

Connecting India, Arabia and Europa

C Raja Mohan

Summary

When implemented, the multimodal transport, energy and digital corridor between India and Europe via the Arabian Peninsula, announced on the margins of the G20 summit in New Delhi in early September 2023, marks a breakthrough in post-partition India's quest for deeper connectivity with the regions to the west and north-west of the subcontinent.

Although the idea of a corridor connecting India to the Arabian Peninsula and Europe had been discussed for a while, the announcement of plans to build such a corridor on the margins of the G20 summit in New Delhi was a surprise.

It was an idea discussed in detail in a [paper](#) published by the Institute of South Asian Studies in 2021. The [first suggestion](#) that policymakers were interested in ship and rail connectivity across the three regions came when India's national security adviser, Ajit Doval, met his American counterpart, Jake Sullivan, and the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) national security advisor, Sheikh Tahnoun bin Zayed Al Nahyan, in Riyadh in May 2023 and called on the crown prince and prime minister of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed bin Salman. The idea of building a more secure and prosperous Middle East "[connected to India and the world](#)" was discussed during these meetings.

Few had expected the proposal to be concretised so quickly. Intensive consultations behind the scenes have apparently been taking place in the last few months. The United States (US) also roped in [the European Union](#) (EU) to join this venture to develop a corridor connecting India with both Arabia and Europe. The presence of all the key actors in Delhi for the G20 summit provided the opportunity to unveil the formal framework to pursue this transformative project.

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi and US President Joe Biden joined leaders of the EU, France, Germany, Italy, Saudi Arabia and the UAE on 9 September 2023 in Delhi to announce what is being called the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC). [The plan](#) is to "usher in a new era of connectivity with a railway, linked through ports connecting Europe, the Middle East, and Asia." India, the US and its partners also "intend to link both continents to commercial hubs and facilitate the development and export of clean energy; lay undersea cables and link energy grids and telecommunication lines to expand reliable access to electricity; enable innovation of advanced clean energy technology; and connect communities to secure and stable Internet." A [memorandum of understanding](#), signed in Delhi by these countries, promised that officials would meet within two months to finalise an action plan to implement this corridor.

If turned into concrete outcomes, the plan could transform India's geopolitics in several ways. First, until a few years ago, the conventional wisdom in Delhi said India and the US

might work together in the Indo-Pacific but had little in common in the Middle East. That myth was broken when both countries joined hands with Israel and the UAE to set up the I2U2 forum to jointly develop some economic projects. The IMEC would help reinforce India's new partnership with the US in the Middle East.

Second, the IMEC could help undermine Pakistan's veto over India's overland connectivity to the west and north-west Asia. Since the 1990s, Delhi has sought various trans-regional connectivity projects with Pakistan. However, Islamabad was adamant in its refusal to let India gain access to landlocked Afghanistan and Central Asia.

Third, although Iran and Russia have offered overland connectivity through the so-called [North-South Corridor](#), the international isolation of Tehran and Moscow limits the commercial possibilities for this arrangement. Therefore, the IMEC would help India explore commercial opportunities through its overland connectivity.

Fourth, the corridor will deepen India's strategic engagement with the Arabian peninsula. The Modi government, which has rapidly elevated links with the UAE and Saudi Arabia in the last few years, has an opportunity to build enduring [geo-economic connectivity](#) between India and Arabia. During the years of the British Raj, the subcontinent's resources played a key role in linking India, Arabia and Europe. The current project will restore India's role as a driver in shaping regional connectivity.

Fifth, the mega connectivity project could, in the words of US officials, help "[bring down the political temperature](#)" in the Arabian peninsula by promoting intra-regional connectivity. "Infrastructure for peace" has long been an alluring but elusive goal for the Middle East. It remains to be seen if the current corridor will break that jinx.

Sixth, the corridor also marks the [mobilisation of Europe](#) into the infrastructure development in the region. The EU had earmarked €300 million (\$438 million) for infrastructure spending worldwide between 2021 and 2027. Its support for the new corridor will make the EU a major stakeholder in integrating India with the Middle East and Europe.

The EU has also joined hands with the US in developing the so-called [Lobito Corridor](#) across Southern Africa – running from Angola to land-locked Zambia. India, which has also stepped up its engagement with Africa, would want to partner with the US and the EU in Africa to link the Lobito Corridor to the continent's Indian Ocean coast.

Lastly, the IMEC is being inevitably viewed as an alternative to [China's Belt and Road Initiative \(BRI\)](#), which a number of countries in South Asia, the Middle East and Africa have embraced. It will be a while, though, before the joint infrastructure initiatives of India and the West can measure up to the expansive scale and scope of Beijing's decade-old BRI.

India's real task is less about competing with China and more of developing a regional connectivity agenda of its own. For long, India's efforts to promote regional connectivity have been hobbled by the lack of resources, political will and capacity for project implementation. Modi has sought to overcome many of these limitations in recent years.

India's new partnership with the US, the EU and the capital-rich Gulf states could provide a much-needed boost to India's plans for accelerating regional connectivity.

.

Professor C Raja Mohan is a Visiting Research Professor at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He can be contacted at crmohan@nus.edu.sg. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.