

## **The Gaza War and the Dynamics of U.S.-India Multilateral Cooperation in the Middle East**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study examines the U.S.-India multilateral cooperation in the Middle East, most notably through the I2U2 group and the India Middle East Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). It examines the regional and international factors that have shaped this cooperation, with particular emphasis on its political, economic, and geopolitical dimensions. The analysis reveals how these initiatives reflect deeper strategic shifts in the regional and global order, including U.S.-led efforts to advance Arab-Israeli normalisation, India's emergence as a pivotal actor in reshaping regional trade and logistics networks, and the formation of new alliances that move beyond traditional frameworks strategically bypass China in alignment with a shared U.S.-India strategic vision. The study also highlights Dynamics of U.S.-India multilateral cooperation, after the outbreak of the Gaza War in October 2023 through April 2025. While the Gaza War introduced complex security and geopolitical challenges to the prospects of renewed cooperation between Washington and New Delhi, the study identifies credible indicators of potential continuity that emerged during the war itself, particularly through nascent political and economic arrangements. It concludes that the resumption and sustainability of U.S.-India cooperation in the region remain plausible in light of ongoing transformations. This outcome, however, is contingent upon the capacity of the involved actors to navigate prevailing regional challenges, establish a minimal degree of stability, and foster a broader consensus that accommodates the diverse interests of participating states within an international environment marked by volatility and accelerating change.

**Keywords:** Gaza War; U.S-India; Middle East; I2U2; (IMEC).

### **INTRODUCTION**

U.S-India cooperation in the Middle East has witnessed notable developments in the context of regional and international transformations that have fostered a favorable environment for a multilateral strategic Cooperation between the two countries. This evolving cooperation aligns with a broader U.S. vision aimed at expanding the scope of Arab-Israeli normalisation, and India's strategic objective of enhancing its regional footprint presence within the framework of the "Extended Neighborhood Policy" toward West Asia (the Middle East).

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The cooperation between New Delhi and Washington culminated in the formation of the I2U2 group in July 2022, comprising India, Israel, the United States, and the United Arab Emirates. (U.S. Department of State, 2022) The group emerged within a newly evolving regional landscape shaped by the “Abraham Accords”, which signalled a strategic shift toward “political and economic integration” in the Middle East, beginning with the normalisation agreement between the UAE and Israel in 2020. In the years that followed, these states experienced a marked deepening of their bilateral relations with India, laying the groundwork for broader multilateral cooperation, most notably through the I2U2 group.

This cooperation paved the way for broader strategic initiatives, most notably the signing of a memorandum of understanding during the G20 Summit held in New Delhi on September 9, 2023. The agreement brought together India, the United States, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia, alongside key European partners including France, Germany, Italy, and the European Union. It aimed to advance the development of the India Middle East Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), a project envisioned to enhance connectivity and trade integration across the regions. (The White House, 2023)

However, the outbreak of the Gaza War on October 7, 2023, significantly disrupted the momentum and implementation of these initiatives, which had been progressing under U.S. sponsorship with active Indian engagement. The launch of the corridor project, originally scheduled to begin within 60 days of the memorandum’s signing, was postponed. (The White House, 2023) while I2U2 meetings and Summits were suspended, with no subsequent steps publicly announced.

Following the implementation of the Gaza ceasefire agreement in January 2025, (McCready, Alastair; Kurmelovs, Royce ;, 2025) discussions on U.S.-India cooperation in the Middle East resumed. In February 2025, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi met with U.S. President Donald Trump in his first official visit since Trump’s inauguration for a second term. (Ministry of External Affairs - Government of India, 2025) A joint statement issued after the meeting emphasised the two countries’ commitment, stating, the two countries affirmed their commitment to deepening cooperation and diplomatic consultations, stressing the importance of investing in critical infrastructure and economic corridors to promote regional peace and security. They also announced plans to convene partners from the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor and the I2U2 Group within six months to launch new initiatives in 2025. (Ministry of External Affairs - Government of India, 2025) This step reflects a joint U.S.-Indian effort to reinitiate the geopolitical and economic frameworks disrupted by the war.

