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Silk Road or Spice Route? The Gulf's Rising Connectivity with

Asia, Africa, and Europe

1. Directors

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2. Abstract

In summer 2023, China's well-established Belt-and-Road Initiative (BRI, colloquially known as "Silk Road"), got a new sister: the India–Middle East–Europe Corridor (IMEC, aka "Spice Route"). Spanning over 4,800 kilometres, this new trade route shall connect India and Europe via the Middle East through new and upgraded rail links, electricity grids, a hydrogen pipeline and high-speed data transmissions. It is meant to develop new cooperation opportunities, but also to counter China's rising influence in Africa, Asia and Europe. This happens with the support of the US which is trying to implement its new geo-strategic vision for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) also through this new trade corridor, in addition to its very own I2U2 initiative (India, Israel, UAE, USA). At its core, the Spice Route shall bring Saudi Arabia and the UAE as leading Gulf economies closer to the West and foster their geopolitical ambitions. Eventually, European relations with India shall be strengthened, and, not least, cooperation between Israel and its Arab neighbours shall be furthered – an endeavour which however received serious setbacks since the renewed outbreak of war between Israel and Hamas in October 2023.

3. Context

IMEC's announcement during the G20 summit in New Delhi marked a significant step in the cooperation between its participating countries. Intended cooperation between France, Germany, India, Israel, Italy, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), the United States (US) and not least, the European Union (EU), shall happen on multiple fronts such as economic integration, trade, and investment. In short, IMEC aims to establish a more efficient and cost-effective trade route connecting Asia and Europe via the Middle East to enhance global connectivity and geopolitical stability. It also seeks to constitute a geopolitical counterweight to China's and Russia's connectivity aspirations and strengthen US and EU global and regional leadership.

The Spice Route faces a number of hurdles, though. First, it aims to establish collaboration between countries with very different systems, interests, and tensions. The current war between Israel and Hamas has drastically shown once more how fragile peace and cooperation in the MENA region are, and it is hard to imagine an efficient rail link between Dubai and Haifa across the Arabian Peninsula under these conditions. Second, adjacent countries resist this plan. At present, most trade between Asia and Europe passes through Egypt's iconic Suez Canal. The prospects of having parallel rail connections have raised major concerns in Cairo, since IMEC would potentially not only reduce Egypt's transit revenues, but might also lower its strategic importance. For Egypt, as well as the other invited countries Argentina, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia and UAE, it will thus be of greatest relevance if they will join the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) bloc on January 1, 2024, after the invitation was pledged in summer 2023. BRICS's envisaged enlargement connects to a third concern about IMEC: the contingency of intensified confrontation with China. A number of seaports along the Pacific and Atlantic coast are under Chinese management, including seaports in Europe and Beijing, will most likely not accept having its massive BRI investments endangered by unwanted competition.

Not least, critics question whether there would be enough trade volume to feed both, Spice Route and Silk Road, with relevant freight volumes to have both networks running at sufficient operational capacity in parallel, especially in times of economic crisis. Given the latest shortage in freight capacities with its major interruptions of global trade chains, this criticism seems nevertheless of less relevance under the current conditions.

Those concerns notwithstanding, IMEC's sheer existence offers new opportunities for Gulf countries to deepen and broaden their international connections, trade activities, and eventual growth and importance. From their perspective, there is much to win and little to lose.

4. Focus/objectives

In this workshop, we intend to analyse the multitude of interconnectivity links running from Asia to Africa and Europe (and vice versa) with the Gulf at their geographic center, and critically discuss their potential impacts on the region's global positioning, both economically and politically. Specific focus will be laid on expected implications for the Gulf's future internal power balances between Iran, Israel, and Saudi Arabia as main proponents, surrounded and influenced by Egypt, Türkiye, Iraq, China, India, Pakistan, the EU, and the US in concentric, neighbourly circles. For this broad and at the same time deep analysis, we will consider aspects of economics, politics, geostrategic positioning, regional balances, and social implications. In detail, welcomed papers should discuss one or several of the following topics (but could also go beyond these suggested issues):

Economics

- Can IMEC grow into a viable alternative to China's BRI, and if so, what does this mean for economic development in the Gulf region and beyond?

- How does the new Spice Route increase connectivity and cooperation in the region?
- Silk Road, Spice Route, I2U2, expanded BRICS: Will they eventually be filled with life, or will they remain fora of rather tenuous cooperation that might be activated under certain circumstances or in specific sectors only?
- Can the Spice Route with its focus on hydrogen be seen as a lucrative part of global energy transition, and if so, what will it mean for the Gulf?

Regional leadership

- Will the Gulf continue to grow into a leading global hub between Africa, Asia and Europe, and would its growing relevance push North African countries, including Egypt, further to the periphery?
- Will Gulf countries be united in their future cooperation strategies with Asia, Africa and Europe, and thus use the rising possibilities through Silk Road, Spice Route, BRICS and I2U2 in a strategic, flexible way, or might individual preferences challenge the internal coherence of the Gulf Cooperation Council?

Geostrategic positioning

- Will IMEC succeed in better aligning the Gulf with the West, and not less with India?
- Will IMEC strengthen the Gulf position at the center of geopolitical trade, transport, and global cohabitation?
- What will the new route mean for US efforts to contain China?

Regional balances

- Impact on Saudi-UAE rivalry about regional leadership
- Effects on the anticipated rapprochement between Israel and the Gulf
- Will the current war between Israel and Hamas hamper the newly planned IMEC trade link?

