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Unlocking Global Connectivity: The Strategic Imperative of IMEC and The Global Gateway

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In an era marked by geopolitical realignments and the quest for sustainable development, connectivity has emerged as a critical component of global economic strategy. The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC,) presented during the 2023 G20 Summit, is a transformative framework that is intended to connect Asia, the Arabian Gulf, and Europe with multimodal transportation networks, renewable energy infrastructure, and digital connectivity. IMEC is presented as a game-changing initiative that aims to reshape global trade and energy flows. It promises to [cut transit times for products by 40%](#), considerably increasing efficiency compared to existing routes such as the Suez Canal, making the Gulf an even more appealing transit site for international trade.

Simultaneously, the EU's Global Gateway aims to put in place resilient infrastructure partnerships around the world, with an emphasis on equitable prosperity, digital transformation, and sustainability. The [GCC countries play an important role in these frameworks](#), acting as a link between East and West while pursuing their own economic diversification goals. The combination of IMEC and the Global Gateway provides a unique opportunity to coordinate both efforts, utilizing their combined strengths to improve connectivity, safeguard supply chains, and spur innovation.

The EU's Global Gateway effort, despite its ambitious scope and budget, has struggled to gain visibility and impact in the Middle East. Despite being positioned as a critical framework for strategic relationships in the Gulf, its presence is minimal, and its projects are little known in the region. Furthermore, [the initiative's alignment with IMEC](#) is still in its

early phases, with few actual cooperative initiatives and little transparency about synergies. Critics further point out that Global Gateway frequently [favors European commercial interests](#) and [does not place a major emphasis on addressing inequities in partner nations](#), thereby undermining its effectiveness and image in the Middle East. Addressing these deficiencies will require more inclusive project design, better local engagement, and a shift towards real partnership models.

This policy brief looks at the strategic imperatives for connecting IMEC with the EU's Global Gateway in the Gulf region. The convergence of these efforts provides a unique opportunity for GCC countries to strengthen their role as global connection hubs, utilizing their strategic position to build stronger economic partnerships with Europe and Asia. By integrating IMEC with the Global Gateway, there exists the potential to build a strong framework to solve common concerns such as infrastructure security, regulatory harmonization, and geopolitical tensions.

Ultimately, the success of this integration will be determined by the ability of GCC nations, India, and European stakeholders to work effectively together, ensuring that the combined strengths of IMEC and the Global Gateway are used to drive sustainable development, improve regional stability, and increase global connectivity. This collaboration will have a significant impact on the future of commerce, energy, and digital infrastructure in these regions, potentially establishing a paradigm for long-term and equitable economic prosperity.



1. Strategic Importance of Connectivity for the Gulf:

The Gulf region is essential to global connectivity due to its strategic geographical location between Asia, Europe, and Africa. This has allowed it to serve as an important trade, energy, and digital infrastructure hub and partner. The GCC countries have been actively investing in infrastructure projects to improve their communication capabilities, such as transportation networks, ports, and underwater cables. These investments are part of a larger economic diversification strategy that aims to reduce reliance on oil exports and promote long-term growth.

The Gulf's strategic importance is driven in large part by its location on global commerce routes. The region acts as a link between East and West, with large ports such as Jebel Ali in Dubai and King Abdullah Port in Saudi Arabia supporting trade between Asia and Europe. The creation of new connectivity projects such as IMEC emphasizes the region's ability to improve trade efficiency and cut transit times. For example, [the 40% reduction in transit time](#), which went down from 18 days to 10 days, will speed up cargo flow between India, the Middle East, and Europe, while simultaneously cutting transportation costs by up to 30%.

This [improvement in cargo movements](#) would come about by combining sophisticated rail and port infrastructure, which allows items to be transported more effectively between ships and trains. By lowering the number of transshipment locations and streamlining customs procedures, the corridor reduces delays and ensures that goods move more quickly and reliably across regions. As a result, businesses benefit from faster delivery times and lower logistical costs, which strengthens the Gulf's position as a worldwide commerce hub.