The renewed outbreak of war in Gaza on March 18, 2025, (AJLabs, 2025) introduced significant uncertainty regarding the future of these regional initiatives. This escalation highlights the need to closely examine the evolving dynamics of multilateral U.S.-India cooperation in the Middle East, particularly through the I2U2 framework and the proposed India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor as part of a broader strategic reconfiguration of the international order amid intensifying

rivalry with China. Both Washington and New Delhi view this cooperation as a means to reshape regional power balances and counter China's growing influence.

## **OBJECTIVE**

The Gaza war has disrupted the trajectory of cooperation and introduced complex security and geopolitical challenges to its potential resumption. Amid these challenges, this study aims to examine the prospects for revitalizing U.S.-India cooperation in the Middle East, with particular focus on the I2U2 group and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC).

This study is guided by the main question: What regional and international factors have driven the rise and strengthening of multilateral U.S.-India cooperation in the Middle East? It also explores the effect of the Gaza War on this cooperation's development and evaluates the chances for its revival amid ongoing regional changes.

To address this inquiry, **two core hypotheses are proposed:**

First, the I2U2 group and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) represent strategic efforts to reshape the regional balance of power through multilateral projects that strategically bypass China, while positioning India as a central actor through active collaboration with the United States.

Second, the revival of these initiatives depends on the emergence of a conducive political and economic environment, one that entails progress and the reinvigoration of regional trade and connectivity frameworks. Within this context, the United States plays a pivotal role in facilitating diplomatic and political arrangements, with particular emphasis on supporting the normalisation agreements, while India contributes through its expanding capacity to restructure regional trade and logistics networks.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study adopts an inductive methodological approach, (Witkowsky, Patricia; Bingham, Andrea ;, 2021) which involves identifying empirical indicators and observable developments stemming from U.S. and Indian policies toward the Middle East. The aim is to analyse the concrete factors that have contributed to the emergence of multilateral cooperation between the two countries in recent years. The analysis focuses on two primary frameworks of this cooperation: the I2U2 group and the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). By analysing the dynamics of this cooperation during the Gaza War, the study aims to uncover its fundamental strategic dimensions and to evaluate the prospects for its continuation or revival amid ongoing regional and international transformations.

The study relies on a diverse range of sources, including official documents such as data and reports issued by the Ministries of Foreign Affairs of India and the United States. Additionally, it draws upon specialised analytical reports and academic studies published by leading international and regional think tanks. This multi-source approach enhances both the analytical rigour and the credibility of the study's findings.

To address the research problem and examine the study's hypotheses, the paper is structured around four main thematic sections: The first section analyses the regional and international factors that have contributed to the emergence of U.S.-India cooperation in the Middle East. The second section examines the frameworks of multilateral cooperation through the initiatives of the I2U2 group and the India Middle East Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). Whilst the third section assesses the impact of the Gaza War and the broader security escalation in the region on the trajectory of this cooperation. The final section assesses the prospects and potential for reviving U.S.-India cooperation in light of current regional transformations.

## **DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION**

Two key findings can be drawn, which may elucidate the nature of this cooperation and its future prospects:

First: the multilateral U.S.-India cooperation constitutes a component of emerging geopolitical frameworks aimed at recalibrating the regional economic and political power balance, chiefly through the containment of Chinese influence, a mutual objective for both Washington and New Delhi. This dynamic was prominently evidenced in the outcomes of the inaugural I2U2 Summit (July 2022), notably India's endorsement of the acquisition of the Port of Haifa, situated adjacent to a Chinese-operated facility. This strategic move bears significant geopolitical ramifications and aligns closely with the proposed India Middle East Europe Corridor (IMEC), which functions as a competitive alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Second, the successful resumption of this cooperation depends on several critical factors, foremost among them the capacity to surmount geopolitical challenges through the establishment of regional stability conducive to the implementation of joint initiatives. Equally imperative is the attainment of a broader regional consensus that ensures a balanced alignment of interests among diverse stakeholders, particularly within an international order marked by uncertainty and rapid transformation.

### ***Section One: The Formation of U.S.-India Cooperation in the Middle East: Regional and International Drivers.***

U.S.-India cooperation in the Middle East has witnessed notable expansion in recent years, propelled by accelerating regional and international transformations that have fostered a conducive environment for the development of a broader strategic Cooperation between the two countries. The primary drivers of this cooperation can be analysed across two key dimensions:

#### ***Arab Israeli normalisation and India's Expanding Strategic Presence in the Middle East.***

Since 2020, the Arab-Israeli normalisation arrangements have gained considerable momentum under active U.S. sponsorship during Donald Trump's first term (2017-2021). This process was initiated by the announcement of a "peace agreement" between the United Arab Emirates and Israel on August 13, 2020. (U.S. Embassy in Israel- U.S. Mission Israel, 2020) followed by the formal signing of the "Abraham Accords" in Washington, D.C., on September 15, 2020, with the participation of Israel, the UAE, (U.S Department of state, 2020) and Bahrain. (U.S Department of state, 2020) Subsequently, Morocco signed its normalisation agreement on December 22, 2020, (U.S Department of state, 2020) followed by Sudan in January 2021. (U.S Department of state, 2021) These agreements marked a departure from traditional peace treaties toward the establishment of comprehensive diplomatic, economic, and security partnerships within a U.S.-led framework referred to as "economic peace", aimed at fostering regional stability.

This trajectory was further reinforced during the administration of Joe Biden (2021-2024), which adopted a multilateral cooperation approach exemplified by the establishment of the Negev Forum, comprising Israel alongside the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Egypt. (Ministry of Foreign Affairs- United Arab Emirates, 2022)

In this context, India's presence in the region has acquired growing significance within the framework of New Delhi's "Extended Neighbourhood Policy" toward West Asia (the Middle East). (Trigunayat, Anil, 2019) In 2004, the government of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh launched the "Look West Policy", which aimed to enhance cooperation with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. (Press release, Prime Minister's Office Congress, 2005) Following Narendra Modi's assumption of office in 2014, this policy evolved into the "link-West" Policy, (Ministry of External Affairs- Government of India, 2014) which placed greater emphasis on strengthening bilateral relations, particularly with the United Arab Emirates and Israel.

India-UAE relations culminated in the declaration of a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in 2017. (Embassy of India, Abu Dhabi- United Arab Emirates, 2024) In the fiscal year 2023-2024, bilateral trade reached \$83.65 billion, making the UAE India's third-largest trading partner and second-largest export destination. Conversely, India is the UAE's second-largest trading partner and ranks as the seventh-largest foreign investor in the country. (Embassy of India, Abu Dhabi- United Arab Emirates, 2025)

India-Israel relations have also deepened significantly, with bilateral (non-defence) trade reaching \$16.53 billion in 2023 2024. Indian direct investment in Israel amounted to \$396 million, while Israeli investment in India totalled approximately \$314.87 million. In the defence and security sectors, the strategic partnership between the two countries encompasses arms sales, counterterrorism cooperation, joint training exercises, and military-to-military diplomatic initiatives. (Embassy of India, Tel Aviv-Israe, 2024)

This trilateral rapprochement between India, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel has coincided with the acceleration of Arab Israeli normalisation. This convergence has facilitated India's integration into emerging regional frameworks alongside the so-called "Abrahamic states". A notable manifestation of this alignment was the establishment of the I2U2 Group in 2022, bringing together the United States, India, the UAE, and Israel within a framework that blends economic cooperation, longstanding bilateral alliances, and coordinated political and security engagement.

### ***The Strategic Implications of the Russia-Ukraine War for U.S.-India Convergence.***

The official announcement of the establishment of the I2U2 Group on July 14, 2022, was not an isolated development, but rather part of broader international geopolitical realignments, most notably the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war on February 24 of the same year, which was accompanied by a deepening of Russian Chinese strategic convergence. (Shakhanova, Gaziza,, 2024) Prior to the war, a pivotal meeting took place between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing on February 4, 2022. During this meeting, the two leaders issued a joint statement stating:

"Russia and China stand against attempts by external forces to undermine security and stability in their common adjacent regions, intend to counter interference by outside forces in the internal affairs of sovereign countries under any pretext, oppose colour revolutions, and will increase cooperation in the aforementioned areas" (President of Russia;, 2022) implicitly referring to Ukraine and Taiwan.