Social implications

- How can IMEC bridge the gap between people and civilizations across continents?
- How can IMEC help participating states achieve their citizens' overall well-being? Which economic and political improvements can be expected?
- To what extent would IMEC foster economic activities across the Arabian Peninsula and thus create jobs which eventually might further stimulate international labour migration, both regular and irregular?

5. Papers focus/topics

Papers discussing any aspect related to the interconnectivity links between the Gulf, Asia, Africa and Europe (as outlined above) will be considered suitable for participation. In particular, we are interested in the following aspects:

Trade, politics and geostrategic positioning

- Economic, political and social impact of the growing number of global connectivity links between Asia, Africa and Europe meeting in the Gulf, and the Gulf's contributions to these networks
- India as the Gulf's and Europe's new central partner in Asia
- The European Union as rising or declining cooperation partner for Asia, Africa and the Gulf?
- Possible difficulties such as interstate tension, geopolitical rivalries and security threats

- How will the Israel-Hamas war (raging since October 2023) likely alter the dynamics in the region and rekindle traditional regional conflict, affecting the viability of this project?
- The positions of neighbouring countries such as Egypt, Iran and Türkiye
- China's reactions

Specifically on IMEC

- Practical challenges such as funding, creation and handling
- Which perspectives does IMEC offer for the Gulf's export and import activities, including in its oil and gas sector?
- IMEC's relations with comparable projects, i.e. competing corridors and trade routes of similar scopes, including Russia's proposed "North-South Transport Corridor"

Papers should focus on one of the topics indicated in this section, keeping in mind the indications in sections 4, 6, and 7.

6. Paper structure, referencing, and format

The workshop directors work within the guidelines for publication issued by the GRM. Papers shall follow the underlying GRM guidelines in regard to style and content; detected plagiarism will lead to disqualification, while the use of LLM software (such as ChatGPT) will be permitted under specific limitations and conditions (provided the permission of the eventual publisher of the planned edited volume, see following section). GRM adheres to [Cambridge University Press guidelines on AI Contributions to Research Content](#). Further details concerning the papers accepted for this workshop will be elaborated upon acceptance in accordance with the GRM organisers.

Authors should also adhere to the [GRM Paper Guidelines](#).

Participants who do not submit a completed paper by the 31 May 2024 deadline or whose submitted paper does not meet the requirements will be disinvented by GRC.

7. Publication plans

The workshop directors intend to produce an edited volume containing the best, ideally all, contributions from this workshop. Depending on the eventual quality of the papers, the book shall be published primarily in Springer Publishers' Gulf Series. The advantage here will be an expected smooth and timely publication procedure and relative quick review turnarounds of submitted contributions. Once all workshop participants and topics are confirmed, we will reach out to Springer with the comprehensive edited volume proposal. In order to ensure broadest accessibility, we will look for open access funding options and, in a second step, apply for translation funds of the book into Arabic (after formal approval by the publisher). If the quality of papers is sufficiently high, we aspire to also contact some of the leading University Presses to inquire whether the possibility for publication exists with them.

Papers that may not be publishable in the edited volume will still be reviewed by the directors and considered for individual publication in either a peer-reviewed journal or as a GRM paper. Directors will make reasonable efforts to ensure that all accepted papers are published in one of these three forms.

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9. Directors' bio notes

Riham Bahi is Associate Professor of international relations at the Faculty of Economics and Political Science, Cairo University. She earned her Ph.D. in International and Public Affairs from Northeastern University in Boston, where she also received her MA in International Relations. Currently, she is a visiting professor at the Institute of Arab Research and Studies (ALESCO, Arab League). She is a member of the Future Studies and Risk Management Council at the Egyptian Academy of Scientific Research and Technology. She serves as Associate Editor for *Review of Economics and Political Science*. She served as the academic coordinator of the Euro-Mediterranean Studies program at Cairo University 2017-2021. In parallel, she was a visiting professor at the American University in Cairo (2009-2022), a visiting scholar at the Center for Middle Eastern and North African Politics at Freie Universität Berlin (November 2017), and a visiting professor at the Institute of the Middle and Far East, Jagiellonian University, Kraków, Poland (Fall 2018 and Spring 2023). She is a DAAD trainer contributing to skills enhancement among Egyptian academics. She has developed and implemented programs for strengthening the capacity of doctoral students in dissertation research and writing in partnership with DAAD Kairo Akademie, Freie Universität Berlin, Ford Foundation and the Population Council in Cairo. She worked as the academic coordinator for AMIDEAST Education Abroad Program (2010-2012).

Bahi has received many awards and honors, including a Fulbright Pre-Doctoral award and Cairo University's International Publishing Award in 2017, 2018, 2019 and 2021.

Her research interests include international relations and global governance, gender studies, Egypt and U.S. foreign policies, Iran-Gulf relations and Euro-Mediterranean relations.

Jan Claudius Völkel (Dr. rer pol. Universität Freiburg) is a DAAD Seconded Professor in German Studies and International Relations at the School of Political Studies (SPS) and Graduate School of Public and International Affairs (GSPIA), University of Ottawa, Canada. Before, he was Academic Dean at the Institute for the International Education of Studies (IES) in Freiburg and held positions at Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Cairo University, the European University Institute Florence, Universität Salzburg and Universität Freiburg. His work focuses on Euro-Mediterranean relations, the contemporary Middle East and North Africa, and German/European politics. Since 2008, Jan is the MENA regional coordinator at the Transformation Index of Bertelsmann-Stiftung (BTI). He was awarded the European Union's prestigious Marie Skłodowska-Curie Fellowship in 2017 and is an alumnus of the Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA).