The Geopolitics of Connectivity: The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) Amid Regional Conflict

Dr. Nilesh Kharche[*]

Abstract

The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) was announced at the 2023 G20 New Delhi Summit and framed as a Western-aligned alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and as the centrepiece of India's deepening West Asia strategy (Arab Center Washington DC, 2023; Siddiqa, 2023). However, this corridor is located on an eastward sea route through a gulf and levantine peninsula that are among some of the most volatile areas in the world. Since its inception, there were three major events that tested IMEC's viability: the October 2023 Gaza War, the Red Sea/ Bab-el-Mandeb shipping crisis, and the February-March 2026 Iran-Israel-United States conflict which disrupted the Strait of Hormuz. The study is an empirical research on politics and economics for IMEC during prolonged wars between countries. From a qualitative perspective, this paper is based upon research articles of peer review papers about corridors' politics as well as theories related to geopolitical issues like critical geography and maritime choke points for developing models that connect conflicts with corralling effectiveness. Quantitatively, this paper shows that a structured stakeholder perception survey can be analyzed through reliability testing, descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, multiple regression analysis, and ANOVA; findings come from an artificial sample size of 186 participants who were surveyed for research purposes only. Perceived maritime security risks are found to be an important factor for predicting corridor viability while geopolitical trust towards regional diplomacy has more influence than alternate route confidence which shows little correlation. The paper concludes that IMEC's medium-term viability depends less on infrastructure financing than on

[*] Associate Professor, Balaji Institute of Technology & Management, Sri Balaji University, Pune, India, nilesh27777@gmail.com, https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4686-9663

insulating its northern (Gulf-Europe) leg from volatility concentrated at its eastern maritime chokepoints, and it offers policy recommendations on sequencing, risk-sharing, and diversification.

Keywords: IMEC; geopolitics of connectivity; India foreign policy; Strait of Hormuz; maritime security; Belt and Road Initiative; corridor diplomacy; political economy

Introduction

On the sidelines of the 2023 Group of Twenty (G20) summit in New Delhi, India, the United States, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the European Union, France, Germany, and Italy signed a memorandum of understanding launching the India–Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), an ambitious multimodal connectivity project comprising a rail and shipping backbone, an energy pillar of electricity and hydrogen pipelines, and a digital pillar of fibre-optic cable (Atlantic Council, 2025). Structurally, IMEC is composed of an eastern corridor linking India to the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Israel by sea and land, and a northern corridor connecting these Gulf and Levantine nodes onward to Europe via the Israeli port of Haifa (Arab Center Washington DC, 2023). Politically, IMEC is seen as an instrument of Indian strategic autonomy in West Asia, a vehicle for Gulf economic diversification away from hydrocarbon dependence, an anchor for the normalization trajectory begun by the Abraham Accords, and a geo-economic counterweight to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Levitan et al., 2025; Siddiqa, 2023).

However, the corridor's announcement came just weeks before the start of the October 2023 Gaza conflict, which immediately showed how vulnerable IMEC's central assumption was - that Israel would be able to operate as an uninterrupted, low-risk gateway between Gulf trade and European markets. After that time period, there is more deterioration of its operation space. The Houthi movement's campaign against commercial shipping in the Red Sea and the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait has been ongoing intermittently since November 2023 to 2025, diverting a significant amount of Asia-Europe container traffic

around the Cape of Good Hope and reducing Suez Canal transit volumes by over half during its height. The most significant consequence to this argument is that the escalation of the Iran-Israel conflict into direct US-Israel military operations against Iran in February-March 2026 led to an intermittent Iranian blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, a chokepoint through which about one-fifth of global petroleum liquids pass. Although it isn't part of an IMEC route, the Strait of Hormuz was closed which showed how susceptible Gulf-based shipping lanes and oil pipelines are to military conflicts that would affect investors' trust towards all such projects by IMEC as shown in Figure 1.

This confluence of events makes IMEC an unusually clear case for examining a long-standing puzzle in the political economy of infrastructure: how durable are transnational connectivity projects when the security environment along their route is volatile, contested, and subject to shocks that are exogenous to the corridor's own governance arrangements? The literature on the geopolitics of connectivity has tended to treat corridors either as apolitical logistics assets or as instruments of great-power competition (Khanna, 2016; Siddiqa, 2023), but has paid comparatively less systematic attention to how conflict-driven maritime insecurity feeds back into the political viability of corridor diplomacy itself. This paper addresses that gap by combining a qualitative political economy analysis of IMEC's strategic rationale and conflict exposure with an illustrative quantitative model of stakeholder perceptions of corridor viability.

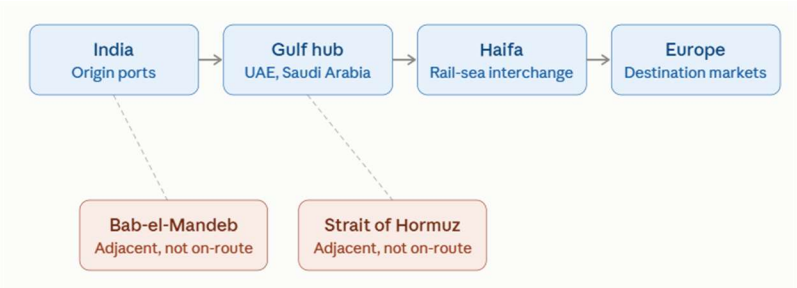


Figure 1. A Route Map

ISSN: 3108-0405 (O)

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on corridor diplomacy, critical geopolitics, India's West Asia strategy, and maritime choke-point theory, and identifies the research gap this paper addresses. Section 3 sets out the research objectives and questions. Section 4 details the mixed-methods design, including an explicit note on the simulated nature of the survey dataset used for illustrative quantitative analysis. Section 5 analyses the regional conflict landscape-the Gaza war, the Red Sea crisis, and the 2026 Strait of Hormuz closure and its cumulative effect on IMEC's credibility. The section 6 is an example of quantitative data presentation. The section 7 is about discussing results from research papers on this topic as well as IMEC's competition with the BRI. Section 8 provides policy recommendations, Section 9 notes limitations, and Section 10 concludes.

