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INDIA'S GEOPOLITICAL AND GEOECONOMIC MOTIVES FOR REVIVING THE SPICE ROUTE

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to describe and analyze India's geopolitical and geoeconomic motives for reviving the historic spice route. This study focuses on a detailed examination of India's ambitions regarding this transcontinental trade route, especially as the country's economic potential continues to grow and its global influence expands. India is actively seeking to assert a more prominent role in international politics.

To achieve the aforementioned objective, an interdisciplinary research method was employed to thoroughly analyze India's geopolitical and geoeconomic interests in revitalizing the spice route. This approach is essential for understanding the complexities of India's rationale behind this initiative, as no single discipline can fully encompass the multifaceted nature of the project.

Research has revealed that the development of the new spice route aligns with India's broader geopolitical and geoeconomic objectives. The India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC) aims to connect India to the resource-rich Middle East and the advanced economies of Europe. This intercontinental trade route will not only facilitate trade but also serve as a conduit for the dissemination of Indian cultural products, ideas, and values. By doing so, India can project its soft power and expand its sphere of influence beyond its immediate neighborhood.

Through this ambitious initiative, India seeks to translate its growing economic power into greater geopolitical influence, positioning itself as a key player in international affairs. The revival of the spice route represents not just a commercial opportunity, but also a strategic endeavor to enhance India's global standing and foster stronger ties with key regions across the globe.

Keywords: India's geoeconomic ambitions, India's geopolitical ambitions, The India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC), The spice route.

Introduction – the emergence and evolution of the spice route

The Spice Route was an ancient network of trade routes that linked Europe with Asia, facilitating the trade of spices and other goods. It was a transcontinental trade route that included various land and maritime routes. The Spice Route played a crucial role in establishing trade, commercial and cultural relations between Asian and European countries (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2016).

This transcontinental trade routes were used to supply Europe not only with spices, but also with vital and valuable goods such as silk, tea, porcelain, precious metals, textiles, incense and fragrances. The exchange of the above-mentioned goods had a profound impact not only on culinary practices of Europe, but also on culture and lifestyle of the European cities and countries.

The evolution of the Spice Routes, also known as the Spice Trade Routes, can be traced back thousands of years and is closely tied to the rise and fall of major civilizations and empires throughout history. Major ancient civilizations, including the Phoenicians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans, established control over various segments of these trade networks to access valuable spices and other luxury goods.

The development of sailing technologies facilitated the expansion of maritime spice trade routes across the Indian Ocean. The rise of the Venetian Republic and other European maritime powers led to increased competition for control of the lucrative spice trade, particularly the sea routes to Asia. Until the mid-15th century, European powers used the Silk Road to trade with the Asian countries and the Byzantine Empire and the Italian city-states of Venice and Genoa acted as the middlemen. By positioning themselves as the middlemen in this transcontinental trade, the Byzantine Empire and the Italian city-states amassed tremendous wealth and influence. They were able to extract significant commissions and tariffs from the European powers who sought access to the coveted Asian markets and products (Keay, 2007).

The fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Empire in 1453 disrupted the overland Silk Road trade routes that had previously connected Europe and Asia. In 1453 the Byzantine Empire ceased to exist and the overland Silk Road trade routes were blocked by Turks. The European powers were forced to find new routes to establish economic, commercial and trade relations with the Asian countries. Particularly Portugal and Spain sought alternative maritime trade routes to establish relations with the Asian countries and gain access to spice markets. Technological advances, such as improved ship design and the development of more sophisticated navigational instruments and techniques, allowed European powers to travel greater distances and explore new trade routes to the lucrative spice-producing regions of Asia. The main goal of European explorers was to break the monopoly of Arab traders and gain direct access to the Asian countries which produced vast amounts of spices and valuable products. European explorers embarked on a very risky adventure and began to look for new ways to the Asian markets (Kandelaki, 1961)

In 1487-1498 Vasco da Gama and Bartolomeo Dias circumnavigated Africa and discovered a new sea route to India that passed through the Indian Ocean. They established small settlements along the coasts of Africa and Asia so that ships bound for India could replenish their supplies of food and fresh water. This discovery was a revolutionary event for Portugal, as well as

for all European powers, because they successfully managed to reach the Indian subcontinent in the 15th century, establishing the first direct maritime trade route between Europe and Asia. Gama's successful voyage, which demonstrated the feasibility of a direct maritime route to India, dramatically altered the dynamics of the spice trade. By establishing a sea-based trade route, the Portuguese were able to bypass the traditional overland networks and the established middlemen, gaining direct access to the sources of these valuable spices in Southeast Asia. As a result, approximately half of the Asian spice trade shifted from the Silk Road to the newly established maritime route, which became known as the Spice Route. This shift of trade from land to sea had several significant implications: decline of the ancient Silk Road and the emergence of the Spice route as the most attractive transcontinental trade route between Europe and Asia (Kandelaki, 1961).

Soon the European powers began to fight for the control of new maritime trade routes and Spice Routes, because these transcontinental trade routes enabled them to expand their political, economic, and cultural influence across the world and establish powerful transcontinental empires. The Portuguese, Dutch and British competed with each other and developed a vast network of transcontinental maritime routes. The European powers established new colonies along the coasts of Africa and Asia in order to secure their dominance over the Spice Routes. A vast network of trade hubs and commercial centers emerged along these new spice routes such as Malacca, Goa, Aden, and Zanzibar. These trade hubs and commercial centers played a crucial role in transcontinental trade as they facilitated the exchange of not only spices but also other valuable goods, ideas, and technologies. They played very important role in economic and cultural integration of various regions of the world.

The discovery of these new Spice Routes was a revolutionary event for the Old Continent as it reshaped the geopolitical and geoeconomic landscape of the pre-modern world, setting the stage for the rise of European maritime empires and the integration of global trade networks. The success of the Spice Route led to increased European interest and investment in further maritime explorations and the establishment of colonial outposts and trade settlements in Asia, Africa, and the Americas. The colonial wars and wars of conquest carried out by Europe led to the formation of a common world civilization and the transformation of the world into one "global village" (Modebadze, 2023).

Why the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor matters

Over the last years Indian government has redeveloped a plan to revive the spice route, recognizing its historical importance in trade and its potential for modern economic development. The initiative focuses on enhancing connectivity and cooperation with countries involved in the spice trade, particularly through maritime routes. While the historic Silk Road is primarily associated with China's central role in facilitating transcontinental trade and cultural exchanges between the East and West, the emergence of the new Spice Route is directly tied to India's growing prominence and strategic positioning in the modern global economy.

The original Silk Road, which flourished from the 2nd century BCE to the 15th century CE, was a network of land-based trade routes that connected China to the Mediterranean world, facilitating the exchange of goods, ideas, and technologies. China's geographic location and economic prowess at that time made it a

central hub and driving force behind the development of this extensive trade network.

In contrast, the new Spice Route, also known as the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), is a maritime-based trade and connectivity initiative that leverages India's strategic location and economic potential. Spanning the Indian subcontinent, the Middle East, and Europe, this corridor is poised to become a crucial artery for the flow of trade, investment, and economic cooperation in the 21st century. By diversifying trade routes and economic partners, India aims to reduce its dependence on China and counterbalance its growing influence in Asia. It is in the strategic interests of India to transform the IMEC into a major trade artery between Asia and Europe (Rizzi, 2024).

Several factors have contributed to India's central role in the new Spice Route:

1. *India's Geographical Advantage:* Situated at the crossroads of major sea trade routes, India's peninsular geography and proximity to the energy-rich Middle East and the consumer markets of Europe make it a natural hub for maritime trade and logistics.
2. *India's Economic Transformation:* India's steady economic growth, diversified industrial base, and expanding consumer market have positioned it as an attractive destination for trade and investment, particularly in sectors like manufacturing, technology, and renewable energy. As India's economic potential grows, so does its desire to play more active role in world politics and exert its influence abroad. India as a great power intends to play more active role in international relations and therefore, the development of these project – the new spice route – is of outmost importance for the economic development of the country.
3. *India's Geopolitical Influence:* As a rising global power, India's growing geopolitical influence and diplomatic ties with the Middle East and Europe have enabled it to spearhead initiatives like the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEEC), which align with its strategic interests.
4. *India's Connectivity Initiatives:* India's investments in port modernization, the development of industrial corridors, and the promotion of multimodal transportation networks have strengthened its position as a key facilitator of the new Spice Route.

While the historic Silk Road was defined by China's centrality, the new Spice Route is directly shaped by India's pivotal role in shaping regional and global economic dynamics. As the world increasingly shifts its focus towards the Indo-Pacific region, India's prominence in the new Spice Route is poised to grow, with far-reaching implications for the geopolitical and economic landscape of the 21st century.

In an increasingly interconnected global economy, the strategic and economic importance of regional connectivity has come to the forefront. One such crucial corridor that has garnered significant attention in recent years is the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC).

The IMEC encompasses a vast geography, spanning the Indian subcontinent, the Middle East, and the European continent. This corridor presents immense potential for enhancing trade, investment, and economic integration between these regions,

which collectively account for a significant portion of the world's population, economic output, and geopolitical influence (Siddiqui, 2023).

The IMEC aims to increase economic, commercial and cultural ties between India, the Middle East and Europe and increase connectivity and cooperation among the above-mentioned regions. The countries that participate in this project try to develop a transcontinental corridor that will play a crucial role in the movement of goods, services, and people across the region.

The gradual shift in the global economic center of gravity towards Asia, with India and the Middle East emerging as key growth hubs, has heightened the strategic importance of the new Spice Route, or the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC).

Over the past few decades, the world has witnessed a significant realignment of economic power, with the Asia-Pacific region, led by the rapid growth of economies like China and India, becoming a dominant force in the global economy. This shift has been driven by a confluence of factors, including the rise of Asia's manufacturing capabilities, the expansion of its consumer markets, and the region's investments in critical infrastructure and technological innovation. Within this broader Asian economic ascendance, India and the Middle East have emerged as particularly dynamic growth centers, further accentuating the importance of the the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC).

India's economic transformation has been nothing short of remarkable. The country has evolved from a primarily agrarian economy to a diversified industrial and services powerhouse, boasting a large and youthful workforce, a burgeoning middle class, and a thriving startup ecosystem. India's growing economic clout, coupled with its strategic geographic location, has made it a critical node in the new Spice Route, connecting the resource-rich Middle East with the consumer markets of Europe.

Simultaneously, the Middle East, long known for its dominance in the global energy sector, has been actively diversifying its economic base and investing in sectors like renewable energy, advanced manufacturing, and digital technologies. Countries in the region, such as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, have positioned themselves as hubs for innovation, logistics, and financial services, further enhancing the significance of the the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (Suri et al. 2024).

The convergence of these trends – the rise of Asia, the growth of India and the Middle East, and their increasingly interconnected economic fortunes – has elevated the strategic importance of the new Spice Route. This corridor has the potential to become a vital artery for the flow of trade, investment, and technology, transforming the economic landscape of the Eurasian landmass and beyond.

As the world's economic center of gravity continues to shift eastward, the the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) stands as a testament to the evolving global order, where the traditional East-West dynamic is giving way to a more multipolar and integrated economic ecosystem. The successful development of this corridor could unlock unprecedented opportunities for economic cooperation, technological advancement, and shared prosperity across the India-Middle East-Europe region.

India's geopolitical and geoeconomic motives for reviving the spice route

Several factors have to be taken into account when analyzing India's motives for reviving transcontinental trade routes between Asia and Europe. In other words, India's interest in reviving the spice route is driven by several factors such as economic growth, energy security, geopolitical influence and cultural exchange.

Economic motives for reviving the spice route: As India's economic potential grows, so does its demand to export manufactured goods and products abroad. India has now a fifth largest economy in the world and as time passes, its economic potential increases steadily. Expanding trade and investment opportunities can significantly boost India's economy, creating new job opportunities for its young and dynamic population. By connecting three major economic regions, India aims to boost its exports, attract investments and create jobs. The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) provides India with an opportunity to further improve its economic competitiveness and solidify its position as a key player in the interconnected global economic system (Qiao at all, 2024).

All great powers, both historical and contemporary, have long aspired to create and control strategic trade routes. This ambition stems from the fundamental understanding that command over such critical economic arteries can confer immense geopolitical and economic advantages.

Throughout history, the ability to project power and influence through the control of trade routes has been a hallmark of the world's dominant powers. From the ancient Silk Road that facilitated China's economic and cultural ascendance, to the maritime trade networks that fueled the expansion of European colonial empires, the mastery of strategic trade corridors has been a key component of great power status.

In the modern era, this dynamic remains as relevant as ever. By creating and controlling the flow of goods, capital, and information through critical trade routes, great powers can effectively project their economic power worldwide. This, in turn, allows them to shape the rules of the economic game – setting prices, dictating terms of trade, and exerting influence over the economies of sovereign nations.

The strategic value of trade route control lies in the multifaceted benefits it confers. Firstly, it enables the dominant power to extract economic rents, as they can levy tolls, tariffs, and other fees on the passage of goods and services through their controlled corridors. This provides a steady stream of revenue and allows the great power to amass wealth and resources that can be leveraged for further economic and geopolitical ends.

Secondly, the control of trade routes grants the dominant power the ability to shape global supply chains and market dynamics. By regulating the flow of goods and resources, the great power can manipulate scarcity, influence prices, and tilt the playing field in favor of its own industries and businesses. This, in turn, allows the great power to dominate certain sectors of the global economy and maintain its competitive edge.

Lastly, the control of strategic trade routes serves as a potent instrument of statecraft and geopolitical leverage. By restricting or facilitating the movement of goods, capital, and information, the great power can reward allies, punish adversaries, and exert

pressure on sovereign states, coercing them to align with its strategic interests.

In the 21st century, as the global economic center of gravity continues to shift towards Asia, the competition for the control of critical trade corridors, such as the emerging India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), has become increasingly fierce. The great powers of the modern era are keenly aware that the ability to shape the rules and dynamics of this new Spice Route will be a crucial determinant of their future economic and geopolitical clout on the world stage (Cafiero, 2023).

Energy security: As India's economy steadily grows, so does the demand for natural resources. India is a major energy consumer. The India-Middle East Economic Corridor (IMEC) can play a crucial role in providing India with access to crucial natural resources from the Middle East, thereby enhancing its long-term energy security.

India, as one of the world's fastest-growing major economies, has a rapidly expanding energy demand that must be met to sustain its economic development and growth. However, India's domestic energy resources are limited, and it has historically been heavily reliant on energy imports, particularly from the Middle East.

The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), which connects India to the resource-rich economies of the Middle East, offers a strategic opportunity to strengthen India's energy security. The corridor provides India with a direct and efficient conduit to access the vast oil and natural gas reserves of the Middle East, a region that accounts for a significant portion of the world's fossil fuel resources (Qiao at all, 2024).

Through the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), India can establish reliable and diversified energy supply chains, reducing its vulnerability to disruptions or geopolitical tensions that may affect energy imports from other regions. The corridor's infrastructure, which includes pipelines, ports, and transportation networks, can facilitate the seamless flow of energy resources from the Middle East to India, ensuring a steady and uninterrupted supply.

Moreover, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) can also enable India to diversify its energy mix by facilitating the import of renewable energy resources, such as solar and wind power, from the Middle East. Several countries in the region, particularly the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, have been actively investing in the development of renewable energy infrastructure, which could be leveraged to support India's own clean energy transition. By enhancing India's access to natural resources and diversifying its energy sources, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) can play a pivotal role in strengthening the country's long-term energy security. This, in turn, can have far-reaching implications for India's economic development, industrial growth, and overall national security, as a secure and reliable energy supply is a crucial prerequisite for sustaining a rapidly growing economy.

Geopolitical motives for reviving the spice route: By strengthening its economic and diplomatic ties with the Middle East and Europe through the IMEC (India-Middle East-Europe Corridor) project, India aims to enhance its geopolitical standing and influence in the global arena.

The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) represents a strategic initiative that goes beyond mere economic

interests. It is a pivotal component of India's broader foreign policy and geopolitical aspirations. Through this ambitious project, India seeks to position itself as a crucial node in the emerging global economic and geopolitical landscape.

Strengthening ties with the Middle East and Europe holds multifaceted benefits for India. Firstly, it allows India to diversify its economic partnerships and reduce its reliance on any single region or power. By forging deeper connections with the resource-rich Middle East and the technologically advanced European markets, India can unlock new avenues for trade, investment, and technological collaboration.

This, in turn, can bolster India's economic prowess and resilience, enabling it to weather global economic shifts and challenges more effectively. As India's economic clout grows, so too will its geopolitical influence, as it becomes an increasingly indispensable player in the global arena. The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) represents a strategic opportunity for India to expand its political, economic, and security footprint in the Middle East, ultimately strengthening its position as a major player in the evolving global order. Leveraging this initiative can help India advance its interests and increase its sphere of influence in the oil-rich countries of the Middle East (P. R. Shankar, 2023). Given the complex security challenges in the Middle East, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) can enable India to deepen its security cooperation and intelligence-sharing with regional allies. This can strengthen India's position as a regional security provider and increase its influence in shaping the region's geopolitical dynamics.

Moreover, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) presents India with an opportunity to assert its regional leadership and cement its status as a rising power. By facilitating the seamless movement of goods, capital, and information across the Eurasian landmass, India can position itself as a pivotal connector between the established economic centers of the West and the dynamic markets of the East.

This strategic positioning can grant India enhanced leverage in international negotiations, allowing it to shape the rules and dynamics of global trade and diplomacy. Additionally, by strengthening its economic and diplomatic ties with the Middle East and Europe, India can diversify its geopolitical partnerships, reducing its vulnerability to potential shifts in the global balance of power. The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) provides a platform for India to forge deeper political, economic, and security partnerships with key countries in the Middle East, such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Israel, and others. These enhanced regional relationships can translate into greater diplomatic clout and economic opportunities for India.

Furthermore, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) aligns with India's broader vision of being a net security provider in the Indian Ocean region and beyond. By enhancing connectivity and economic integration across the Eurasian landmass, India can play a vital role in promoting regional stability, fostering economic development, and mitigating the risk of geopolitical conflicts.

In essence, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) is a strategic gambit that aims to catapult India onto the global stage as a formidable economic and geopolitical power. By leveraging its position at the heart of this critical economic corridor, India seeks to expand its sphere of influence, solidify its

regional leadership, and assert its voice on the global stage (Singh Gill, 2023)

Cultural motives for reviving the spice route: The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) represents a strategic initiative that goes beyond mere economic and geopolitical interests, we have to take into account also India's cultural motivations for reviving the historic spice route. If we analyze the history of mankind, we can come to the conclusion that transcontinental trade routes have served not only the economic interests of the great powers, but have also allowed them to spread their cultural norms & values and project their soft power on a global scale.

Throughout history, the establishment and control of major trade routes, such as the Silk Road, the Spice Route, and the Maritime Silk Road, have been intrinsically linked to the geopolitical ambitions of dominant civilizations and empires. These trade routes were not merely conduits for the exchange of goods and resources; they also functioned as channels for the dissemination of cultures, ideas, and ideologies.

The great powers of the past, from the ancient Roman and Chinese empires to the colonial European powers, recognized the strategic value of controlling these transcontinental trade networks. By doing so, they could not only reap the economic benefits of facilitating commerce but also project their cultural influence and soft power onto distant lands and populations.

Through the trade routes, the dominant civilizations were able to export their art, architecture, religion, language, and social norms to the far-flung corners of the world. This cultural diffusion often accompanied the expansion of political, economic, and military influence, as the controlling powers sought to shape the worldviews and behaviors of the societies they encountered along the trade routes.

In the context of India, the Spice Route, which connected the subcontinent to the Middle East, Africa, and Europe, served as a critical channel for the dissemination of Indian cultural products, ideas, and values. By controlling and facilitating the flow of goods, people, and information along this vital trade corridor, India had the opportunity to share its rich heritage, philosophical traditions, and artistic expressions with the wider world.

The export of Indian culture through the Spice Route could have taken many forms, from the spread of Hinduism, Buddhism, and other religious traditions to the global popularity of Indian textiles, cuisine, and performing arts. Additionally, the exchange of ideas, scientific knowledge, and technological innovations along the trade routes could have amplified India's cultural influence and intellectual contributions.

In the contemporary era, as India seeks to reclaim its position as a dominant economic and geopolitical power, the revival of transcontinental trade routes, such as the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC), presents a strategic opportunity to once again leverage its cultural soft power and facilitate the global diffusion of its rich civilization and diverse traditions.

By controlling and shaping the flow of goods, people, and information along these modern trade networks, India can position itself as a cultural hub, sharing its unique heritage and values with the world and enhancing its global influence and soft power.

Conclusion

Research has revealed that India has various motivations to revive the spice route and build new transcontinental trade routes. With regards to geoeconomic motivations, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) offers significant opportunities to India to diversify its economy and reduce its reliance on traditional sectors. The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor could play a crucial role in fostering the economic growth and creating new job opportunities for India's young and dynamic workforce. It can play a very important role in attracting foreign investment and creating new business opportunities in various provinces of India.

With regards to energy security, we should take into account the fact that India is heavily reliant on energy imports, primarily from the Middle East. By developing new transcontinental trade routes, India aims to enhance its energy security and reduce vulnerabilities. The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor offers an opportunity to secure stable and reliable energy supplies through diversified routes and infrastructure.

With regards to Geopolitical motivations, we should mention India's desire to enhance its geopolitical standing. India aims to acquire a status of great power and play more active role in international politics. India's participation in the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) is a strategic move to enhance its geopolitical standing, strengthen economic ties with various regions of the world and reduce its dependence on traditional trade routes. By investing in the construction of new transcontinental trade routes, India aims to exert more power in international politics and emerge as a major player on the global arena. By strategically utilizing the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), India can amplify its soft power projection on a global scale, strengthening its international reputation, expanding its political and economic influence, and positioning itself as a leading voice in shaping the regional and global order.

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