El paso del Golfo Pérsico al Mediterráneo Oriental

Resumen:

La vía de comunicación terrestre que une el golfo Pérsico con el Levante ha sido una constante a través de diferentes momentos de la historia de la humanidad. Sin embargo, también ha sido constante la volatilidad de esta región, que ha producido que el vínculo de unión entre el subcontinente Indio y la península euroasiática de Europa haya perdido el contacto en varias ocasiones. Actualmente se ha puesto de nuevo en marcha esta tendencia geopolítica mediante el lanzamiento de la iniciativa India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), que de nuevo pretende retomar la conectividad de la región. No obstante, los intereses contrapuestos de otros actores globales y regionales, unidos al conflicto entre Israel y Hamás, hacen que el futuro del proyecto se encuentre en entredicho.

Palabras clave:

IMEC, Conectividad, India, Arabia Saudita, Israel, Hamás.

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Introduction

The land link between the Persian Gulf and the eastern Mediterranean has been a constant throughout the ages, as has the existence of antagonistic forces that have prevented this natural communication route from being implemented.

The current historical moment is no exception. In the Middle East region, China's Belt and Road initiative (OBOR), linking East and West, is gaining momentum at a time when US and European influence seemed to be in clear decline in favour of China-led projects.

However, US relations in the region had softened somewhat, following the current US administration's abandonment of idealistic posturing early in its term. Circumstances were sufficiently propitious for the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) initiative to be launched in early September 2023 during the G20 Summit, driven by the United States, India, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, France, Germany, Italy and the European Union itself.

The IMEC project consists of renewing connectivity between India and Europe via the Middle East. From the Indian coast, the eastern ports of the Arabian Peninsula would be reached and, from there, a land connection would link up with the port of Haifa in the Mediterranean and then reach the Greek port of Piraeus by sea. The aim of this ambitious initiative would be to establish a channel for the shipment of energy products and containerised goods, reducing the current freight times and costs involved in global transport circuits.

Despite theoretical approaches, the IMEC concept is being reborn in contrast to the Belt and Road and other trade routes, which has led global and regional powers to oppose the consolidation of the initial project. Equally, this project cuts across a particularly volatile global region, of which the current conflict between Israel and the Hamas group is a significant illustration.

Background: between communication and regional confrontation

The land connection between the Persian Gulf and the western Mediterranean has always been a matter of constant interest since ancient times. One of the earliest references dates from the time of the Roman Empire, when exotic goods were transported by caravan from the central ports of the Persian Gulf to reach the Mediterranean coast. Although this route was more expensive than moving goods across the Red Sea, it was competitively profitable, due to the sea route's dependence on the inter-monsoon periods¹.

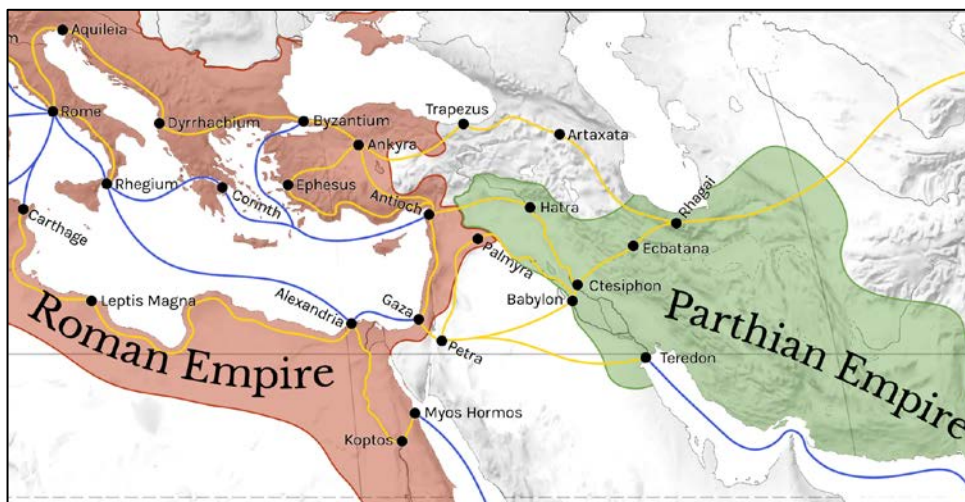


Figure 1. Map of the main Roman and Parthian trade routes

Source: VAN DER CRABBEN, Jan. "Map of Roman & Parthian Trade Routes", *World History*. 22 January 2020. Available at: <https://www.worldhistory.org/image/11763/map-of-roman--parthian-trade-routes/> [accessed: 26/12/2023].

Time-wise, this area experienced a boom in the 20TH century following the discovery of the Arabian Peninsula's oil resources, which could feasibly be transported overland to the eastern Mediterranean. In the late 1950s, crude oil began to be shipped via the Trans-Arabian Pipeline (TAPLINE) between the Saudi offshore fields of Dhahran and the Lebanese port of Sidon.

¹ HANCOCK, James. "The Eastern Trade Network of Ancient Rome", *Word History*. 2 June 2021. Available at: https://www.worldhistory.org/article/1761/the-eastern-trade-network-of-ancient-rome/#google_vignette [accessed: 26/12/2023].

The geopolitical dynamics of the time should also be studied, as the Saudi-American initiative through the ARAMCO Company was not welcomed by all actors at that historical stage. For the Americans, TAPLINE could solve a couple of vexing problems at the same time. On the one hand, hydrocarbon-hungry Western Europe could benefit from cheaper and less remote oil. On the other, the Arabs could see their economy improve, and the spectre of instability be driven away. This would not only apply to the Saudi producer at the source, but also to transit countries such as Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, which would see their incomes rise, thereby increasing their standard of living².

If a route had to be chosen at the time of its construction based only in topographical criteria, the best solution would have been to draw a straight line from Dhahran to the deep port of Haifa, located in the then British Mandate of Palestine.

However, business and geopolitical considerations did not go hand in hand. The disagreements between King Ibn Saud and Jordan's King Abdullah argued for a detour through Egypt, thus benefiting King Farouk. Nor was it clear that the British would agree to the project being completed, as they controlled the only pipeline in the area, which ran between Kirkuk and Haifa, through the Iraq Petroleum Company (IPC). Therefore, unless they benefited from Saudi oil abundance, they would not go for the TAPLINE project. In fact, the British preferred to refer the talks to Jerusalem rather than London in order to involve the local authorities and prevent the construction of a terminal in Haifa, because its port was full of IPC tankers. In these circumstances, ARAMCO officials sought the port of Caesarea as an alternative, but Ibn Saud was reluctant to do so, as he would not allow his pipeline to pass through a future Israeli state³.

Possible British opposition and the more than likely formation of a Jewish National Home made the Americans turn to the newly created Lebanese state, where the Arabs had guaranteed the Americans a space for mutual cooperation⁴. Passage through Jordan, a supporter of the Palestinian cause, was guaranteed by the promise of substantial economic benefits.⁵

² LITTLE, Douglas. "Pipeline politics: America, TAPLINE, and the Arabs", *Business History Review*, vol. 64, n.º 2. 1990, p. 257.

³ *Ibidem*, pp. 263-267.

⁴ GENDZIER, Irene L. *Notes from the Minefield: United States Intervention in Lebanon, 1945-1958*. Columbia University Press, 2006, pp. 65-66.

⁵ SHINE, John W. *Aramaco And Tapline In International Oil*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1953. p. 66.

However, the differences between businessmen and diplomats were ironed out as long as there was a common American interest in controlling the oil resources of the Persian Gulf⁶. By establishing this line, the Americans were also contributing to the economic recovery of Western Europe, which had been devastated after the war and was not to fall into the Soviet orbit. The TAPLINE project was therefore linked to US national security⁷.

Israel's War of Independence and US recognition of Israel almost killed the TAPLINE project, creating a "catastrophic situation in Riyadh...", from which only the Russians could profit". However, American diplomacy, greased with substantial financial resources and large doses of humanitarian aid for the Palestinians, appeased consciences and ensured that the project went ahead, loading the first tanker on the Lebanese coast in December 1950⁸.

The Suez Canal crisis, provoked by the British and French in 1956, led the Arabs to dynamite the IPC, making TAPLINE more relevant. In 1967, the Six-Day War led to the Israelis seizing the Golan Heights from Syria, the very area through which TAPLINE flowed, and which continued to flow despite attacks by the Palestine Liberation Front. In 1973, the Yom Kippur war led Saudi Arabia to impose an embargo that closed the pipeline for more than a year. Eventually, the continuing demands of transit governments, the civil war in Lebanon, armed incidents along the line and, above all, a new generation of supertankers that lowered freight costs made TAPLINE unviable, and it ceased operations in 1983. Subsequently, Israel used the Golan Heights portion of the line for water transport.⁹

A third leap in time leads us to think about the importance of this communication route, both in times of peace and in times of crisis. Parallel to the pipeline, a road called Tapline Road had been built, which initially served to service the construction and maintenance of the TAPLINE, but was paved and used for transit from 1967 onwards. The route was soon established as a land route linking the eastern and central part of the Arabian

⁶ ANDERSON JR, Irvine H. *Aramco, the United States, and Saudi Arabia: A study of the dynamics of foreign oil policy, 1933-1950*. Princeton University Press, 2014. p. 202.

⁷ RAIMONDI, Eric James. *America's Forgotten Project: TAPline and the Rise of a New Capitalist Order in the Levant, 1945-1950*. Bard College, Spring 2019, pp. 16-17.

⁸ GHOSN, Rania. "Territorialities of a Transnational Oil Flow", *CIST2011-Fonder les sciences du territoire*. 2011, p. 167.

⁹ KAUFMAN, Asher. "Between Permeable and Sealed Borders", *Intelligence Journal Middle East Studies*, n.º 46. 2014, pp. 105-110.

Peninsula with Lebanon, Syria and Jordan. The road was used for freight traffic and the main section, which runs through Saudi Arabia, is called "Highway 85"¹⁰.



Figure 2. Map of the road running parallel to TAPLINE route

Source: AL-MASHAREQ. "Saudi Arabia's Tapline Road: a vital conduit in times of war and peace". 29 June 2021. Available at: https://almashareq.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_am/features/2021/06/29/feature-02 [accessed: 26/12/2023].

The Gulf War in 1991 put a strain on an entire region, which had to absorb huge numbers of troops preparing for the first major armed conflict in recent history. Once forces were deployed, they needed to be supplied and maintained, so communication routes were necessary. One of the main logistical routes established was the so-called Dodge Route, which coincided with the main section of the TAPLINE Road. This road, on which the US VII Corps established its assembly area, was also used by the theatre logistics command for the movement of coalition troops from the ports of disembarkation to the assembly areas¹¹.

¹⁰ AL-MASHAREQ. 1990, Saudi Arabia's Tapline Road: a vital conduit in times of war and peace". 29 June 2021. Available at: https://almashareq.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_am/features/2021/06/29/feature-02 [accessed: 26/12/2023].

¹¹ BOURQUE, Stephen Alan. *Jayhawk: The VII Corps in the Persian Gulf War*. Department of the Army, 2002, p. 78.

Around the turn of the century, alternatives for establishing a "trans-fast network" for the transport of goods and passengers in the Middle East were considered. Within this possible network, an infrastructure running along the pipeline highway was a perfect fit, being one of the most viable options. However, given the port infrastructures in the eastern Mediterranean, a bypass could be created to the North Sinai Distributor and then on to the main ports in Egypt and Israel¹².

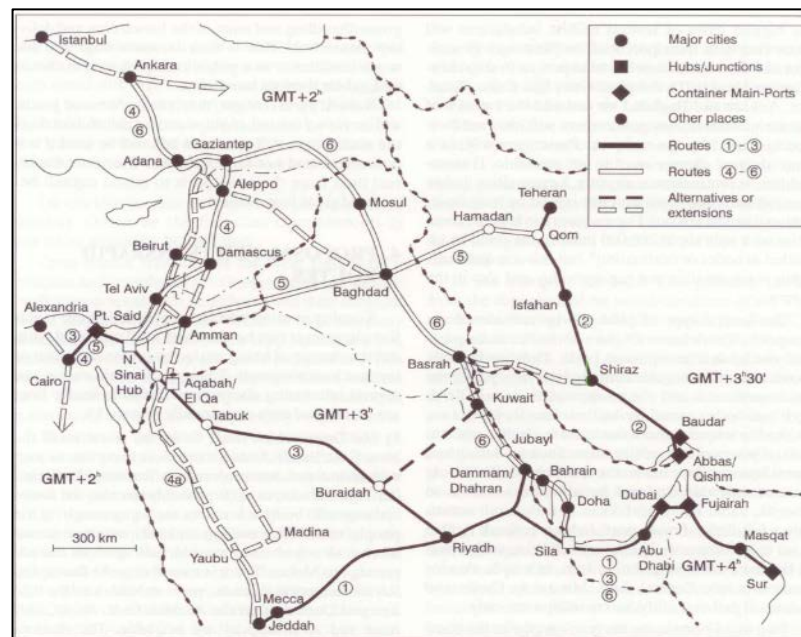


Figure 3. Project for a trans-fast grid in the Middle East

Source: RITTER, Wigand. "A Transrapid-Network for the Near East?", *Promet-Traffic&Transportation*, vol. 11, n.º 2-3. 1999, p. 132.

In 2016, Saudi Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) announced an ambitious transformation programme for his country, which he called Vision 2030. One of the pillars of this programme was based on making Saudi Arabia a communications *hub* between Asia, Africa and Europe, thanks to its geographical position¹³.

Within the framework of Vision 2030 Saudi Arabia established the National Industrial Development and Logistics Programme (NIDLP), which will receive the necessary

¹² RITTER, Wigand. "A Transrapid-Network for the Near East?", *Promet-Traffic&Transportation*, vol. 11, n.º 2-3.1999, p. 132.

¹³ KSA. *Vision 2030: An Overview*. Available at: <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/media/cofh1nmf/vision-2030-overview.pdf> [accessed: 28/12/2023].

connectivity support through the National Transport and Logistics Strategy with the intention of interconnecting local and regional networks, facilitating cross-border trade and simplifying the movement of goods through digitised and simple customs procedures¹⁴.

The Saudi vision seemed to overlap with China's Belt and Road Initiative, in a context where the US was ceding power. Indeed, China welcomed a strategic alliance with the Saudis, not only because of its energy resources, but also because the Middle East is the confluence of Chinese land and maritime strategies¹⁵.

Towards a new Gulf-Mediterranean regional reconfiguration

Events began to accelerate again in 2018, when Donald Trump arrived at the White House with his campaign manager and son-in-law, Jared Kushner. The latter, of Jewish origin, has a good relationship with Prince MbS for having supported him during the Khashoggi case¹⁶.

Trump's legislature sought Saudi and Israeli backing in the region, allowing him to focus his efforts on the Asia-Pacific region. Trump therefore launched a plan for the Palestinians, seeking reconciliation in exchange for their welfare. In his view, a future Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital could be created, but in exchange Palestinians would have to renounce terrorism and recognise Israel's sovereignty over certain West Bank territories. Despite the offer, the Palestinians rejected the 'deal of the century' of the early 2020s, which offered a doubling of the territory under their control and significant economic benefits for them and surrounding Arab countries¹⁷.

¹⁴ FROST & SULLIVAN. "Vision 2030: KSA, A Logistics Hub". 20 November 2022. Available at: <https://www.frost.com/frost-perspectives/global-supply-chain-resilience-initiative/> [accessed: 28/12/2023].

¹⁵ CHAZIZAJULY, Mordechai. "The Gulf States and the New Silk Road. Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies. July 17, 2019. Available at: <https://besacenter.org/gulf-states-new-silk-road/> [accessed: 28/12/2023].

¹⁶ LEVIN, Bess. "Jared Kushner Could Be Made Secretary of State in Second Trump Term, and No, That's Not a Joke", *Vanity Fair*. 7 December 2023. Available at: <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2023/12/jared-kushner-donald-trump-secretary-of-state> [accessed: 28/12/2023].

¹⁷ OPRYSKO, Caitlin. "Trump unveils longshot Middle East peace plan with path to Palestinian statehood", *Politico*. 28 January 2020. Available at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-unveils-longshot-middle-east-peace-plan-with-path-to-palestinian-statehood/> [accessed: 28/12/2023].