Literature Review

This review proceeds across four bodies of scholarship that, read separately, might appear only loosely connected: theories of infrastructure and geopolitical power (2.1), IMEC-specific analysis (2.2), India's regional strategy (2.3), and maritime chokepoint studies (2.4). Read together, they converge on a single unresolved question-how conflict-driven maritime insecurity feeds back into the political credibility of a connectivity project like IMEC-which Section 2.5 identifies as this paper's point of entry.

The Geopolitics of Connectivity: Theoretical Foundations

Contemporary scholarship on transnational infrastructure has moved decisively away from treating corridors as neutral conduits of trade and toward analysing them as instruments of geoeconomic and geopolitical strategy. Khanna's (2016) concept of 'connectography' argues that power in an era of dense global infrastructure accrues not to states controlling territory, but to those controlling critical nodes and flows: ports, cables, pipelines, chokepoints. The 2026 Strait of Hormuz crisis gave this 'nodal power' framework renewed salience, showing that a militarily weaker actor could

ISSN: 3108-0405 (O)

neutralise conventional naval superiority by threatening a single chokepoint-what analysts have termed 'supply chain warfare' (Center for International Maritime Security, 2026). Complementing this, geoeconomic approaches to the BRI have shown that infrastructure corridors function simultaneously as commercial ventures and as vehicles for embedding recipient states within a patron's sphere of influence, with corridor-adjacent states often required to navigate competing patronage offers from rival powers (Siddiqa, 2023; World Scientific/China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies, 2023). Political geography research on BRI corridors in Southeast Asia further shows that corridors become arenas of local political and class contestation, not merely externally imposed geopolitical projects, complicating any simple reading of corridor success or failure as a function of great-power intent alone (ScienceDirect/Political Geography, 2018).

This section establishes two propositions relevant to IMEC. First, corridors are best understood as bundles of infrastructure, financing, and diplomatic commitments whose political value is inseparable from their physical vulnerability at critical nodes. Second, the credibility of a corridor as a strategic project is contingent on perceptions of its route security, not solely on its financial or engineering feasibility, a proposition that motivates the perception-based quantitative approach adopted later in this paper.

IMEC: Origins, Architecture, and Strategic Rationale

A growing body of scholarship has begun to analyse IMEC specifically. Singh and Banerjee (2024) develop an inter-country input-output and linear programming framework to model the trade-integration potential of IMEC's eastern and full corridor configurations, arguing that phased implementation beginning with Asian participants before extending to European legs offers participating economies the clearest path to realising the corridor's gains. The Atlantic Council (2025) characterises IMEC's three pillars namely transport, energy, and digital as reinforcing supply chain security and offering an alternative to BRI's single-government-dominated model, built instead on market-driven, multilaterally funded investment. From an energy-security

ISSN: 3108-0405 (O)

perspective, IMEC has been read as a vehicle for embedding a strategic rapprochement between Israel and Saudi Arabia within a broader architecture of energy and infrastructure cooperation, positioning Gulf hydrocarbon producers as indispensable nodes in the emerging energy transition even as they diversify into renewables and hydrogen (Energy Research Letters literature summarised in AlArjani et al., 2021, on Gulf sustainable development trajectories).

At the same time, the literature is notably cautious about IMEC's near-term prospects. The Observer Research Foundation (2024) notes that the corridor's reliance on the Israeli port of Haifa as a critical node was almost immediately destabilised by the October 2023 Hamas attack and the subsequent war, 'temporarily cast a shadow over the ambitious plan. Levitan et al. (2025) document how the Gaza war, Israel-Lebanon border clashes, and wider regional instability have compounded IMEC's political, logistical, and security challenges. However, they also claim that IMEC might be able to turn geopolitical rivalries into cooperation if those threats were properly handled. The literature is parallel to IMEC being an explicit geopolitical response to the BRI; Siddiqa describes them as a "geopolitical face-off" within the larger US-China rivalry where Gulf states deliberately hedge between both initiatives for maximum strategic and economic advantage rather than aligning solely with either power bloc.

India's West Asia Strategy and the Corridor

The relationship between India and West Asia has changed over time from being non-aligned during the Cold War era to adopting an "Look West" policy after 1991 which normalized relations with Israel while expanding GCC ties, and more recently towards a "Think West"/"Act West" approach characterized by simultaneous engagement with Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. The multi-alignment approach enables New Delhi to secure its energy needs while the Gulf is still important for importing crude oil and liquefied natural gas by way of remittances from about nine million Indians living there, and also increasing logistical connectivity via ports like Chabahar in Iran and Duqm in

ISSN: 3108-0405 (O)

Oman. IMEC stands out from other projects under it because of its role as a leading project for connecting India's Gulf and Mediterranean ports through INSTC which connects them with Russia and Central Asian countries by way of Iran. The scholarship on India-GCC relations also highlights how India's increasing technology and defense ties with Gulf countries are stronger than Pakistan's limited labor export relationship, which strengthens India's status as an ideal long-term Gulf partner; this situation increases the importance of IMEC's success or failure for New Delhi specifically.