These developments have emerged as a shared strategic concern for both the United States and India, despite the differing historical trajectories of their respective relationships with Russia. While Moscow has long been regarded as a traditional ally of New Delhi, Washington has historically viewed Russia through the lens of strategic rivalry. Nevertheless, China continues to represent a common strategic challenge: as a geopolitical adversary to India and as a direct peer competitor to the United States. This convergence in threat perception renders the deepening of U.S.-India cooperation a geopolitical imperative.

India-China relations have remained consistently strained due to a protracted border dispute, which culminated in a full-scale war in 1962. The legacy of that conflict continues to shape bilateral dynamics, manifesting in recurrent border clashes, most notably the 2020 Galwan Valley clash, which resulted in the deaths of 20 Indian soldiers and four Chinese troops. Tensions resurfaced in

2022, when Chinese forces attempted to breach the Yangtze Plateau in eastern Arunachal Pradesh, a territory Beijing claims as part of the Tibet Autonomous Region. (Bhattacharjee, Yudhijit ;, 2024)

From Washington’s perspective, China is perceived as a rising power that poses a strategic challenge to U.S. dominance within the international order, owing to its expanding regional and global influence. The bilateral relationship is marked by persistent tension and mutual distrust across a broad spectrum of economic, technological, and geopolitical domains most notably in matters related to trade, advanced technologies, Taiwan, and intellectual property rights. Moreover, both states are engaged in a global contest for influence that extends beyond their immediate regions, competing for primacy in cutting-edge technologies, conventional military capabilities, as well as in outer space and cyberspace. (Zhong , Raymond; Myers, Steven Lee ;, 2021)

Concurrently with the aforementioned Sino-Russian joint statement, which emphasised a mutual commitment to counter external powers’ attempts to undermine regional security, the United States articulated its strategic priorities in the Indo-Pacific Strategy. The document states:

“The United States has modernised its longstanding alliances, strengthened emerging partnerships, and forged innovative links among them to meet urgent challenges, from competition with China to the pandemic. It has done so at a time when allies and partners around the world are increasingly enhancing their engagement in the Indo-Pacific...”. (The White House;, 2022)

Furthermore, the strategy set forth an action plan focused on building coalitions and enhancing coordination mechanisms both within and beyond the region.

Within this context, the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy implicitly underscored the strategic importance of forging partnerships with emerging Asian powers. India has assumed a pivotal role within this framework, serving as a key actor in efforts to counterbalance China’s growing influence, particularly in light of the convergence between New Delhi’s regional priorities and Washington’s broader containment strategy. Just as India became a core member of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) (What is QUAD?;, 2025) alongside the United States, Australia, and Japan to respond to China’s assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific, Washington has sought to replicate and expand this model of cooperation in the Middle East through the I2U2 Group, comprising India, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel.

The U.S. vision for integrating India into this strategic framework rests on two principal factors. First is India’s geostrategic position in South Asia, which positions it as a critical node in any prospective regional security and economic. Second is the expanding network of India’s economic and diplomatic relations across the broader Asian landscape, particularly with key actors in the Middle East.

India's accession to the I2U2 Group was not an abrupt or unforeseen development, but rather the culmination of a gradual trajectory of strategic alignment and cooperation. Even prior to the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war, the United States had already been laying the groundwork for India's integration into this emerging bloc. A notable milestone in this process was the virtual meeting of the foreign ministers of the group's member states in October 2021, during which shared priorities for collaboration were discussed. However, the war served as a catalytic event that further accelerated the institutionalisation of this framework, culminating in the group's formal launch just five months after the war began.

In parallel with the deepening strategic alignment between Moscow and Beijing, the United States signalled its readiness to offset India's historical dependence on Russia in the defence and economic domains. In March 2022, U.S. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, Victoria Nuland, affirmed Washington's willingness to become a "strong defence and security partner" for India. She emphasised the United States' preparedness to provide viable alternatives in defence and energy cooperation, thereby facilitating New Delhi's gradual recalibration of its strategic ties with Moscow. (Razdan, Nidhi, 2022)

Despite the cautious approach India adopted towards the Russia-Ukraine war on one hand, (Allan, Manal, 2023) and its new partnership with the United States on the other, (Allan, Manal, 2022) New Delhi has increasingly consolidated its role as a pivotal actor within U.S.-led multilateral frameworks. The formation of the I2U2 Group stands as a salient manifestation of this strategic realignment. This trajectory culminated at the 2023 G20 Summit with the unveiling of the India Middle East Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), a project that will be examined in the subsequent section.

