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The New Geopolitical Scramble for Corridors

Velina Tchakarova

The geopolitical landscape in winter 2024-2025 is marked by significant transformation, uncertainty, and fierce competition for influence. The geopolitical hotspots of this new contest are most visible in the regions that bridge Europe and Asia—what the editors of *Baku Dialogues* call the “Silk Road region.” Central to this dynamic is the growing intersection of interests between major regional players against the backdrop of a Cold War 2.0, putting the West against what I was the first to call the “DragonBear” alliance of China and Russia.

These corridors are not just infrastructural undertakings; they are the arteries of global power, trade, and connectivity,

reflecting deeper geopolitical ambitions and contestations. This extensive analysis elaborates on today’s most significant connectivity projects, exploring their strategic implications and the new power dynamics they are fostering.

In the traditional sense, empires have always relied on transport and trade corridors to project power and expand influence. From the ancient Silk Roads to the West’s colonial sea routes, the ability to control the flow of goods and resources has often equated to geopolitical dominance. Today, this principle remains unchanged, though the scale and stakes have reached unprecedented levels.

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At the Heart of the Geopolitical Game

The modern scramble for corridors is not just about logistics: it is also about the reconfiguration of global power projection in an era of heightened competition. When China unveiled its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, many dismissed it as an overhyped marketing exercise. But a decade later, the Initiative has proven to be a strategic blueprint for global connectivity.

By weaving together terrestrial and maritime networks, China has sought to channel its industrial overcapacity outward while cementing its role as the world’s manufacturing hub. This massive undertaking has catalyzed a global race, with competing countries now seeking to establish their own corridors to counterbalance Beijing’s expanding influence.

Each of the corridors I examine in this article represents a story of overlapping ambitions, conflicting priorities, and the relentless push for influence.

One of the most notable developments is the operationalization of the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), connecting Russia, Iran, and India. This corridor, while often overshadowed by BRI, is strategically significant, offering a multimodal route that bypasses the Suez Canal. As Western sanctions have isolated Russia, Moscow has doubled down on its partnership with Tehran and New Delhi, leveraging the INSTC to bolster trade and reduce reliance on European markets.

In a parallel development, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), unveiled with much fanfare at G20 summit in 2023, promises to challenge China’s dominance in the connectivity arena with the help of the United States and EU. By linking India with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states and extending to the European continent, this corridor aims to redefine trade routes while fostering deeper cooperation between democracies and key Gulf economies.

Yet even as IMEC gains traction, Türkiye has entered the fray with its

Among the myriad challenges and opportunities shaping the global order, one phenomenon stands out as a critical driver of change: the scramble for corridors.

Türkiye-Qatar-Iraq corridor, offering an alternative path that underscores Ankara's ambitions to reclaim its historical role as a bridge between East and West. Not to be outdone, the European Union has responded to China's BRI with its Global Gateway initiative, a comprehensive strategy to fund sustainable infrastructure projects worldwide. While ambitious in scope, the initiative faces significant challenges in matching the speed, scale, and scope of Chinese investments, raising questions about the EU's capacity to shape the connectivity landscape in a fragmented global order.

Meanwhile, the heretofore American response to BRI has been multifaceted, focusing on countering China's growing global influence by promoting alternative infrastructure and development projects. Under the Biden Administration, the U.S. has emphasized the importance of transparency, sustainability, and adherence to international standards in infrastructure projects, positioning its initiatives like the Build Back Better World (B3W) and the India-

The corridors of today will define the power structures of tomorrow. For smaller states caught in this web, the challenge lies in leveraging their strategic geography without succumbing to the pressures of great power rivalries.

Israel-UAE-U.S. Group (I2U2) partnership as alternatives to BRI. These efforts aimed to offer infrastructure investments to the countries in the Global South that are more aligned with the Western conception of democratic values, environmental sustainability, and fair economic practices, while also reducing the risks of debt dependency that can result from Chinese investments. Additionally, the U.S. has worked through alliances like the G7 to provide a collective response to China's economic outreach.

The foregoing is taking place against the background of a geopolitical chessboard that is shifting further north. The Northern Sea Route (NSR), facilitated by the melting Arctic ice, has emerged as a game-changer for transport between China and Russia. This development has taken on added urgency in light of recent crises in the Red Sea, which have disrupted trade flows through the Suez Canal. By opening a faster route between Asia and Europe, the NSR could alter the dynamics of global trade, further isolating the

European Union and its member states while strengthening the Sino-Russian axis.

In South Asia, the revival of the Vladivostok-Chennai corridor signals a deepening alignment between India and Russia. With trade between the two nations surging, this corridor represents a critical link for energy and resource flows, underscoring the geopolitical recalibration taking place in that region. At the same time, these developments are reshaping the geopolitical landscape of the South Caucasus, where Azerbaijan finds itself at the epicenter of competing interests. For Azerbaijan, the stakes could not be higher. Positioned at the crossroads of BRI, the INSTC, and EU-conceived connectivity networks, the country's strategic importance is undeniable. Yet, this prominence brings both opportunities and vulnerabilities. As larger powers vie for influence, smaller countries like Azerbaijan must navigate a complex web of alliances, ensuring their sovereignty while capitalizing on their pivotal location.

In short, the new geopolitical scramble for corridors is about much more than trade routes or infrastructure projects. It is a contest over the very fabric of the global order—a competition to shape the flows of goods, energy, and ideas in

an increasingly polarized world. As this contest unfolds, the corridors of today will define the power structures of tomorrow. For smaller states caught in this web, the challenge lies in leveraging their strategic geography without succumbing to the pressures of great power rivalries.

In this evolving narrative, corridors are not just paths of connectivity but battlegrounds of influence. They reflect the shifting tectonics of global power, where old alliances are tested, new partnerships are forged, and the lines of competition are redrawn. The year 2025 will undoubtedly bring new uncertainties and unknowns, but one thing is certain: the race for corridors will remain at the heart of the geopolitical game.