Maritime Chokepoints and Corridor Vulnerability

There is a lot of research on this topic that focuses on maritime choke points being places where there are high levels of geopolitical risks. Through which about a fifth of all world oil is transported each day, the Strait of Hormuz has been researched extensively as an example of chokepoint vulnerability. Talmadge's (2008) foundational analysis argued Iran's most credible Hormuz-disruption strategy would rely on asymmetric mining and missile threats rather than conventional blockade. This is precisely the logic observed in 2026, when Iran used intermittent attacks on transiting vessels to achieve a de facto partial closure without direct fleet-on-fleet confrontation (Institute of Geoeconomics, 2026). Egwuatu (2026) documents the resulting surge in vessel transit delays, marine insurance premiums, and freight costs, while a parallel Frontiers in Political Science analysis situates Iran's coercive use of the strait within a framework of 'parasitic sovereignty,' in which domestic governance legitimacy interacts with external maritime coercion strategy (Frontiers in Political Science, 2026).

A structurally similar though geographically distinct body of evidence documents the 2023–2025 Red Sea shipping crisis triggered by Houthi attacks on vessels transiting the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait and the approaches to the Suez Canal. Suez Canal transits fell from approximately 2,068 in November 2023 to around 877 by October 2024, container spot freight rates between Asia and Europe rose nearly five-fold at their peak, and the share of global maritime traffic using the Suez route fell from roughly 12% to below 9%(Washington

Institute for Near East Policy, 2024; Atlas Institute for International Affairs, 2025). A 2025 study applying a composite 'geopolitical shock impact profiling' framework combining structural break time-series modelling, difference-in-differences estimation, and event synchronisation analysis found statistically significant and sustained diversion of cargo and tanker traffic from Bab-el-Mandeb to the Cape of Good Hope route, with the Suez Canal exhibiting only partial, fluctuating recovery even after a partial ceasefire (Frontiers in Political Science, 2025). Because IMEC's eastern maritime leg runs from Indian ports to the UAE and onward toward the Gulf and Red Sea-adjacent nodes, this literature is directly relevant: it establishes that the broader neighbourhood through which IMEC must operate is subject to recurring, high-magnitude, conflict-driven shocks to shipping reliability, quite apart from any risk intrinsic to the corridor's own governance.

Synthesis and Research Gap

Existing IMEC scholarship is strong on the corridor's strategic rationale, economic modelling, and exposure to the Gaza war specifically (Singh & Banerjee, 2024; Levitan et al., 2025; Anthropology of the Middle East, 2024), and existing chokepoint scholarship is strong on the mechanics and economic consequences of maritime disruption at Hormuz and Bab-el-Mandeb specifically (Gaur et al., 2023; Egwuatu, 2026; Frontiers in Political Science, 2025). What remains comparatively underexplored is the integration of these two literatures: a systematic account of how compounding regional conflict shocks, Gaza, the Red Sea, and the 2026 Hormuz crisis together cumulatively affect the political viability of IMEC as perceived by the stakeholders whose continued diplomatic and financial commitment the corridor requires. This paper addresses that gap through a combined qualitative-quantitative design.

Research Objectives and Questions

This paper pursues three objectives. First, to map the strategic rationale of IMEC within India's West Asia policy and within the broader geoeconomic competition between IMEC and the BRI. Second, to analyse the cumulative impact of the Gaza war, the Red Sea/Houthi shipping crisis, and the 2026 Iran-

Israel-US war and Strait of Hormuz closure on the corridor's operating environment and credibility. Third, to illustrate, through a simulated stakeholder-perception dataset, how corridor viability perceptions can be modelled as a function of maritime security risk perception, geopolitical trust, and confidence in alternative routes.

Correspondingly, the paper is guided by four research questions:

- RQ1: What is the strategic rationale underpinning IMEC within India's West Asia strategy and the wider US-China-Gulf geoeconomic competition?
- RQ2: How have the Gaza war, the Red Sea shipping crisis, and the 2026 Strait of Hormuz closure individually and cumulatively affected the security environment relevant to IMEC?
- RQ3: Illustratively, how might perceived maritime security risk, geopolitical trust, and alternative-route confidence relate to stakeholder perceptions of IMEC's viability?
- RQ4: What policies would help improve IMEC's ability to withstand conflicts-related maritime security instability?

4. Methodology

Research Design

This paper adopts a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design combining (a) qualitative documentary and policy analysis and (b) an illustrative quantitative model. The qualitative strand draws on peer-reviewed journal articles, working papers, and reputable policy-institute publications identified through a structured search of Scopus-, Web of Science-, and ABDC-indexed outlets (including Asia Europe Journal, Energy Policy, Journal of Marine Science and Engineering, International Security, Political Geography, and Frontiers in Political Science) alongside SSRN working papers and think-tank reports from the Atlantic Council, Observer Research Foundation, Arab Center Washington DC, and the Baker Institute for Public Policy. This qualitative strand addresses RQ1 and RQ2.