The Gulf region also excels in the realm of digital connectivity. [Extensive undersea cable networks](#) connecting Asia, the Gulf, and Europe enable high-speed data transfer, which is critical for economic growth and regional integration. The Gulf countries have led the way in digital transformation, spending extensively on telecommunications infrastructure and digital payment systems.

This digital infrastructure not only promotes local economic development but also establishes the Gulf as a hub for international data flows, reinforcing its strategic relevance in global connectedness. While this infrastructure establishes the Gulf as a major global hub, it also raises security risks in terms of the undersea cables themselves. Because of their increasing reliance on transmitting sensitive, critical data, these cables are possible targets for sabotage or disruption, with huge economic and strategic [vulnerabilities](#) for the region and the world.

The integration of IMEC with the EU's Global Gateway provides an opportunity for the Gulf to expand its position as a connectivity center while also aligning with global environmental objectives. The [Global Gateway program](#) prioritizes sustainable infrastructure development, which is consistent with the GCC countries' attempts to move to more sustainable economies. Participating in these projects [allows the Gulf to attract large investments](#) in green infrastructure, such as renewable energy and green hydrogen generation, diversifying its economy and strengthening its position in global connectivity.

However, the Gulf will still face challenges in retaining its strategic relevance. Geopolitical tensions and regional crises have the potential to disrupt trade routes and infrastructure investments. Furthermore, competition from other connectivity programs, such as China's BRI, threatens the success of IMEC and



comparable projects. In addition, recent geopolitical developments continue to hinder IMEC implementation. First, [Israel](#) was envisioned as a vital junction in the corridor, but the continuing fighting in Gaza has made this link unfeasible in the short term.

Second, [Turkey](#) has strongly resisted the IMEC, seeing its exclusion as a geopolitical defeat. Given [Turkey's strategic geographic location](#), officials claim that no major economic corridor connecting Asia and Europe can prosper without its participation. This opposition raises the question of whether IMEC may be diverted through Syria and Turkey, which, while posing their own set of challenges, could provide an alternative approach that addresses regional concerns about inclusion while increasing the corridor's strategic significance. These disruptions require a rethinking of IMEC's routing and operating practicality.

2. Synergies Between IMEC and the Global Gateway:

The IMEC and the EU's Global Gateway have complementary goals, making their integration a natural step toward improving global connectivity. Both programs seek to build sustainable, secure, and efficient infrastructure networks connecting Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. Their overlap creates opportunities to pool resources, synchronize tactics, and optimize effect in fields like transportation, digital infrastructure, and energy transition.

- *Complementary Goals in Sustainable Infrastructure:* IMEC's concept of connecting India to Europe via the Middle East is strongly aligned with the [Global Gateway's emphasis on sustainable infrastructure development](#). IMEC intends to combine trains, ports, and shipping lines to improve trade

flows and reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Similarly, Global Gateway prioritizes green and high-quality infrastructure projects, with €300 billion set aside for investments between 2021 and 2027. However, as of 2025, concrete projects in the region under the Global Gateway framework have been limited, despite the substantial funds. This is why [integrating intended areas of focus between IMEC and the EU's Global Gateway](#) could still help speed the development of renewable energy grids, such as green hydrogen pipelines and electrical cables, which IMEC anticipates connecting Asia, the Gulf, and Europe.