The Importance of Corridors

The concept of corridors has long been central to the practice of geopolitics. Empires throughout history have used trade and transport routes to project power, integrate territories, and secure economic dominance. The Silk Roads, both overland and maritime, were instrumental in connecting civilizations, facilitating trade, and spreading influence

across continents. The nineteenth century's Great Game between Britain and Russia exemplified how control over routes and regions could shape the balance of power.

Today, corridors represent much more than logistical convenience. In an era of great power competition, they have become tools for economic statecraft, mechanisms of influence, and symbols of strategic alignment. Their development is inextricably linked to global trends such as the rise of multipolarity, the rivalry between the United States and China, and the emergence of new regional powers. The current competition for corridors underscores what I have identified in detail elsewhere as the growing bifurcation of the global system into competing blocs, particularly between the West and the DragonBear alliance of China and Russia.

China's Geopolitical Masterstroke

Launched in 2013, BRI is the most ambitious connectivity project in modern history, with an estimated \$1 trillion in investments spanning Asia, Africa, Europe, and beyond. At its core, BRI seeks to establish a vast network of railways, highways, ports, and pipelines to

reshape global trade patterns and stimulate economic integration. It also serves as a strategic tool for Beijing to address China's domestic challenges such as industrial overcapacity while strengthening its geopolitical leverage. By financing large-scale infrastructure projects, China enhances its global influence, particularly in developing regions, where it fosters economic dependencies that align countries with Beijing's strategic vision. BRI also secures critical trade routes and energy corridors, ensuring resilience in global supply chains.

A critical element of BRI's terrestrial connectivity is China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, which has emerged as the geopolitical and logistical heart of Beijing's grand strategy. Located at China's western frontier, Xinjiang shares borders with eight countries, including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, and Russia. This unique, strategic positioning transforms the Autonomous Region into a key gateway for China's overland corridors, linking it directly with Central Asia, and, from there, with the South Caucasus, the Middle East (including the Levant and Anatolia), and the European continent. Historically significant as part of the ancient Silk Road, Xinjiang now serves as the linchpin for multiple BRI corridors, reinforcing

China's economic and strategic influence across the Eurasian continent.

The Northern Corridor, one of BRI's critical routes, connects China to the EU via Russia. Though disrupted by the Russia-Ukraine war, this corridor has regained importance due to recent geopolitical crises, such as disruptions in the Red Sea, which have forced stakeholders to seek reliable overland alternatives.

Meanwhile, the Middle Corridor, also known as the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, connects China to the EU via Central Asia, the Caspian Sea into the South Caucasus, and Türkiye. This corridor has gained prominence due to its EBRD- and World Bank-projected shorter travel time, improved transit efficiency, and lower transit cost in comparison with the northern route, as well as its ability to bypass Russia (and Iran), with Kazakhstan alone investing heavily to expand its capacity to 500,000 containers annually. For its part, Azerbaijan (without which the Middle Corridor route cannot arguably function at all) has taken a number of important steps to finance the expansion of the capacity of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway (BTK, also known as the "Iron Silk Road"), the parallel highway route,

the Port of Baku (its key connectivity node), and adjacent Alat Free Economic Zone (AFEZ).

Another major component is the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), valued at \$62 billion, which links Xinjiang to Pakistan's Gwadar Port on the Arabian Sea. CPEC not only facilitates China's direct access to the Indian Ocean, bypassing the vulnerable Strait of Malacca, but also strengthens trade connectivity with the Middle East and Africa. Similarly, the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) connects China's Yunnan province to Myanmar's Kyaukpyu Port on the Bay of Bengal, providing another direct route to the Indian Ocean and further enhancing China's access to South Asian markets. Complementing these overland routes is the Maritime Silk Road, which connects China to Southeast Asia, South Asia, Africa, and the European continent through extensive port developments, bolstering China's trade links across vital sea lanes.

The Belt and Road Initiative is not merely an economic program but a cornerstone of China's broader geopolitical strategy. It enhances China's energy security by securing access to critical resources through pipelines in Central Asia

and projects in the South Caucasus (e.g., Georgia’s first deep-sea port at Anaklia will be built by a Chinese-led consortium) and Africa while reducing dependence on vulnerable maritime chokepoints.

Moreover, BRI extends China’s influence into the technological realm through the Digital Silk Road, which promotes Chinese telecommunications infrastructure, satellite systems, and fintech solutions in emerging markets. This expansion into the digital domain enables China to shape technological standards globally and extend its soft power.

The success of BRI has triggered counter-initiatives by rival powers. At the June 2021 G7 Summit, the United States launched its B3W initiative, focusing on transparency and sustainability in infrastructure financing. Similarly, the EU’s Global Gateway Initiative emphasizes values-based, green, and sustainable projects as an alternative to China’s BRI. India and Japan’s Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) seeks to counterbalance China’s influence, particularly in the Indian Ocean and Africa. Even regional players like Russia and Türkiye navigate complex relationships with

The success of BRI has triggered counter-initiatives by rival powers.

BRI. Russia, for instance, collaborates with China on the Northern Sea Route (NSR, also known as the “Polar Silk Road”) while competing for influence in Central Asia, a region where China’s dominance has grown. Türkiye’s conception of the Middle Corridor overlaps with BRI (and Global Gateway) whilst reflecting Ankara’s desire to carve an independent role in East-West connectivity.

The geopolitical implications of BRI extend into maritime security, where China’s investments in ports like Gwadar, Hambantota, and Djibouti strengthen its growing naval presence in key maritime regions. This has raised concerns among regional and global powers (especially Western ones) about the potential militarization of BRI infrastructure. China’s dual-use projects, which serve both civilian and military purposes, illustrate the initiative’s broader strategic ambitions.

Furthermore, China is leveraging BRI to reshape global governance by promoting its vision of multilateralism through platforms like the Belt and Road Forum, advocating for norms that align with its national interests.

Despite its achievements, BRI faces significant challenges, including debt sustainability, environmental concerns, and geopolitical resistance. Some host countries (and Western powers: directly and through IFIs under their control) have expressed concerns over unsustainable debt burdens, local environmental degradation, and the displacement of communities due

to large-scale infrastructure projects. These issues have tarnished China’s image in some theaters, providing ammunition for critics of the initiative. Nevertheless, BRI has shown resilience, adapting to global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and disruptions in global supply chains by prioritizing regional projects like the China-Laos Railway.

Table 1: China’s BRI and Key Corridors

Corridor Name	Key Routes	Capacity	Strategic Objectives	Challenges
Northern Corridor (China-Russia)	China to Europe via Russia	Over 100 million tons cargo capacity	Bypass sanctions and maintain trade with Europe	Geopolitical tensions (Russia-Ukraine war)
Middle Corridor (Trans-Caspian International Transport Route)	China to Europe via Central Asia, the South Caucasus, and Türkiye	Over 3.4 million tons cargo capacity, 34,600 TEUs	Shorter route to Europe, reduce reliance on Russian corridors	Infrastructure development and political stability
China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)	China (Xinjiang) to Gwadar Port (Pakistan)	Valued at \$62 billion	Access to Arabian Sea, bypass Strait of Malacca	Security concerns and debt sustainability
China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC)	China (Yunnan) to Kyaukpyu Port (Myanmar)	N/A - still under	Access to Indian Ocean, strengthen ties with Myanmar	Political instability in Myanmar
Maritime Silk Road	China to Southeast Asia, South Asia, Africa, and Europe via sea	Nearly 250 million TEUs	Expand maritime trade links, enhance port connectivity	Environmental concerns and maritime security

Sources: Atlantic Council, Caspian News, Brookings, and Port Technology.

Arctic Game-Changer

The Northern Sea Route (NSR, also known as the “Polar Silk Road”) represents a paradigm shift in global shipping and geopolitics, offering a shorter, faster alternative to traditional maritime routes like the Suez Canal. By reducing transit times between Asia and Europe by 30 to 40 percent, the NSR is reshaping trade dynamics, making it particularly attractive for countries heavily invested in maintaining robust supply chains.

A sea voyage between St. Petersburg and Shanghai via NSR is approximately 20 days shorter than the Suez Canal route, making it an attractive proposition for maritime global trade. Beyond economic efficiency, NSR also mitigates geopolitical risks by bypassing vulnerable chokepoints like the Strait of Malacca and the Red Sea, regions frequently disrupted by piracy or political instability.

Spearheaded by the DragonBear strategic partnership between China and Russia, NSR is a cornerstone of their broader Arctic ambitions. For Russia, NSR reinforces its dominance in the Arctic region, bolstering its geopolitical clout and providing new economic lifelines amid Western sanctions.

Simultaneously, China has embedded the NSR into its Polar Silk Road, a key extension of BRI, which seeks to expand Beijing’s influence through Arctic trade routes and resource access.

The strategic significance of NSR is further amplified by the Arctic’s untapped natural resources, particularly oil and gas, which present lucrative opportunities for energy exploration and export. Russian energy giants, such as Novatek, have already utilized NSR to ship liquefied natural gas (LNG) to Asian markets, bypassing Western-dominated maritime routes. This diversification has strengthened Russia’s economic ties with non-Western partners, especially China and India.

However, leveraging NSR is not without challenges. Harsh Arctic conditions necessitate advanced infrastructure, including nuclear-powered icebreakers and robust search-and-rescue systems, all of which require significant investment. Moreover, the region’s fragile environment raises concerns about the ecological consequences of increased shipping and resource extraction. Geopolitical tensions, particularly with Western countries, further complicate NSR’s development, transforming the Arctic into a contested zone of strategic rivalry.

The Northern Sea Route has emerged as a geopolitical and economic game-changer, firmly placing the Arctic at the center of global competition. Linking European regions to Asian markets via the Arctic Ocean and the Bering Strait, NSR offers a transformative alternative to traditional maritime routes like the Suez Canal. For the DragonBear alliance, it represents far more than a logistical convenience; it is a strategic tool to challenge Western dominance in trade and transport routes. Recent disruptions in the Red Sea and broader Western decoupling efforts have accelerated their compatible Arctic ambitions, reinforcing NSR’s role as a cornerstone of the emerging Polar Silk Road.

Recent developments have underscored the deepening cooperation between China and Russia in developing the NSR. In 2024, President Vladimir Putin and President Xi Jinping announced the establishment of a joint commission to oversee the route’s development. This commission will focus on infrastructure expansion, regulatory harmonization, and investments to ensure the route’s reliability and year-round accessibility. Rosatom, Russia’s state nuclear corporation, is leading efforts to bolster its nuclear icebreaker fleet, which is essential for Arctic navigation.

Strong demand for Russian energy exports to China has further propelled the route’s viability. In 2023, cargo transit along the NSR reached record levels, with over 33 million tonnes shipped, driven largely by liquefied natural gas (LNG) exports and oil shipments facilitated by advanced icebreaking technologies. A significant milestone was reached in September 2024 when a Panamax-class container ship, *Flying Fish 1*, completed its Arctic transit from St. Petersburg to China in just three weeks, demonstrating NSR’s commercial potential for large-scale shipping.

Both China and Russia have distinct yet complementary objectives in leveraging NSR. For China, the route provides an “entry ticket” to the Arctic, a region it describes as part of its Polar Silk Road, securing direct access to Arctic resources while expanding its influence in global trade (China already calls itself a “Near-Arctic State”). For Russia, the NSR supports its efforts to link Arctic resource extraction to export markets in Asia, ensuring economic resilience amid Western sanctions. Russia has also explored delivering energy resources such as oil, coal, and LNG to India via NSR, further diversifying its trade routes while strengthening its growing partnership with New Delhi.

The geopolitical implications of NSR are profound. The route provides a strategic counterweight to Western-dominated maritime routes in the Indo-Pacific and Red Sea regions. For Russia, Arctic militarization is a key priority, evidenced by its investment in military bases, radar stations, and icebreakers to project power across the region. China, meanwhile, has expanded its Arctic presence under the guise of scientific research, raising concerns about dual-use infrastructure with military applications. The exclusion of Russia from Arctic governance forums, such as the Arctic Council, has reinforced its reliance on China as a primary partner. This dynamic solidifies the DragonBear alliance and enables China to extend its influence into the Arctic, challenging Western dominance.