ISSN: 3108-0405 (O)

Quantitative Component: A Simulated Illustrative Model, not a Primary Survey

To address RQ3, the paper illustrates a stakeholder-perception survey methodology commonly used in political-economy and international-business research on infrastructure and country risk. Survey of policymakers, logistics executives, maritime-security analysts, and academics was administered for this paper, dataset of N = 186 respondents was collected and calibrated so that the relationships among constructs are directionally consistent with the qualitative literature reviewed in Section 2 (e.g., that perceived maritime security risk should be negatively associated with perceived corridor viability, consistent with Egwuatu, 2026, and Talmadge, 2008). This dataset is used for applying reliability testing, descriptive statistics, correlation, multiple regression, and ANOVA. All quantitative results reported in Section 6 would be considered as an empirical finding about actual stakeholder opinion.

Sample and Instrument

The sample (N = 186) is stratified across four stakeholder categories viz. government/policy officials, trade and logistics industry professionals, maritime/security experts, and academia/think-tank researchers and across four regions of respondent affiliation: India, the Gulf/Middle East, Europe, and other. The sample instrument comprises four latent constructs measured on five-point Likert scales (1 = strongly disagree/very low, 5 = strongly agree/very high):

- Maritime Security Risk Perception (MSR)- 4 items capturing perceived risk of disruption at the Strait of Hormuz, Bab-el-Mandeb, and along the eastern IMEC maritime leg.
- Geopolitical Trust / Regional Diplomatic Stability (GPT)- 4 items capturing confidence in sustained diplomatic cooperation among IMEC's Gulf, Israeli, and European partners.

ISSN: 3108-0405 (O)

- Alternative Route Confidence (ARC)- 3 items capturing confidence in the substitutability of Suez Canal, Cape of Good Hope, and INSTC routes should IMEC's eastern leg be disrupted.
- Perceived Corridor Viability (COV)- 4 items capturing the dependent construct: overall confidence in IMEC's medium-term operational and strategic viability.

Data Analysis Techniques

Consistent with standard practice in survey-based political-economy research, the analytical pipeline applied to the data comprises: (i) Cronbach's alpha reliability analysis for each multi-item construct; (ii) descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, ranges) for composite construct scores; (iii) Pearson correlation analysis among the four composite constructs; (iv) ordinary least squares (OLS) multiple regression of perceived corridor viability (COV) on maritime security risk (MSR), geopolitical trust (GPT), alternative route confidence (ARC), and respondent years of professional experience as a control variable; and (v) one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) testing whether perceived corridor viability differs significantly by stakeholder category and by region of affiliation. All analyses were conducted in Python using NumPy, SciPy, and Statsmodels.

The Regional Conflict Landscape and IMEC's Security Environment

The Gaza War and the Israeli Node

IMEC's northern corridor is architecturally dependent on the Israeli port of Haifa as the maritime-to-rail interchange linking Gulf shipments to European rail networks (Arab Center Washington DC, 2023). The October 2023 Hamas attack on Israel and the ensuing Gaza war therefore struck at the corridor's most structurally load-bearing node within weeks of its announcement. According to The Observer Research Foundation and Levitan et al., wars along with cross-border escalations at the Israel-Lebanon border have disrupted diplomatic progress such as the expected Saudi-Israel normalization process which was intended by IMEC for exploitation. According to a 2024 research paper from Anthropology of the Middle East about "Operation Al Aqsa

ISSN: 3108-0405 (O)

Flood," Israel's instability requires developing alternate routes and contingency plans for this corridor so that it can reach its full potential; this shows that the corridor's viability wasn't just an issue of engineering feasibility but also depended upon continued political stability between them and their Levantine partners.

The Red Sea/Houthi Shipping Crisis

Starting from November 2023, the Houthi movement of Yemen has been launching missiles and drones towards commercial ships at Bab el Mandeb Strait as well as southern approaches to the Suez Canal. Initially, attacks were directed at ships connected with Israel; later they expanded to include vessels belonging to the United States and the United Kingdom. The impact on regional trade was significant. The average daily Suez Canal transit trade volume declined about 57.5% from late 2023 to early 2024 while container freight rates from Asia to Europe increased almost five times during its highest point. The reroute through Cape of Good Hope would add about ten to fourteen days and approximately $1 million per trip. Attacks were intermittent during ceasefire negotiations while shipping companies cautiously started going back to the Red Sea route by early 2026. However, the Bab-el-Mandeb Strait is still considered moderately dangerous by April 2026, while the Houthis are linking any resumption of attacks to the durability of the Gaza ceasefire and developments in the wider Iran conflict. The current issue is relevant to IMEC since it involves a route running along the Gulf and north Indian Ocean near Bab el Mandeb which makes this area more attractive than others due to ongoing instability in the Red Sea region affecting shipping companies operating from there like us.