The Trump administration was equally active in Israel's regional environment with the Abraham Accords initiative, securing recognition of the State of Israel by both the Emirates and Bahrain in September of that year (later joined by Sudan and Morocco). In addition, the Saudis welcomed possible cooperation on the Red Sea littoral. These agreements also implied an eventual solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which, despite the establishment of the Negev Forum, did not produce significant progress¹⁸.

When Joe Biden became US president in January 2021, his idealistic rather than pragmatic positions led to a freeze on previous US initiatives. Initially, the new president sought to return to the Iran nuclear deal, end the Yemen conflict and turn Saudi Arabia into a 'pariah' state, approaches that set off alarm bells in the Arab countries of the region¹⁹.

The change in US posture would be seized upon by China, which showed its rapprochement in late 2022 with the visit of President Xi Jinping, who would be warmly received by the Saudis. Continuing its rapprochement with the region, the Chinese secured another 'deal of the century' in the spring of 2023, when under its auspices Saudi Arabia and Iran re-established diplomatic relations. This change of direction in the region was viewed with concern by Israel, fearing Iran's threatening posture and the presence of Hamas leaders in Mecca during Ramadan²⁰.

The US perceived that it had lost much of its influence in the region and that it needed to take positions closer to the reality of events. Starting with the low points of President Biden's visit to Saudi Arabia in the summer of 2022, rapprochements began to emerge that smoothed out many of the rough edges of the early part of the legislature. Tripartite

¹⁸ FEIERSTEIN, Gerald M. and GUZANSKY, Yoel. "Two years on, what is the state of the Abraham Accords?". Middle East Institute, 14 September 2022. Available at: <https://www.mei.edu/publications/two-years-what-state-abraham-accords> [accessed: 28/12/2023].

¹⁹ HANNAH, John and KODUVAYUR, Varsha. "Note to Mohammed bin Salman: Stop Digging Yourself Deeper", *Foreign Policy*. 30 November 2020. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/11/30/salman-saudi-arabia-biden-israel/> [accessed: 27/12/2023]. For a more in-depth reading of Saudi Arabia's role in the new regional and global environment, we suggest the following document: CASTRO TORRES, José Ignacio. "Arabia Saudita entre el Rimland y la confluencia de las grandes potencias" (IEEE Analysis Paper, 05/2023). Available at: https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2023/DIEEEA05_2023_JOSCAS_Arabia.pdf

²⁰ For a more detailed study of China's position in the region, we suggest the following document: CASTRO TORRES, José Ignacio. "La consolidación de China en el Oriente Medio" (IEEE Analysis Paper, 32/2023). Available at: https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2023/DIEEEA32_2023_JOSCAS_China.pdf

rapprochements led to reports in August 2023 of the possible revitalisation of a project similar to the former TAPLINE, but with the port of Haifa as the terminal²¹ .

Thus, in September 2023 Prince MbS declared that Saudi Arabia was getting closer to Israel by the day. Among the issues of interest to all three actors, the Palestinian problem was on the negotiating table, with the Americans once again advocating a hypothetical two-state solution. However, it seemed that Netanyahu and Biden also discussed more pragmatic aspects, such as settler violence in the West Bank and the actions of terrorist groups. There was also the possibility of collaboration on civilian nuclear issues, so necessary for Prince MbS's Vision 2030^{22,23}. Security issues were also important to MbS, as apart from US arms sales, the Saudis need a system as efficient as Israel's Iron Dome to counter the Houthi threat from Yemen²⁴ .

Meanwhile, the situation in Gaza worsened due to the Hamas group's poor administration of the territory. Although Qatar had traditionally supported the group, during the summer of 2023 there was a delay in Qatari monetary donations, resulting in the non-payment of salaries to the Strip's nearly 50,000 civil servants. The usual Gazan criticism became even more exacerbated, with Hamas employees themselves joining in. In this situation, Hamas's plight was becoming more and more pressing, possibly leading its leaders to believe that they had to take drastic action before they lost international support and the disaffection of their own population²⁵ .

On 7 October, an attack from the Gaza Strip on Israeli territory caused astonishment and surprise due to the effects achieved and the cruelty of the acts carried out. At the same

²¹ ISRAEL NEWS. "Trans-Arabian Pipeline with Oil Terminal in Haifa Port May Become a Reality". 19 August 2020. Available at: <https://israelnews.org/trans-arabian-pipeline-with-oil-terminal-in-haifa-port-may-become-a-reality/> [accessed: 30/1/2024].

²² TIMES OF ISRAEL. "Saudi crown prince: Israel and Saudi Arabia moving closer to normalization "every day". 20 September 2023. Available at: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog-september-20-2023/> [accessed: 28/12/2023].

²³ MACARON, Joe. "A Three-way US Saudi Israeli Normalization Deal Might be a Tall Order". The Wilson Center, 22 August 2023. Available at: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/three-way-us-saudi-israeli-normalization-deal-might-be-tall-order> [accessed: 28/12/2023].

²⁴ TRAUB, James. "Netanyahu Has Drawn a Saudi-U.S. Road Map", *Foreign Policy*. 8 February 2023. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/02/08/netanyahu-israel-united-states-saudi-arabia-abraham-accords/> [accessed: 28/12/2023].

²⁵ AL-MUGHRABI, Nidal. "Hamas unable to pay salaries in Gaza after Qatari aid delay, officials say". Reuters, 16 July 2023. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/hamas-unable-pay-salaries-gaza-after-qatari-aid-delay-officials-say-2023-07-16/> [accessed: 28/12/2023].

time, Shiite Hezbollah militias from Lebanon carried out several rocket and anti-tank weapon attacks, which initially raised fears of a possible extension of the conflict²⁶.

The India-Middle East-Europe Corridor. The Belt and Road counter-initiative.

In parallel to the evolving dynamics of the area, an event that attracted global attention took place during the G20 Summit in New Delhi in early September 2023. India firmly expressed its position as a power in a new multilateral order by announcing, among other achievements, the launch of a communications corridor linking Indian and European ports via a land route through the Middle East²⁷.



Figure 4. India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor Project (IMEC)

Source: THE LOWY INSTITUTE. "History repeats: A new (old) economic corridor emerges". 1 November 2023. Available at: <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpretor/history-repeats-new-old-economic-corridor-emerges> [accessed: 29/12/2023].

The IMEC project foresees access by sea from the Indian port of Mumbai to the Arabian Peninsula, where, from the Emirati and Saudi ports, major rail lines would cross the entire

²⁶ For further information on the first phases of the current Gaza conflict, we suggest the following article: CASTRO TORRES, José Ignacio. "Tierra Santa se estremece de nuevo" (IEEE Briefing Paper, 01/2023). Available at:

https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_informativos/2023/DIEEEIO1_2023_JOSCAS_TierraSanta.pdf

²⁷ GUPTA, Shishir. "From G20 summit to Middle East Corridor, India's 5 geopolitical wins in 2023", *The Hindustan Times*. 29 December 2023. Available at: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/from-g20-summit-to-middle-east-corridor-indias-5-geopolitical-wins-in-2023-101703865419222.html> [accessed: 29/12/2023].

Arabian Peninsula and continue through Jordan to the Israeli port of Haifa. Once there, the sea route would continue to the port of Piraeus in Greece²⁸.

For India, the corridor is an ideal solution in the current geopolitical context, given its rivalry with China and strained relations with Pakistan. Although a first possibility for the Indians was to use Iran as a land corridor, poor relations between Iranians and Americans discouraged this project. On the other hand, good relations between India and the US have been steadily growing, given that both are rivals of China and the US has gradually lost interest in Pakistan²⁹. Meanwhile, India's rapprochement with Saudi Arabia and the Emirates has been growing. It should also be noted that IMEC opens up the possibility for India to increase its influence in Africa despite China, aligning itself with US and EU projects to realise the Trans-African Corridor, also announced at the G20 summit³⁰.

For the Chinese, the IMEC announcement must have come as a bit of a shock. After its rapprochements with Saudi Arabia, it seems that the latter wants to maintain an equidistant stance that allows it to maximise the benefits of its relations with all global players, and the Chinese have no choice but to compromise because they need Saudi oil³¹. In this context the Chinese see their Belt and Road Initiative as having a counterweight in IMEC across the Eurasian region, backed by India as an emerging global power³².

The US is another potential winner in this situation, as it regains spheres of influence in areas where it has traditionally had significant leverage. It seems that, regardless of which government is in power, the Americans will put aside idealistic posturing to focus on

²⁸ THE LOWY INSTITUTE. "History repeats: A new (old) economic corridor emerges". 1 November 2023. Available at: <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/history-repeats-new-old-economic-corridor-emerges> [accessed: 29/12/2023].

²⁹ AZIMI, Saeed, 'IMEC transit route puts India-Iran trade ties to the test'. Amwaj, 18 October 2023. Available at: <https://amwaj.media/article/imec-transit-route-puts-india-iran-trade-ties-to-the-test> [accessed: 29/12/2023].

³⁰ EU PRESS CENTRE. "Joint Statement from the European Union and the United States". New Delhi, 9 September 2023. Available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/%20en/statement_23_4419 [accessed: 29/12/2023].

³¹ MOIZ KHAN, Abdul. "The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC): Too Little, Too Late?". Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 12 December 2023. Available at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/91214> [accessed: 29/12/2023].

³² USANAS FOUNDATION. "Can IMEC Emerge as An Alternative To BRI?". 16 October 2023. Available at: <https://usanasfoundation.com/can-imec-emerge-as-an-alternative-to-bri> [accessed: 29/12/2023].

making gains and regaining power at China's expense³³. Russia does not seem to be particularly harmed by IMEC, as it can be complementary to its North-South Transport Corridor through Iran. However, President Putin does not favour American involvement in the project.³⁴

At the regional level, apart from the benefits to the Saudis, Emiratis, Jordanians and Israelis, Egypt could suffer, as the transit of goods through the Suez Canal could be reduced³⁵. A corridor around Turkey's land bridge between Asia and Europe is not in Turkey's interest either. President Erdogan has therefore announced that he will push for an alternative corridor from the Iraqi port of Great Faw, conducting intensive negotiations with Iraq, the Emirates and Qatar for the construction of the Development Route³⁶.

For its part, Iran is perceived as another potential loser in this initiative, as it weakens its position in the NTSC Corridor, losing its exclusive position as the southern gateway to Russia's communications. It is therefore possible that it will try to promote other alternatives, such as the Resistance Corridor, connecting Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon by rail to reach the Mediterranean coasts. Moreover, Iran maintains a dominant position in the area of the Strait of Hormuz, through which part of IMEC's route will have to pass. This Iranian geopolitical strength should be studied by the countries involved in the project to prevent it from being used as a tool to exert pressure³⁷.

³³ MOTI, Altaf. 'The Geopolitics Of Connectivity: BRI And IMEC In Era Of US-China Rivalry', *Eurasia Review*. 14 September 2023. Available at: <https://www.eurasiareview.com/14092023-the-geopolitics-of-connectivity-bri-and-imec-in-era-of-us-china-rivalry-oped/> [accessed: 29/12/2023].

³⁴ SPUTNIK. "Putin sees benefit for Russia in a new economic corridor with US participation", *El País CR*. 12 September 2023. Available at: <https://www.elpais.cr/2023/09/12/putin-ve-beneficio-para-rusia-en-un-nuevo-corredor-economico-con-participacion-de-eeuu/> [accessed: 29/12/2023].

³⁵ CHOREV, Shaul. "The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor: Promises and Challenges". Australian Institute of International Affairs, 25 October 2023. Available at: <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/the-india-middle-east-europe-economic-corridor-promises-and-challenges/> [accessed: 29/12/2023].

³⁶ BLAIR, Alex. "Turkey moves against Europe with trade corridor alternative to IPEC". *Railway Technology*, 20 September 2023. Available at: <https://www.railway-technology.com/news/turkey-alternative-india-middle-east-trade-corridor-plan/?cf-view> [accessed: 29/12/2023].

³⁷ ALZGHOO, Mohammad. "Will IMEC Push Iran Toward a "Coalition of Losers" in the Region?". Emirates Policy Center, 28 September 2023. Available at: <https://epc.ae/en/details/brief/will-imec-push-iran-toward-a-coalition-of-losers-in-the-region-> [accessed: 3/1/2024].

For a more detailed understanding of the possible communication routes between Iran and the Levant, we suggest reading the following document: CASTRO TORRES, José Ignacio. "La importancia de los corredores terrestres (II): la carrera de Irán hacia el mar Mediterráneo" (IEEE Analysis Paper, 26/2021). Available at: http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2021/DIEEEA26_2021_JOSCAS_Iran.pdf

Conclusions

Attempts to communicate between the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea have been a historical constant throughout the ages. Today, the independence granted by technology in relation to the constraints of nature offers the possibility that this ancestral communication route may have several options for its route.

However, as in all historical moments, the Middle East region's global crossroads situation brings together competing interests, each with their own initiatives to exploit the region for the establishment of communications for their own benefit.

In the current context, the IMEC corridor has been born as a project that is on a collision course with the already advanced, the China-driven Belt and Road Initiative , which is increasingly bringing the Far East into contact with the Western world. It is therefore not surprising that several groups of actors have been established around these communication projects.

On the IMEC side, Western actors are clearly aligned, such as the US with its partners and allies, consisting of Western European countries and Israel, to which India must obviously be added. In this context, the Americans could regain much of the influence they have traditionally had in the region, without having to employ a costly military presence. Europeans could diversify the countries with which they trade, avoiding China's market grab and opening up a huge competitive trading space, such as India. Israel, for its part, could become a communications hub and transit zone in the Middle East, thus benefiting from the advantages of its territory as a transit area. Like Israel, the benefits of its geographical position would spill over to neighbouring Jordan.

On the other side are the IMEC's detractors, led by China, which would lose influence in the region at the expense of its Indian and American rivals. It is therefore understandable that all Chinese efforts are aimed at ensuring that their Belt and Road Initiative prevails and that they control all types of relations in the greater Eurasian continent, definitively distancing the US and containing the rise of India.

This idea would be joined by two other big losers in the region vis-à-vis IMEC. Both Egypt and Turkey, due to their geopolitical situation, would be seriously harmed if this idea were to succeed, as the passage of goods through the Suez Canal would be drastically reduced, as would the communication possibilities offered by the land bridge that is the

Anatolian peninsula. Iran would also be damaged by the new corridor, as it would lose part of its important position as the hinge of East-West and North-South communications in Eurasia.

Monarchies in the Arabian Peninsula would find comfort in the coexistence of both initiatives. This is mainly because both would struggle to find favour with these countries. The Arabs would push more or less for either option depending on how much they would gain, but both would need to be consolidated. Russia would be in a balanced position, as it has a presence in Syria and, if IMEC is consolidated, would possibly have Turkey on its side. On the other hand, it would not be completely dependent on Iran for a way out to the south.

However, it is not all geopolitical trends and declarations of good intentions. Predispositions need to be financed to become realities, and declarations at the G20 meeting have not yet been followed by any commitments to share the burdens of the project. It does not seem that the Western world will jump into investment, given that Europe is economically weakened by the Ukrainian conflict and the US is not doing well economically either. Likewise, the monarchies of the Arabian Peninsula must measure their efforts in infrastructures in order to keep pace with all the transformation projects that are being carried out in these countries. Nor does it seem that India is going to make a solitary effort in this transport corridor, having to face the challenge of growing progressively and confronting China in other scenarios.

The IMEC project therefore seems likely to rely heavily on private initiative, which is always cautious, and more so pending the resolution of the Gaza conflict and its ramifications in Yemen or Lebanon. Moreover, with civilian casualties mounting from the conflict, Arab leaders are unlikely to push for relations with Israel in the short term, which could turn public opinion within their own countries against them.

Another important obstacle to overcome will be the establishment of policies to facilitate connectivity in the corridor. Some kind of common investment coordination mechanism is needed to facilitate the establishment of the project, as within the G7 each country implements its own approach to major infrastructure investments. In addition, it is essential that multimodal transfers take place without the trade of goods being delayed

over time and without transit tariffs ultimately eroding the benefits that can be obtained compared to other routes.

In short, as has been the case on several occasions throughout history, the implementation and consolidation of the link between the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean is a consistent possibility, although it is fraught with pitfalls that must be carefully overcome. Again, how existing conflicts in the area are managed will be a key factor, and among these, the outcome of the current Israeli-Hamas conflict will be crucial to the momentum of IMEC.

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