For Europe and the West in general, the rise of NSR presents both challenges and opportunities. On the one hand, the route offers access to Arctic resources and alternative energy supplies from Russia. On the other hand, the EU must contend with China and Russia's growing dominance in Arctic shipping, which could undermine its influence. To maintain competitiveness, the EU must accelerate investments in alternative trade corridors, such as IMEC and the Three Seas Initiative (3SI), while

fostering greater collaboration with like-minded partners.

Whatever other motives may be at play with the recent revival of interest in Greenland by the Trump Administration, one is attributable to growing American concerns that the increasing vulnerabilities to the West in the Arctic theater cannot be addressed without some sort of enhanced U.S. security umbrella. It appears increasingly likely that Trump 2.0 will seek to bring the Panama Canal (another major global choke point) and Greenland under U.S. control for strategic purposes in order to confront the DragonBear in the Arctic and its immediate vicinity.

IMEC

The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), unveiled at the G20 Summit in September 2023, is a landmark initiative aimed at strengthening economic, trade, and infrastructural connectivity between India, the GCC states (Saudi Arabia and the UAE), Israel, and the European continent. By integrating rail, sea, and digital infrastructure, IMEC seeks to transform regional trade dynamics, fostering economic cooperation, and providing a strategic alternative to BRI.

The corridor consists of two key segments: an eastern route connecting India to the Arabian Gulf via the UAE and Saudi Arabia, and a northern route linking the Middle East to the European continent through Jordan, Israel, and Greece.

At its core, IMEC has been shaped by several strategic motivations. From an economic perspective, it creates opportunities to link some of the world's fastest-growing economies—particularly India and the GCC states—with the EU market, facilitating smoother trade flows and reducing transit times. By enhancing connectivity across continents, IMEC not only bolsters supply chains but also positions GCC states as critical nodes in global trade infrastructure. The corridor also serves strategic geopolitical objectives, particularly for the United States and its partners, as it offers a transparent and sustainable alternative to China's BRI, which has faced increasing criticism for its debt-driven projects and lack of transparency.

The European Union plays a central role in IMEC, aligning the corridor with its broader Global Gateway Initiative, which prioritizes sustainable, green, and digital infrastructure development. For the EU, IMEC represents an opportunity to strengthen its economic

ties with South Asia and the Middle East while supporting its own strategic goals of diversifying trade routes and reducing energy dependencies. The corridor also reflects growing alignment between India, the U.S., and the EU in counterbalancing China's influence in Central Asia and the South Caucasus, reinforcing geopolitical partnerships across regions.

IMEC also builds on diplomatic breakthroughs like the Abraham Accords and I2U2. The corridor is poised to strengthen ties between key Arab states and Israel, enhance regional stability, and promote economic cooperation. Diplomatic milestones, such as the rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran and the normalization of relations between Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, provide a conducive environment for IMEC to flourish.

By fostering economic interdependence, IMEC has the potential to transform the historically volatile Middle East into a zone of peace and prosperity. Furthermore, IMEC promises to stabilize trade routes, enabling seamless logistics through established ports, rail networks, and financial systems in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the EU. It will reduce transaction costs, create additional job opportunities,

and stimulate industrial development. The corridor will facilitate the movement of goods, renewable energy, and digital information, ensuring operational efficiency and strengthening supply chains. By linking Haifa Port to ports in Western and Southeastern Europe (and beyond), IMEC enhances Israel's trade accessibility, benefiting all participating states.

However, IMEC is not without its challenges. The October 2023 Hamas-Israel conflict underscored the geopolitical volatility of the Middle East, highlighting the risks of relying on such a fragile region for a transcontinental corridor. The Hamas-Israel ceasefire signals a potential turning point for the re-launch of the normalization process between Israel and Saudi Arabia, while also advancing efforts towards IMEC. The corridor also bypasses the trans-Caspian region, which limits its scope and risks alienating potential stakeholders such as Azerbaijan and Türkiye.

Thus, Ankara has responded to IMEC with its own Türkiye-Qatar-Iraq corridor (with a possible connection to Syria following Assad's ouster), a rival initiative aimed at cementing that country's influence as a critical player in East-West connectivity. Furthermore, IMEC faces stiff competition from established

initiatives like BRI. While IMEC seeks to position itself as a transparent and sustainable alternative, China's deep-rooted influence in Eurasian connectivity presents a formidable challenge. Additionally, alternative projects like the Iraq Development Road Project (IDRP), which also involves Türkiye (see below), and the proposed India-Iran-Armenia corridor further intensify competition.

The scale of IMEC's infrastructure projects entails high logistical and financial costs. Complex customs procedures, multimodal shipments, and coordination across diverse regulatory frameworks could hinder the corridor's economic viability—much more so than those affecting the Middle Corridor's optimization, for instance. Moreover, differences in environmental standards and emission regulations between participating countries, particularly the EU and India, could further complicate operations.

Despite these challenges, the GCC states—particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE—have embraced IMEC as a means to assert their growing geopolitical clout. Positioned at the crossroads of East and West, these states view the corridor as an opportunity to expand their networks with India, key European countries, and the EU

itself, while maintaining their independent foreign policies amid intensifying great power competition.

For India, IMEC is a strategic triumph, allowing it to bypass rivals like Pakistan while strengthening ties with GCC partners and securing new economic leverage against China. India's participation reflects its growing ambition to act as a bridge between the Middle East and European markets, further consolidating its position as a leading power in the emerging multipolar world order.

In conclusion, IMEC is a bold step toward reshaping global trade and connectivity in a multipolar world. It holds vast potential to deepen economic ties between South Asia, the Middle East, and the European continent while strategically countering BRI, led by rival China.

Yet its success will hinge on navigating regional geopolitical challenges, ensuring sustainable investments, and maintaining the delicate balance between competing regional powers. As GCC states assert their roles as hubs of intercontinental connectivity, IMEC represents not only an economic corridor but also a symbol of the shifting dynamics in global power and influence.

VCMC

The relaunch of the former Vladivostok-Chennai Maritime Corridor (VCMC) as a landmark initiative aims to enhance trade connectivity between India and Russia. This direct sea route connects Chennai in southeastern India to Vladivostok in Russia's Far East, significantly reducing transit times and offering a viable alternative to traditional trade routes dominated by Western influence. Originally proposed during Prime Minister Narendra Modi's 2019 visit to Vladivostok for the Eastern Economic Forum and officially announced during the July 2024 Modi-Putin summit in Moscow, the corridor symbolizes a strategic deepening of India-Russia ties. Its operationalization marks a critical step in redefining Eurasian trade dynamics.

VCMC addresses logistical challenges that have historically hindered trade between India and Russia. Previously, goods had to traverse European routes, taking over 40 days to reach their destination. VCMC slashes this transit time to just 24 days, offering a faster, more efficient, and cost-effective option. For India, this corridor aligns with its strategic objective of diversifying trade partners and reducing its

reliance on the Suez Canal, which remains a critical chokepoint. For Russia, VCMC provides a lifeline to access Asian markets amid Western sanctions and geopolitical isolation following the war on Ukraine.

Economically, VCMC has profound implications for both states. Bilateral trade between India and Russia currently exceeds \$66 billion, heavily skewed in Russia's favor due to significant energy imports by India. The corridor promises to boost trade volumes, particularly in energy, industrial goods, and fertilizers. India, a major importer of coking coal essential for steel production, stands to benefit from Russian coal, which is cheaper than Australian alternatives, as well as the cheaper Russian oil. The corridor also facilitates direct LNG shipments, enhancing India's energy security while expanding Russia's access to a stable and growing market.

Fertilizer imports further exemplify the corridor's potential. In 2022-23, India imported over 4.35 million metric tonnes of fertilizers from Russia. By reducing logistics costs, VCMC makes Russian fertilizers more competitive, even after the projected discontinuation of discounted rates. Indian exports, including textiles,

machinery, and agricultural goods like eggs, are also poised to find new opportunities in Russia's Far East.

Lastly, aligning export standards with Russian requirements could help mitigate India's trade deficit with Russia and foster more balanced economic relations.

VCMC is not just a bilateral initiative; it serves as a regional enabler. Integrating Russia's Far East into broader Asian trade networks encourages investments and infrastructure development in this underutilized region. Similarly, Chennai's port facilities are expected to receive significant upgrades, driving economic growth in Tamil Nadu and enhancing India's logistical capabilities.

Geopolitically, VCMC is a critical asset in the shifting global order. For India, it complements other connectivity initiatives like INSTC, expanding its trade footprint in the "Silk Road region." It also reinforces India's strategic autonomy, balancing its growing partnership with Russia against its relationships with Western powers. For Russia, VCMC signifies a pivot toward Asia, countering its economic isolation and leveraging its Far East and Arctic regions as gateways to major Asian markets.

However, VCMC faces challenges. Infrastructure upgrades in Vladivostok and Chennai, including enhanced rail and multimodal connectivity, are essential to maximize efficiency. Western sanctions on Russia could pose risks to Indian companies operating within the corridor, although India's neutral stance and rupee-ruble trade mechanisms help mitigate these challenges. To sustain the corridor, India must focus on increasing its exports to Russia, diversifying its trade portfolio, and improving market access. India plans to begin accepting Russia's MIR card and simultaneously introduce its own payment system, RuPay, into Russia, despite Western sanctions on the MIR system being in effect since February 2024. Additionally, the increased shipping activity raises environmental concerns, necessitating compliance with international sustainability standards.

In conclusion, the Vladivostok-Chennai Maritime Corridor reflects the evolving partnership between India and Russia, offering a faster and strategically significant trade route. For India, the corridor aligns with its "Act East" policy and aspirations to become a global trade leader. For Russia, it underscores a strategic shift towards Asia, leveraging its Far East to access new markets.

As VCMC gains momentum, the corridor has the potential to transform regional trade dynamics, foster economic growth, and redefine connectivity between Asia and the Arctic.

Türkiye's Strategic Role

As global powers compete to shape the future of international trade routes and infrastructure, Türkiye has emerged as a pivotal player in the connectivity race, leveraging its strategic location, infrastructure investments, and geopolitical acumen. Situated at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, Türkiye occupies a unique position as a vital link in east-west and north-south trade.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's vocal opposition to IMEC underscores Türkiye's ambitions to remain indispensable in this new era of geoeconomic rivalries. This exclusion has been met with strong criticism from Erdoğan, who argues that Türkiye's economic and geographic advantages make it an irreplaceable part of any connectivity plan. In response, Türkiye has prioritized IDRP, an ambitious \$17 billion initiative that aims to establish a direct route linking Gulf ports to the European continent via Iraq and Türkiye. Furthermore,

by participating in BRI through the Middle Corridor, Ankara is asserting itself as a central hub for global trade and energy transit.

IDRP is designed to provide a comprehensive multimodal solution, including a dual-track railway and modern highways spanning 1,200 kilometers, as well as high-speed trains capable of transporting goods and passengers at up to 300 km/h. The corridor is projected to connect Europe with West Asia by cutting transit times between the two continents by 12 to 15 days, compared to the existing Suez Canal route.

Plans for logistics hubs, industrial complexes, and energy pipelines integrated into the project further emphasize its strategic significance. Erdoğan has garnered strong support for IDRP from the UAE and Qatar, with UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed pushing for expedited negotiations and project execution.

Türkiye's alignment with BRI, particularly through the Middle Corridor, has further solidified its position in global connectivity networks. The Middle Corridor connects China to the European continent via Central Asia, the Caspian Sea, the South Caucasus, and Türkiye whilst

bypassing Russia—a key geopolitical advantage amid Western sanctions on Moscow. By integrating this route into flagship domestic infrastructure projects like the Marmaray Tunnel and Istanbul Airport, Türkiye has strengthened its logistical capacity and attracted investments from China, Azerbaijan, and Central Asian states.

The Middle Corridor highlights Türkiye's role as a bridge between competing powers, providing a shorter and more stable alternative to northern routes while fostering economic ties with Beijing and regional neighbors. Türkiye's influence in the Middle East is central to its broader corridor strategy. In Iraq, IDRP positions Türkiye as a gateway for GCC energy exports to Europe, enhancing its role as a critical energy transit hub. The integration of oil and gas pipelines into IDRP could provide the EU and its member states with alternatives to the Suez Canal and Russian energy supplies, aligning with the EU's diversification goals.

Türkiye's current involvement in Syria further underscores its geopolitical ambitions. Military interventions in northern Syria, which almost certainly played a decisive role in the collapse of the Assad regime in December 2024,

have bolstered Türkiye's leverage over potential energy and trade routes in the region. This is evident in competing pipeline proposals such as the Qatar-Syria-Türkiye pipeline, which competes with Iran-backed alternatives. Additionally, Türkiye's longstanding partnership with Qatar—the latest practical example is Türkiye's and Qatar's reopening of their respective embassies in Damascus within days of the old regime's fall (and within days of each other)—reflects Ankara's deepening ties with the GCC states to counterbalance regional rivals.

Türkiye's geopolitical strategy of multi-alignment allows it to maintain strong ties with NATO allies while engaging with GCC states, China, and the states of the core "Silk Road region." This balancing act enables Türkiye to maximize its influence across rival connectivity initiatives and mitigate risks of geopolitical isolation.

Despite its strengths, Türkiye faces significant challenges in asserting itself as a central player in global corridors. The rivalry between Türkiye's IDRP and the IMEC corridor project reflects competing visions for Gulf-to-Europe connectivity. The outcome will depend on factors such as project funding, geopolitical alignment, and the ability to navigate

volatile regional dynamics. Security concerns in Iraq and Syria also pose risks to Türkiye's corridor ambitions. Political instability, terrorism, and unresolved conflicts could delay or derail infrastructure projects. Additionally, strained relations with Western actors, particularly the U.S. and the EU, may hinder Türkiye's ability to attract investments and partnerships for its initiatives.

Türkiye's proactive push for alternative corridors signals a broader fragmentation of global trade networks. As multipolarity reshapes international connectivity, Türkiye's efforts to integrate energy pipelines into trade routes could transform global energy markets. Its alignment with GCC states, China, Azerbaijan, and Central Asia countries positions Ankara as a key player in redefining east-west trade.

At the same time, Türkiye's ambitions expose it to increased competition and scrutiny. Successfully navigating these dynamics will require Ankara to secure investments, maintain regional stability, and balance competing interests across its geopolitical partnerships. In a fragmented global landscape, Türkiye's ability to adapt to shifting alliances and secure its relevance will be critical.

As a linchpin of global corridor politics, Türkiye is poised to play a defining role in shaping the future of trade and connectivity in an increasingly multipolar world.

Is the EU Ready for Primetime?

The European Union is at a pivotal crossroads, as global powers compete to dominate the emerging geoeconomic corridors that are reshaping global trade and influence. Connectivity initiatives like BRI, IMEC, and INSTC are redefining trade routes, creating both opportunities and challenges for the EU. In response, Brussels is leveraging tools like Global Gateway, 3SI, and its strategic engagement in volatile regions like Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. What follows examines the EU's strategy to navigate this intricate geoeconomic landscape, balance competing interests, and assert its role as a leader in sustainable and transparent global connectivity.

Launched in 2021, Global Gateway is the EU's flagship response to China's BRI. With a €300 billion budget, it aims to fund sustainable infrastructure projects

worldwide, focusing on digital, transport, energy, and health infrastructure. Unlike BRI, Global Gateway emphasizes transparency, accountability, and alignment with EU values such as environmental sustainability. This EU initiative is presented as providing an alternative

for developing countries wary of the debt traps associated with Chinese projects. Investments in green transition projects (e.g., renewable energy networks) and digital connectivity

infrastructure in Africa, Asia, and Latin America are central to this strategy.

However, Global Gateway faces numerous challenges. Its scale and budget pale in comparison to the expansive reach of BRI, and internal fragmentation among EU member states risks diluting its impact. Despite these limitations, Global Gateway aligns with the EU's broader geopolitical objectives, particularly in regions like the South Caucasus, where connectivity and energy projects intersect with its stated strategic interests.

Furthermore, 3SI complements the EU's objectives by strengthening

infrastructure, energy, and digital connectivity among 13 EU member states located between the Baltic, Adriatic, and Black Seas. While not directly led by the EU, 3SI reinforces integration efforts in Central and Eastern Europe and reduces reliance on external actors like Russia and China. Key projects under 3SI include investments in LNG terminals, energy interconnectors, and broadband infrastructure. 3SI's emphasis on North-South connectivity complements east-west corridors like IMEC, I2U2, and INSTC, furthering the ambition to establish a more integrated and resilient pan-European infrastructure network. By attempting to both stabilize Eastern Europe and bolster regional economies, 3SI aims to enhance the EU's geopolitical leverage and mitigate vulnerabilities in this strategically sensitive region.

The EU's role in the global corridor race involves navigating a complex web of competing and complementary initiatives. While initiatives like I2U2 and IMEC align with EU interests, others, such as BRI and Russia's ambitions (INSTC and NSR9) challenge the EU's ambition to be influential in neighboring geopolitical theaters.

Interestingly, INSTC offers an alternative to traditional maritime routes, connecting the European continent to South Asia via Azerbaijan. By integrating the trans-Caspian region into its connectivity framework, the EU can strengthen trade ties with South Asia while balancing Russian and Chinese influence. However, China's BRI dominates Eurasian connectivity, and Russia's focus on NSR and VCMC adds complexity to the EU's eastward ambitions. The EU

must respond by reinforcing its strategic partnerships, particularly with India and the United States, to counter these rival initiatives.

The European Union is navigating a rapidly evolving connectivity landscape, marked by fierce competition and fragmentation. The facilitation of Free Trade Agreements with India and the GCC is of crucial geostrategic importance for the EU's interests, as these would enhance access to key external markets through the development of strategic corridors, boosting economic growth, ensuring energy security, and strengthening the EU's position in the global trade landscape.

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Connectivity initiatives like BRI, IMEC, and INSTC are redefining trade routes, creating both opportunities and challenges for the EU.

Through initiatives like Global Gateway and 3SI, engagement in projects like IMEC, and working to extend I2U2 into the purview of the EU, Brussels would bolster the EU's quest to assert itself as a leader in sustainable and transparent connectivity. However, its success depends on strategic investments, robust partnerships, and effective diplomacy, particularly in volatile regions like Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus.

Azerbaijan's Indispensability

Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus have become pivotal regions in the evolving competition over global connectivity corridors, linking the European continent, Asia, and the Middle East. These areas, rich in geographic and economic potential, are at the heart of major projects such as INSTC, BRI, and the EU's energy and trade networks.

Amid this geopolitical flux and following the outcome of the Second Karabakh War, Azerbaijan has emerged as a critical player—a “keystone state of a keystone region,” as the U.S. Naval War College's Nikolas K. Gvosdev put it in an earlier edition of *Baku*

Dialogues—whose strategic location and investments position it as a linchpin in these initiatives, making it indispensable for regional and global connectivity.

Azerbaijan's geography places it at the crossroads of multiple major corridors, bridging the trans-Caspian region with Europe and Asia. Its role in INSTC exemplifies this importance, providing a land-based alternative to traditional maritime routes like the Suez Canal. By integrating its extensive rail and road networks, including the vital BTK railway that connects the country with Georgia and Türkiye, Azerbaijan has enhanced the Middle Corridor's efficiency.

Moreover, Baku's role in the direct rail link between Russia and Iran, which bypasses the inefficient Caspian Sea maritime route, further underscores its capacity to streamline transit and reinforce its status as a critical transit hub. Energy security also underlines Azerbaijan's geopolitical leverage. The Southern Gas Corridor, delivering natural gas from the Caspian Sea to Europe, has become a cornerstone of the EU's strategy to diversify energy supplies and reduce reliance on Russian imports (as has the earlier oil pipeline projects stemming from the 1994 “Contract of the

Century”). This alignment with the EU's energy goals not only strengthens Azerbaijan's position as an energy hub but also reinforces its importance in the global energy transition. Given the end of the transit of Russian gas on 31 December 2024, Ukraine has stated that it is prepared to transit gas from Azerbaijan to Europe.

Despite these advantages, Azerbaijan operates in a region fraught with geopolitical and logistical challenges. The lingering tensions following the end of the conflict over Karabakh pose perceived risks to infrastructure stability, which in turn could deter foreign (read: Western) investments. Strained relations with Iran add another layer of complexity.

While Tehran is a vital INSTC partner, the occasional flaring up of geopolitical tensions with Baku appear to outsiders as providing an unpredictable dynamic that complicates regional cooperation. Simultaneously, Azerbaijan must navigate the EU's support for Armenia and Georgia, whose pro-Western stances occasionally clash with Baku's broader regional ambitions.

Against this background, Azerbaijan's strategic importance extends to its involvement in competing connectivity corridors. Its active participation in BRI and the Middle Corridor project, further highlights its commitment to diversifying trade routes. As noted above, the development of the Port of Baku and AFEZ, coupled with the expansion of the BTK rail route, bolster its capacity to handle increased trade flows. However, balancing alignment with China and strengthening its alliance with Türkiye while maintaining partnerships with the EU (and its key member states) and the U.S. is a delicate task.

Moreover, emerging initiatives such as IMEC and IDRP further complicate Azerbaijan's position. While IMEC bypasses the trans-Caspian region, diminishing Azerbaijan's role in east-west connectivity, Baku could advocate for future inclusion together with Türkiye, leveraging their strategic location. Similarly, the IDRP, with its Gulf-to-Europe focus, presents both competition and opportunities for collaboration, particularly with Türkiye and GCC states.

In today's fragmented and competitive geopolitical landscape, Azerbaijan stands poised to play a pivotal role by bridging continents and influencing the emerging global order.

In addition, Azerbaijan's regional influence is also shaped by its relationships with Armenia and Georgia in South Caucasus. Armenia's participation in INSTC due to its very good relations with India balances Azerbaijan's dominance in the South Caucasus and its own efforts to capitalize on this connectivity. Conversely, Georgia's traditional alignment with the EU and its participation in BRI projects position it as a complementary partner for Azerbaijan, exemplified by its role in BTK and the region's network of oil and gas pipelines.

While Azerbaijan's geographic and economic advantages position it as a rising power in corridor politics, several challenges remain. Regional instability, particularly persistent tensions with Armenia, threatens to disrupt transit routes and investment flows. Dependence on external partners like Russia, Iran, and China exposes Azerbaijan to geopolitical risks, limiting its autonomy in shaping the future of connectivity. Balancing relationships with competing blocs, including the West and non-Western alliances like BRICS+ (which it has applied to join), requires careful diplomacy to avoid overreliance on any single power.

To solidify its role in global connectivity, Azerbaijan must prioritize infrastructure projects within INSTC, such as fully operationalizing the rail link between Russia and Iran. Strengthening relationships with India and Iran through cultural and trade diplomacy (and further energy exports) can help mitigate tensions and deepen collaboration. Diversifying its involvement in competing corridors like IMEC and IDRPs while leveraging a future BRICS+ membership to attract investments will also be critical.

To conclude, Azerbaijan's role in the global connectivity race is emblematic of the broader geopolitical dynamics reshaping Eastern Europe and the "Silk Road region." Its ability to navigate competing interests, resolve regional disputes, and align with major global players will determine its success in capitalizing on its strategic location. In today's fragmented and competitive geopolitical landscape, Azerbaijan stands poised to play a pivotal role by bridging continents and influencing the emerging global order. Its investments and strategic decisions today will shape its future as a linchpin or a "keystone" in the evolving network of geoeconomic corridors.

The New Scramble for Influence

The geopolitical scramble for corridors has emerged as a defining feature of the twenty-first century, reshaping global trade, alliances, and power dynamics. Present-day competition for these strategic routes underscores the onset of an era of connectivity where infrastructure serves not only as economic lifelines but also as an instrument of geopolitical influence. This corridor race reflects a deeper global bifurcation, driven by the rivalry between the West and the DragonBear alliance, and manifests in connectivity initiatives like NSR, IMEC, and INSTC—to name but three of those covered in this article.

The recent instability in the Red Sea region has highlighted the vulnerability of traditional trade routes like the Suez Canal, emphasizing the urgent need for alternative pathways. Piracy, regional conflicts, and logistical bottlenecks have placed this critical artery at risk, spurring interest in corridors that bypass these threats. However, this competition

is not without consequences. The proliferation of parallel systems risks fragmenting the global economy, creating spheres of influence that undermine integration and cooperation amid deepening Cold War 2 between the U.S. and the DragonBear under Trump 2.0.

What its proponents call the "energy transition" will also be a cornerstone of the corridor race in the time ahead. The global shift toward renewables demands corridors capable of facilitating the trade of green technologies, hydrogen pipelines, and energy grids. Initiatives like IMEC, which incorporate renewable energy infrastructure, are reshaping the traditional functions of trade routes, aligning them with the imperative of sustainability. This new focus will play a critical role in defining the winners and losers in the energy transition, as countries invest in corridors to secure their leadership in the green economy.

The green energy Black Sea cable initiative, which involves producing and transporting electricity generated from wind and solar sources in Azerbaijan and Georgia to Romania,

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Hungary, and other European electricity markets (coupled with a possible extension across the Caspian Sea to incorporate electricity from Kazakh and Uzbek renewable sources), is another example of the above.

Small and medium-sized states are increasingly leveraging their strategic geography to gain prominence in this evolving landscape. Countries like Azerbaijan, Türkiye, and the GCC states are adeptly positioning themselves as indispensable links in major corridors, using their connectivity to punch above their geopolitical weight. These countries exemplify how strategic diplomacy and infrastructure investments can transform geographic constraints into geopolitical assets, granting them significant leverage in global politics.

The geopolitical implications of this corridor scramble are profound. The global bifurcation into competing blocs further challenges the longstanding norms of multilateralism and global integration brought to the fore in the immediate aftermath of the end of the Cold War. As connectivity becomes increasingly politicized, states will

have to navigate a world of shifting alliances and economic dependencies. For smaller states, the challenge will be to balance competing interests, maintaining neutrality while capitalizing on opportunities presented by both the West and the DragonBear alliance.

The corridors taking shape across Eurasia, the Arctic, and the Middle East will define the contours of a multipolar world order at the meta-level

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of global affairs. They will influence not just trade flows but also military strategy, energy security, and technological standards. The race for corridors is not merely about physical connectivity; it is a race to shape the future of global power, governance, and influence.

In short, the modern scramble for corridors is, in essence, a race for the future—a contest that will determine the balance of power in a fragmented yet still remarkably interconnected world. As countries compete to secure their place in this evolving landscape, the corridors of today are shaping the global order of tomorrow, setting the stage for a century defined by infrastructure, alliances, and resilience. **BD**

Table 2: Key Corridors

Corridor Name	State Actors Participating	Key Geopolitical Data	Key Geoeconomic Data
Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)	China, 150+ countries globally	Enhances China's global influence, infrastructure financing criticized for debt-trap diplomacy	Investments estimated at \$1 trillion+, but could reach \$8 trillion in infrastructure projects across Europe, Africa, and Asia
India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC)	India, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Israel, EU, U.S.	Counterweight to BRI, bolsters India's strategic ties with Middle East and Europe	\$20 billion initial investment; cuts shipping times by 40%
International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC)	India, Iran, Russia, Azerbaijan, Türkiye, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Belarus	Reduces dependence on Suez Canal, strengthens India-Iran-Russia ties	Cuts transit time by 40%, trade volume expected to exceed \$170 billion
Middle Corridor (Trans-Caspian)	China, Central Asia, Azerbaijan, Türkiye, EU	Bypasses Russia, crucial for east-west trade amid sanctions	Transportation volumes surged by 68% in the first 10 months of 2024, reaching 3.8 million tonnes, while container traffic rose 2.7 times, with shipments from China increasing 25-fold
Northern Sea Route (NSR)	Russia, China,	Arctic trade shortcut, bypasses traditional sea routes like Suez Canal	Cuts transit time by 30%, reached record volumes of 79 transit voyages and an estimated 2.38 million tons of transit cargo
Vladivostok-Chennai Corridor	India, Russia	Links India and Russian Far East, mitigates reliance on Western-dominated routes	5,600 nautical miles, boosting India-Russia trade in energy and resources
Three Seas Initiative (3SI)	13 EU member states (Baltic, Adriatic, Black Sea regions)	Strengthens EU connectivity and reduces dependency on external actors	3SI reached 143 grossing an estimated investment value of 111 billion euros
Global Gateway Initiative	EU and partner countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America	Promotes sustainable alternatives to BRI, focuses on green and digital projects	€300 billion budget for global projects in transport, energy, and health
Türkiye-Iraq-Qatar Corridor	Türkiye, Iraq, Qatar, UAE	Provides a competitive alternative to IMEC, connects Gulf region to Europe via Iraq and Türkiye, strengthens Türkiye's influence in the Middle East	Estimated \$17 billion investment; includes railways, highways, and potential energy pipelines; projected to create 100,000 jobs and generate \$4 billion annually

Sources: CSIS, MEI, Saudi Journal of Economics and Finance, Astana Times, Centre for High North Logistics, India Shipping News, 3Seas, European Commission, and Asia News.