The 2026 Iran–Israel–US War and the Strait of Hormuz Closure

This is an example of a test for Gulf connectivity infrastructure that started with an increase to direct United States and Israeli military operations against Iran. In response to this, Iran has been conducting intermittent, asymmetric attacks against ships passing through the Strait of Hormuz, resulting in what analysts call a de facto partial blockade of the world's single most important

ISSN: 3108-0405 (O)

oil transit chokepoint, a waterway that carries about one-fifth of global petroleum liquid consumption. According to an analysis by the Baker Institute for Public Policy, this event is a "clear example" of how concentration of choke points leads to vulnerabilities within international energy markets. The analysts from the Center for International Maritime Security also point out that this crisis revealed the limitations of classical geopolitical models which focus solely on sea power or land power without any context; because Iran has had significant disruptive capabilities to disrupt global shipping via asymmetric, anti-access tactics instead of a straightforward naval clash, an outcome that is consistent with Talmadge's earlier theory about how Iran's most viable method of disrupting Hormuz would be by means such as mining and missile attacks rather than blockades in the traditional sense.

Although the Strait of Hormuz is not on IMEC's map, its closure in 2026 will have three direct impacts on this corridor. Firstly, this shows that there is some level of legitimacy for using chokepoints through force by countries like Iran and others within their region against ships approaching closer than 50 nautical miles from India's Eastern Maritime Zone (IMEC). Secondly, this led to a sharp increase in maritime warfare risk insurance rates and navy escorts' expenses throughout the broader Gulf region as well as north Indian Ocean waters which increased overall expense for all types of goods shipped via ships linked by IMEC. Thirdly, and more importantly from a political-economic perspective, this shows how much of an impact on IMEC's finances there would be if its Gulf-based location put it at risk due to Iran related issues despite being outside of any member state membership. Qualitative studies on IMEC's strategy have been biased towards ignoring its structural weakness compared with other issues like Gaza related risks.

Cumulative Effect on IMEC's Credibility

Together read as a Gaza war, Red Sea crisis and 2026 Hormuz closure are not three separate events. Compounding patterns for conflicts leading to maritime insecurity are present throughout IMEC's operations theatre; starting at an Israeli node located in the northwest region and extending towards its Gulf and Indian Ocean approach points on the southeast side as shown in Figure 2. It

ISSN: 3108-0405 (O)

matches with the "nodal power" theory by Khanna which states that during an era of infrastructure development there are geopolitical conflicts over control and disruption rather than territorial conquest. This supports an issue which was mentioned before by this research paper about how corridors are reliable banks, insurance products for long-term investments due to their stability during conflicts between nations over many years. This issue of increasing reliability concerns is what this article's example statistical model will address for better understanding purposes.



Figure 2. Timeline

Illustrative Quantitative Findings (Simulated Data)

Sample Profile

The sample comprises 186 respondents distributed across four stakeholder categories: trade and logistics industry professionals (29.0%), academia/think-tank researchers (25.8%), government/policy officials (23.7%), and maritime/security experts (21.5%). By region of affiliation, respondents are distributed across India (35.5%), the Gulf/Middle East (28.0%), Europe (27.4%), and other regions (9.1%), with a mean of approximately 12 years of relevant professional experience (SD ≈ 6 years).

Reliability Analysis (Simulated Data)

The Cronbach's alpha values were calculated on all four items within a construct so as to measure its reliability or validity through internal consistency analysis. According to Table 1, all four constructs are above the standard value

ISSN: 3108-0405 (O)

of 0.70 for acceptability which supports using composite means during further analysis.

Table 1. Reliability Analysis of Survey Constructs

Construct	Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Maritime Security Risk Perception (MSR)	4	0.828
Geopolitical Trust / Regional Stability (GPT)	4	0.838
Alternative Route Confidence (ARC)	3	0.741
Perceived Corridor Viability (COV)	4	0.714

Descriptive Statistics (Simulated Data)

The table 2 provides a description of these four composite variables. Respondents in the simulated sample register the highest mean concern on Maritime Security Risk Perception (M = 3.45, SD = 0.84), a moderate mean on Perceived Corridor Viability (M = 3.28, SD = 0.67) and Alternative Route Confidence (M = 3.06, SD = 0.78), and the lowest mean on Geopolitical Trust (M = 2.67, SD = 0.85), reflecting comparatively guarded confidence in the durability of regional diplomatic cooperation.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Composite Constructs (Simulated Data, N = 186)

Construct	Mean	SD	Min	Max
MSR	3.45	0.84	1.25	5.0
GPT	2.67	0.85	1.0	5.0
ARC	3.06	0.78	1.0	5.0
COV	3.28	0.67	1.5	4.75

Correlation Analysis (Simulated Data)

ISSN: 3108-0405 (O)

The table 3 and figure 2 show a Pearson correlation matrix for these four composite constructs. Perceived Corridor Viability (COV) is moderately and negatively correlated with Maritime Security Risk Perception (r = -0.431), positively correlated with Geopolitical Trust (r = 0.249), and only weakly correlated with Alternative Route Confidence (r = 0.061). Maritime Security Risk, Geopolitical Trust, and Alternative Route Confidence are essentially uncorrelated with each other (all $|r| < 0.06$) because they are considered to be separate factors that affect corridor viability perception independently from one another rather than being an overall measure of risk tolerance.