- *Digital Connectivity as a Shared Priority:* Both IMEC and Global Gateway view digital connectivity as a critical component of economic progress. IMEC includes proposals for high-speed data pipes connecting innovation ecosystems in India, the Gulf, and Europe. This is consistent with Global Gateway's goal of establishing secure digital networks worldwide. The Gulf region's existing undersea cable networks make it a suitable partner for this project. Put together, [IMEC and Global Gateway](#) can help improve data security, reduce latency in global communications, and promote new technologies like AI and blockchain.
- *Trade Route Optimization:* The planned rail and sea routes by IMEC aim to circumvent conventional chokepoints such as the Suez Canal. This efficiency aligns with Global Gateway's goal of building robust supply chains that are less susceptible to disturbances. The Gulf's unique location as a worldwide commerce crossroads makes it an important hub for both initiatives. This



could help translate the coordination of developments at ports such as Jebel Ali (UAE) and Haifa (Israel) to seamless commercial flows between Asia and Europe while lowering costs.

- *Energy Transition Opportunities:* Another area of synergy exists between the two initiatives' energy dimensions. IMEC envisions a shared renewable energy system that will enable sustainable energy trading across Asia, the Gulf, and Europe. This builds on Global Gateway's commitment to finance renewable hydrogen projects in North Africa and beyond. The Gulf countries, leaders in renewable energy investment, [can benefit from integrating both frameworks](#) to help expedite the global transition to greener energy sources while also promoting regional economic diversification goals.
- *Strategic Geopolitical Alignment:* The integration of IMEC with Global Gateway also serves broader geopolitical aims for Europe as well as its Asian and Middle Eastern partners. For Europe, [IMEC complements its Indo-Pacific strategy](#) by developing connections with India while opposing China's BRI. Participation in both frameworks increases Gulf nations' geopolitical prominence as mediators between East and West, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE, providing a foundation for forging stronger trilateral collaboration between India, Europe, and Gulf states.
- *Leveraging Multilateral Cooperation:* The multilateral aspect of both IMEC, with its eight signatories, and Global Gateway enables resource sharing among varied parties. The EU's "[Team Europe](#)" model, which mobilizes public-private partnerships, can be expanded to include Gulf nations under the framework of IMEC. This 'II' not

only increase cash resources but also ensure that projects adhere to high sustainability and governance requirements.

3. Challenges to Integration:

IMEC's integration into the EU's Global Gateway confronts several challenges, including geopolitical issues, regulatory mismatch, financial limits, and competition from other global connectivity programs. These challenges highlight the difficulty of integrating IMEC with the EU's Global Gateway while managing geopolitical conflicts, legal impediments, financial limits, security dangers, rivalry from other efforts, operational inefficiencies, and public perception issues. The complexities of these challenges underscore the difficulty of implementing such large initiatives in a highly linked and politically sensitive environment.

- *Geopolitical tensions and regional instability:* Navigating the geopolitical dynamics of the IMEC member regions is one of the most important concerns. The corridor connects states with various political systems, historical rivalries, and competing interests. For example, the ongoing Israeli violations in Palestine and neighboring countries have put Saudi-Israeli rapprochement talks on hold, which are largely regarded as a necessity for the IMEC's operationalization. Furthermore, IMEC's structure excludes significant regional players such as Egypt, Turkey, and Oman. Egypt's exclusion is especially remarkable given its dominance over the Suez Canal, a critical chokepoint for global trade, and [Turkey's absence](#) has sparked criticism



from its leadership, which claims that no cor’Idor can thrive without its participation. These geopolitical realities have the potential to undermine trust among participating countries and postpone infrastructure construction.

- *Regulatory misalignments:* The absence of harmonized regulatory frameworks among IMEC’s participant countries creates considerable integration issues. Diverging standards for customs procedures, digital governance, and transportation networks generate inefficiencies that may impede seamless integration. For example, differing public procurement laws among international partners have already been noted as a [stumbling block to the EU’s Global Gateway initiatives](#). Furthermore, financial systems in participating nations are not yet fully integrated, complicating cross-border transactions and trade finance.
- *Financial constraints:* The scale of infrastructure necessary for IMEC necessitates substantial financial investment, which remains a major barrier. Estimates indicate that establishing port links, trains, electrical grids, and telecommunication networks might cost [billions of dollars](#). Securing such funding promptly is difficult due to the engagement of various stakeholders—including governments, international organizations, and private sector entities—with competing interests. The EU’s Global Gateway initiative has faced similar [financial issues in raising funds for large-scale initiatives](#).
- *Security risks to critical infrastructure:* The IMEC’s reliance on submarine cables and digital networks exposes it to security risks. Protecting these key infrastructures from cyberattacks or sabotage is critical to guaranteeing

consistent data flows and connections. [Geopolitical tensions](#) compound these dangers, with hostile parties potentially targeting infrastructure as part of larger regional wars. Furthermore, maritime security remains a problem for IMEC’s shipping routes that cross controversial waterways such as the Strait of Hormuz.

- *Competition from other connectivity initiatives:* IMEC faces significant competition from existing connectivity networks, notably the BRI, which has already established strong footholds in key locations for IMEC’s success. China, for example, uses [its state-owned shipping giant](#) Cosco to dominate major ports like Piraeus in Greece. This entrenched power challenges efforts to establish IMEC as a viable alternative. Furthermore, several Gulf nations, such as Qatar, urge for [collaboration with both BRI and IMEC](#) rather than selecting between the two. This dual involvement model may weaken IMEC’s influence if stakeholders fail to articulate a united vision.
- *Lack of operational frameworks:* Despite its lofty ambitions, IMEC remains mostly conceptual, nearly two years after its debut at the G20 Summit in 2023. [Practical initiatives](#), such as holding mandated meetings to implement action plans, have been delayed. Without specific operational procedures and project timetables, IMEC risks being viewed as a political statement rather than an actionable undertaking. The [EU’s Global Gateway has received similar criticism](#) for its implementation due to institutional resistance and a lack of foreign policy experience within the European Commission.
- *Public perception and political will:* Public perception is critical in determining the success of connectivity



programs such as the IMEC and the Global Gateway. The exclusion of certain countries from IMEC has already provoked criticisms. Furthermore, persistent conflicts such as Israel's war on Palestine [diminish public support for projects](#) that include collaboration with Israel. There is little effort put towards building political will among participating countries, involving honest communication about the benefits of integration while addressing local concerns over inclusion and equal outcomes.

4. **Policy Recommendations:**

To fully achieve IMEC and the Global Gateway's potential for encouraging global connectedness and regional stability, proactive and comprehensive policy measures must be implemented. These ideas aim to address existing difficulties, improve synergies, and position IMEC as a catalyst for long-term economic and geopolitical collaboration in the Gulf area and beyond.

- *Strengthening Geopolitical Alignment and Inclusivity:* IMEC's success is dependent on geopolitical stability and inclusivity. This is why it is critical to involve all key regional parties, including those now excluded from the framework. This involves promoting discussions with countries such as Egypt, Oman, and Turkey, which are critical for regional stability and connectivity. The EU can use its diplomatic channels to encourage such initiatives, making IMEC a more inclusive and sustainable endeavor. Furthermore, linking IMEC with larger regional peace initiatives can help to [strengthen its legitimacy and stability](#).

In this context, the Middle East peace process and the [Global Alliance](#) for implementing the Two-State Solution provide a valuable framework for coordinated diplomatic activity. Aligning IMEC's development with the objectives and activities of this Global Alliance may strengthen the corridor's role in supporting peace, stability, and inclusive cooperation in the region.