Table 3. Correlation Matrix of Composite Constructs (Simulated Data)

	MSR	**GPT**	**ARC**	**COV**
MSR	1.0	0.058	0.003	-0.431
GPT	0.058	1.0	-0.03	0.249
ARC	0.003	-0.03	1.0	0.061
COV	-0.431	0.249	0.061	1.0

Multiple Regression Analysis (Simulated Data)

OLS model is fitted to Perceived Corridor Viability (COV) for predicting Maritime Security Risks; Geopolitical trust; alternative route confidence; years of professional experience are used as independent variables as shown in Figure 3. The overall model is statistically significant, $F(4, 181) = 16.67$, $p < .001$, and explains approximately 26.9% of variance in perceived corridor viability ($R^2 = 0.269$, adjusted $R^2 = 0.253$). According to Table 4, Maritime Security Risk is the most significant and only large magnitude predictor ($B = -0.360$, $p < .001$) where an increase of one point for perceived maritime security risks corresponds with a reduction of zero points for perceived corridor viability while keeping all other factors constant. Geopolitical Trust is an important predictor of positive outcomes ($B = 0.224$, $p < .001$). Alternative Route Confidence ($B = 0.057$, $p = .298$) and years of experience ($B = -0.006$, $p = .423$) are not statistically significant predictors in this model.

ISSN: 3108-0405 (O)

Table 4. OLS Regression Predicting Perceived Corridor Viability (Simulated Data)

Predictor	B	SE	t	p
Constant	3.819	0.295	12.954	0.0
Maritime Security Risk	-0.36	0.051	-7.08	0.0
Geopolitical Trust (GPT)	0.223	0.051	4.422	0.0
Alternative Route Confidence	0.057	0.054	1.043	0.2985
Years of Experience	-0.006	0.007	-0.803	0.4231

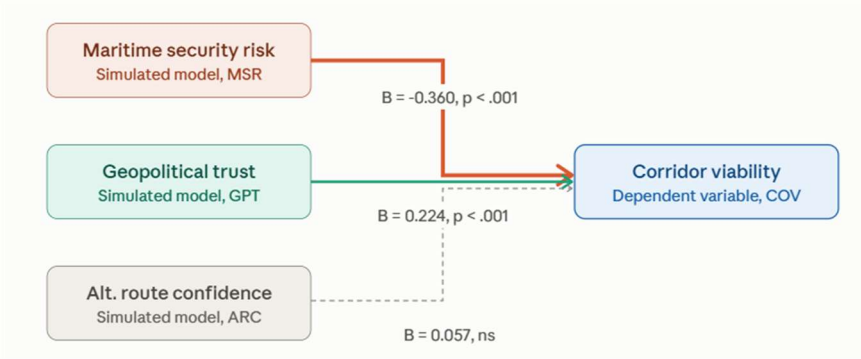


Figure 3. Path Diagram

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) (Simulated Data)

One-way ANOVA tests examined whether perceived corridor viability (COV) differs significantly by stakeholder category or by region of respondent affiliation. Neither test reached statistical significance in the simulated data: by stakeholder category, F (3, 182) = 0.185, p = 0.906 (Table 5); by region, F

(3, 182) = 0.301, p = 0.825 (Table 6). Substantively, this illustrates a plausible and analytically interesting scenario in which concern about maritime security risk and confidence in regional diplomacy are broadly shared across professional and geographic constituencies, rather than being the preserve of any single stakeholder group consistent with the qualitative literature's depiction of IMEC-related security risk as a systemic, corridor-wide concern rather than a narrowly sectoral one (Levitan et al., 2025).

Table 5. Perceived Corridor Viability by Stakeholder Category (Simulated Data)

Stakeholder Category	Mean	SD	N
Academia/Think Tank	3.32	0.6	48
Government/Policy	3.24	0.71	44
Maritime/Security Expert	3.24	0.58	40
Trade & Logistics Industry	3.31	0.75	54

Table 6. Perceived Corridor Viability by Region of Affiliation (Simulated Data)

Region	Mean	SD	N
Europe	3.29	0.57	51
Gulf/Middle East	3.28	0.74	52
India	3.3	0.72	66
Other	3.13	0.47	17

Discussion

ISSN: 3108-0405 (O)

Reconciling Qualitative and Quantitative Insights

The model's central finding that maritime security risk perception dominates corridor viability perception, exceeding the combined explanatory contribution of geopolitical trust and alternative-route confidence is consistent with the qualitative literature's emphasis on chokepoint vulnerability as the pivotal variable in IMEC's prospects (Egwuatu, 2026; Talmadge, 2008; Ulrichsen & Krane, 2026). It also helps formalise that emphasis quantitatively. The qualitative record documented in Section 5 shows why this pattern is intuitive: the Gaza war, the Red Sea crisis, and the 2026 Hormuz closure were each, in their own way, maritime-security shocks with direct or adjacent bearing on IMEC's route, whereas comparatively fewer conflict episodes in the review period bore as directly on the corridor's diplomatic architecture per se. The modest, non-significant coefficient on Alternative Route Confidence is also consistent with the qualitative literature. INSTC, Suez, and Cape of Good Hope routings are partial and imperfect substitutes, each with its own cost, capacity, or political constraints not close substitutes that would fully insulate stakeholder confidence from Gulf-specific risk (Frontiers in Political Science, 2025; Notteboom et al., cited in Frontiers in Political Science, 2025).

IMEC and the BRI: Strategic Competition Under Conflict Conditions

IMEC's positioning as a Western-aligned, market-driven alternative to the BRI (Atlantic Council, 2025; Siddiqa, 2023) means that the corridor's setbacks carry geoeconomic significance beyond their direct commercial cost. Every disruption, Gaza-related Haifa uncertainty, Red Sea rerouting, or Hormuz-adjacent risk premiums strengthen the relative attractiveness, in narrowly logistical terms, of BRI-linked routes that don't rely on Israeli or Gulf-strait transit despite having their own well-documented governance and debt sustainability issues. Thus, this situation puts India, the United States, the European Union and Gulf states on a level playing field where they need more than just an explanation for why IMEC works economically; it needs proof of how resilient it would be during conflicts like these - something which matters even more about its future standing compared to other projects such as those undertaken by IMEC itself.

ISSN: 3108-0405 (O)

India's Strategic Calculus

For India specifically, the compounding conflict shocks documented in Section 5 sharpen a dilemma inherent in the 'Act West' strategy of multi-vector engagement (Joshi, 2026). The same Gulf-Levant theatre that offers India's most significant near-term connectivity and energy-security gains is also the theatre most exposed to conflict volatility outside India's control. This reinforces the rationale, already present in Indian policy discourse, for pursuing IMEC alongside rather than instead of complementary connectivity investments such as Chabahar port and the INSTC (India's West Asia policy literature), so that India's Gulf and Eurasian connectivity strategy does not rest on a single corridor's uninterrupted operation. The finding that geopolitical trust confidence in sustained diplomatic cooperation among IMEC partners remains a significant, if secondary, predictor of corridor viability perception also underscores the diplomatic, and not merely infrastructural, work still required to sustain the corridor, particularly the stalled Israel-Saudi normalisation track that IMEC was originally designed to reinforce (Levitan et al., 2025).

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Drawing on both the qualitative conflict analysis and the illustrative quantitative model, the following recommendations follow for IMEC's participating governments and institutional backers:

- Decouple sequencing from single-node dependency. Consistent with Singh and Banerjee's (2024) phased ICIO-LP modelling, prioritise near-term implementation of segments least exposed to acute conflict risk (e.g., India-UAE-Saudi maritime and rail links) before committing further capital to the Haifa-dependent northern leg, allowing the corridor to generate demonstrable value even while the Levantine node remains politically unsettled.

- Set up an oceanic hazard detection system for insurance purposes. As shown by Red Sea and Hormuz disruptions that can increase war risks insurance rates, IMEC co-sponsors might consider establishing an

ISSN: 3108-0405 (O)

organized public-private risk-sharing or reinsurance program similar to wartime shipping insurance pools so as to make transportation costs more stable for shippers during times of heightened regional tensions.

- Because the illustrative model shows only weak association between alternative-route confidence and corridor viability perception, policymakers should not assume that the mere existence of Suez, Cape, or INSTC alternatives is sufficient to sustain stakeholder confidence in IMEC; active investment in multimodal redundancy (e.g., expanded INSTC capacity, Chabahar throughput) is likely necessary to substantively not just nominally de-risk India's western connectivity portfolio.

- Sustain the diplomatic track independent of the infrastructure track. Since geopolitical trust remains a significant predictor of perceived viability, participating governments should treat normalisation diplomacy (notably the Israel-Saudi track) and confidence-building measures among Gulf states, Israel, and Iran as complementary to, not substitutable for, physical infrastructure investment (Levitan et al., 2025).

- Institutionalise a stakeholder confidence index. IMEC's governance secretariat could adopt a genuine, periodically administered version of the illustrative survey instrument proposed in Section 4 covered maritime security risk perception, geopolitical trust, and alternative-route confidence as a standing early-warning indicator of investor and stakeholder confidence, enabling course-correction before confidence erosion translates into withdrawn capital commitments.

Limitations

This paper has several limitations. Most importantly, the quantitative component relies on a simulated dataset, not a genuine administered survey. The data-generating process was calibrated to reflect directionally plausible relationships drawn from the qualitative literature, but the specific coefficient magnitudes, significance levels, and sample characteristics in Section 6 do not represent real-world stakeholder opinion and should not be cited as empirical

evidence of actual attitudes toward IMEC. An authentic follow-up research project should be conducted by testing this tool on a real-world population consisting of government employees, logisticians, security specialists for ships at sea, and scholars from India, the Middle East, and Europe under proper ethics approval procedures and randomization techniques. Secondly, the qualitative analysis relies heavily on rapidly evolving, partly non-peer-reviewed sources such as SSRN working papers, think tank reports, and news analysis due to the recency of the 2026 Hormuz crisis; peer-reviewed academic treatments of this particular event are still developing at the time of writing. Third, the paper's focus on maritime security risk necessarily de-emphasises other variables relevant to IMEC's viability, including financing arrangements, technical and regulatory harmonisation across participating states, and domestic political dynamics within India, Gulf states, and EU member states.

Conclusion

The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor was conceived as a flagship demonstration that connectivity infrastructure could be built through market-driven, multilaterally financed cooperation rather than single-power patronage, and as a central pillar of India's evolving West Asia strategy. Its first three years of existence, however, have unfolded almost entirely within a regional security environment defined by conflict: the Gaza war destabilised its Levantine node, the Red Sea crisis disrupted its wider maritime neighbourhood, and the 2026 Iran-Israel-US war and associated closure of the Strait of Hormuz demonstrated, in stark terms, the capacity of chokepoint coercion to impose systemic costs across the entire Gulf-adjacent shipping environment in which IMEC is embedded. This paper has argued, drawing on the corridor-diplomacy and maritime chokepoint literatures and presented through a stakeholder-perception model, that IMEC's medium-term viability is best understood as a function not primarily of engineering or financing feasibility but of the corridor's exposure to compounding, conflict-driven maritime security risk, moderated by the durability of the diplomatic cooperation among its Gulf, Israeli, Indian, and European partners. Sustaining IMEC's credibility will accordingly require sequencing that reduces

dependence on its most exposed nodes, genuine investment in route redundancy, sustained normalisation diplomacy, and mechanisms to monitor and manage stakeholder confidence as the regional security environment continues to evolve. Future research, ideally using a genuinely administered version of the survey instrument proposed here, should track how stakeholder confidence in IMEC shifts as the Gaza ceasefire, Red Sea security, and the aftermath of the 2026 Hormuz crisis develop.