- *Harmonizing Regulatory Frameworks:* Regulatory harmonization is critical for facilitating trade and infrastructure development. The EU can play an important role in regulatory alignment by sharing its knowledge in customs procedures, transportation standards, and digital governance across member countries. This would minimize bureaucratic barriers and allow for smoother operations along the corridor. Furthermore, establishing a single tariff regime and synchronized transportation infrastructure will be important for [attaining economic coherence among IMEC participants](#).
- *Enhancing Financial Integration and Investment:* Securing large funding commitments is critical for IMEC's infrastructure initiatives. The EU can set aside a portion of its Global Gateway financing to support IMEC programs, leveraging public-private partnerships to raise additional funds. This would not only improve IMEC's financial viability but would also be consistent with the EU's overall objective of fostering sustainable infrastructure development around the world. Furthermore, diversifying finance sources by involving Gulf countries and other regional investors can [help to lessen financial risks connected with geopolitical instability](#).
- *Addressing Security Concerns:* Critical infrastructure, such as submarine cables



and digital networks, must be protected at all costs. To protect these assets, the EU and participating nations should invest in modern security technologies and strengthen maritime security cooperation. This includes working with regional security efforts like the EU's Naval Force ASPIDES to [ensure the corridor's resilience against potential attacks](#).

- *Promoting Digital and Energy Connectivity:* IMEC provides chances for digital and energy connectivity, which can help promote economic growth and innovation. The EU can help IMEC create high-speed data pipelines and sustainable energy grids that match with its Global Gateway goals. This includes investing in green hydrogen infrastructure, which can help India and the Gulf Cooperation Council countries [realize their renewable energy production potential](#). Furthermore, encouraging fintech collaboration and safe data interchange will improve the corridor's digital connectedness, allowing for the export of IT services from India to Europe and West Asia.
- *Establishing Operational Frameworks and Milestones:* To achieve progress, IMEC's development requires clear operational frameworks and short-term targets. This includes establishing realistic project timeframes and constantly monitoring progress. The EU can coordinate by selecting a high-level IMEC coordinator to establish a consistent European strategy and foster conversation among varied parties.

In this context, GCC countries, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, can serve as inter-regional hubs. GCC countries' strategic location between Asia, Europe, and Africa has propelled them to the forefront of global networking. They have been actively investing in

infrastructure projects, such as underwater cables and renewable energy facilities, which are consistent with the goals of both IMEC and Global Gateway. The UAE and Saudi Arabia see IMEC not as a threat to China's BRI, but as an opportunity to diversify their economies and boost their positions as interregional connectivity hubs. This pragmatic strategy enables them to achieve economic and geopolitical objectives through diverse relationships.

Moreover, as GCC countries are committed to economic diversification, IMEC provides them with a platform to grow their participation in global trade and energy transition. For example, [Saudi Arabia has pledged \\$20 billion to IMEC](#), demonstrating its strategic interest in the corridor. The [UAE and Saudi Arabia are also expected to play key roles](#) in green hydrogen production and transportation, which is consistent with the EU's Global Gateway goals of fostering sustainable infrastructure. The investing opportunities IMEC could bring about to GCC countries, especially in green hydrogen infrastructure, can help these countries improve their position in the global energy market while also contributing to climate action.

Furthermore, the GCC countries' participation in IMEC strengthens their geopolitical relevance as intermediaries between East and West. This strategic orientation enables them to engage with both the EU and other global powers, such as China and the United States, while maintaining a balance that serves their national interests. The GCC countries' participation in IMEC demonstrates their commitment to regional stability and economic integration, which are critical for creating a favorable climate for large-scale infrastructure projects. Such a large-scale collaboration with diverse partners would help GCC countries negotiate complicated geopolitical dynamics



while pursuing their economic and strategic goals.

Despite this, GCC countries still face barriers to properly harnessing IMEC. These include navigating regional geopolitical conflicts, managing the risks involved with large-scale infrastructure investments, and ensuring that IMEC strengthens existing partnerships with global actors like China. However, these issues provide opportunities for GCC countries to strengthen their political and economic influence by encouraging conversation and cooperation among the various parties involved in IMEC.

This is why, moving forward, GCC countries should prioritize strengthening partnerships with European countries and other IMEC participants to ensure that their interests are aligned with the corridor's development. This involves campaigning for more inclusive frameworks that serve both regional security and economic demands. This allows GCC countries to reap the most benefits from IMEC while also contributing to regional stability and global connectivity.

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