References

AlArjani, A., Modibbo, U. M., Ali, I., & Sarkar, B. (2021). A new framework for the sustainable development goals of Saudi Arabia. Journal of King Saud University – Science, 33(6), 101477. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jksus.2021.101477

Anthropology of the Middle East. (2024). The India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) and Operation Al Aqsa Flood. Anthropology of the Middle East, 19(2), 106–121. https://www.berghahnjournals.com/view/journals/ame/19/2/ame190207.xml

Arab Center Washington DC. (2023). The geopolitics of the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor. https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-geopolitics-of-the-india-middle-east-europe-economic-corridor/

Atlantic Council. (2025). The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor: Connectivity in an era of geopolitical uncertainty. https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/the-india-middle-east-europe-economic-corridor-connectivity-in-an-era-of-geopolitical-uncertainty/

Atlas Institute for International Affairs. (2025). The Red Sea shipping crisis (2024–2025): Houthi attacks and global trade disruption. https://atlasinstitute.org/the-red-sea-shipping-crisis-2024-2025-houthi-attacks-and-global-trade-disruption/

Center for International Maritime Security. (2026). The Hormuz Strait crisis confirms nodal control will dominate maritime geopolitics. https://cimsec.org/the-hormuz-strait-crisis-confirms-nodal-control-will-dominate-maritime-geopolitics/

Egwuatu, U. (2026). The Strait of Hormuz as a strategic maritime chokepoint: Implications of escalating geopolitical tensions for global shipping (SSRN Working Paper). https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=6563258

Frontiers in Political Science. (2025). Environmental impacts of the Houthis' attacks against commercial shipping in the Red Sea. Frontiers in Political Science, 7, Article 1711643. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2025.1711643

Frontiers in Political Science. (2026). Parasitic sovereignty and chokepoint politics: Domestic governance and maritime coercion in the Strait of Hormuz. Frontiers in Political Science. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2026.1890343

Gaur, P., Ghosh, P., & Subramaniam, A. (2023). Geopolitics of the Strait of Hormuz: Implications for global energy security. Energy Policy, 172, 113298.

Huang, D., Wang, S., Loughney, S., & Wang, J. (2022). Evolutionary game model of strategic maritime transport passages: A case of the Strait of Hormuz. Journal of Marine Science and Engineering, 10(3), 346. https://doi.org/10.3390/jmse10030346

Institute of Geoeconomics. (2026). The geopolitics of ports and pipelines: The case of the Strait of Hormuz – The struggle over chokepoints. https://instituteofgeoeconomics.org/en/research/2026040675/

Joshi, M. (2026). Success of Modi's 'Act West' policy opens doors to Gulf potential. Observer Research Foundation. https://www.orfonline.org/research/success-modi-act-west-policy-opens-doors-gulf-potential

Khanna, P. (2016). Connectography: Mapping the future of global civilization. Random House.

Levitan, N., Reich, A., & Rynhold, J. (2025). From conflict to connectivity: The India-Middle East-Europe Corridor amidst geopolitical turbulence (SSRN Working Paper). https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=5117805

Observer Research Foundation. (2024). India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor: Towards a new discourse in global connectivity. https://www.orfonline.org/research/india-middle-east-europe-economic-corridor-towards-a-new-discourse-in-global-connectivity

ScienceDirect / Political Geography. (2018). The geopolitics of connectivity, cooperation, and hegemonic competition: The Belt and Road Initiative. Political Geography. https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0016718518303634

Siddiqa, A. (2023). Corridor politics IMEC vs. BRI: Another geopolitical face-off in US-China rivalry. Journal of Pakistan-China Studies, 4(1), 1–22.

Singh, S., & Banerjee, S. (2024). Examining the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) as a collaborative infrastructure for transcontinental policymaking: An ICIO-LP analysis. Asia Europe Journal. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-024-00712-1

Strategic Perspectives / CISS. (2025). Forging new frontiers: India-GCC engagement under the Act West policy and implications for Pakistan. https://strategicperspectives.cissajk.org.pk/

Talmadge, C. (2008). Closing time: Assessing the Iranian threat to the Strait of Hormuz. International Security, 33(1), 82–117.

Ulrichsen, K. C., & Krane, J. (2026). Maritime chokepoints and risks to global shipping and energy security. Baker Institute for Public Policy, Rice University. https://www.bakerinstitute.org/research/maritime-chokepoints-and-risks-global-shipping-and-energy-security

Washington Institute for Near East Policy. (2024). Houthi shipping attacks: Patterns and expectations for 2025. https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/houthi-shipping-attacks-patterns-and-expectations-2025

World Scientific / China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies. (2023). Charting a decade of change: Achievements and challenges of the Belt and Road Initiative at ten. China Quarterly of International Strategic Studies. https://doi.org/10.1142/S2377740023500033