### ***Section Two: U.S.-India Multilateral Cooperation Frameworks in the Middle East.***

The I2U2 group and the India Middle East Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) constitute the most prominent manifestations of U.S.-India multilateral cooperation in the Middle East. These initiatives signal a qualitative shift in the geopolitical orientations of both Washington and New Delhi. For India they align with its broader objective of deepening regional integration and expanding its strategic footprint beyond South Asia. For the United States, there are initiatives with its efforts to advance Arab Israeli normalisation through innovative regional frameworks, while not explicitly stated, are implicitly designed to curtail China's growing influence. Together, these developments reflect a converging U.S.-India strategic vision for the region.

### ***Integrating India into a 'Non-Abrahamic' Cooperation Framework through the I2U2 Group.***

Although the establishment of the I2U2 Group unfolded within a regional landscape shaped by the momentum of the "Abraham Accords", it represents a distinct model of multilateral cooperation. By including India a rising Asian power with deep historical and strategic ties to the region, the group reflects an expanded vision of regional integration.



Following the signing of the accords, New Delhi stated:

“We welcome these agreements regarding normalisation of relations between Israel and other countries, which, we believe, will contribute to peace and stability in West Asia”. (Embassy of India, Cairo- Egypt, 2021)

It is noteworthy that India refrained from using the term “Abrahamic”, which can be attributed to several reasons. First, India’s religious composition is predominantly Hindu, a faith that is not classified among the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam). Second, the invocation of religious categories in foreign policy statements is a particularly sensitive issue for New Delhi, especially in light of growing domestic and international criticism regarding its treatment of religious minorities. As such, the Indian government tends to avoid religiously charged terminology in multilateral settings to maintain a secular and inclusive diplomatic posture. (Allan, Manal;, 2022)

This cautious stance was exemplified by India’s decision to abstain from participating in the trilateral ministerial meeting held on October 13, 2021, which convened the foreign ministers of the United States, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel. The meeting aimed to consolidate the “Abraham Accords” and proposed the formation of two thematic working groups: one focused on “religious coexistence” and the other on “water and energy”. (US Department of State;, 2021)

However, just five days later, on October 18, 2021, India participated in a separate meeting with the same parties the United States, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel that notably avoided any religious framing. Instead, the discussions centered on “enhancing economic and political cooperation in the Middle East and Asia”. (US Department of State;, 2021) This meeting is widely regarded as a foundational step toward the formal launch of the I2U2 Group.

The administration of President Joe Biden adopted a markedly different approach to Arab Israeli normalisation compared to that of his predecessor. During Donald Trump’s first term, the “normalisation arrangements with Israel” were overseen by a team with pronounced ideological orientations, including Evangelical Christians and Zionist-aligned advisors. In contrast, the Biden administration deliberately avoided the use of the term “Abraham Accords” in its official discourse, favouring more neutral and pragmatic language such as “normalisation agreements”. (Wagenheim, Mike ;, 2021) This lexical shift reflects a broader policy orientation toward cultivating flexible regional cooperation and partnerships, with India positioned as a strategic interlocutor within these emerging multilateral frameworks.

These dynamics culminated in the joint statement issued following the first official summit of I2U2 leaders in July 2022, which stating:

“We reaffirm our support for the Abraham Accords and other peace and normalisation arrangements with Israel”. (The White House;, 2022)

It is noteworthy that while the United Arab Emirates and Israel continue to use the term “Abraham Accords” in official discourse, both India and the United States have consistently preferred more general formulations such as “peace and normalisation arrangements”. This deliberate lexical divergence appears to reflect underlying differences in domestic political considerations and strategic narratives among the member states.

The statement further emphasized its support for the economic opportunities, particularly in fostering cooperation across the Middle East and South Asia and encouraging sustainable investment among I2U2 partners. It also welcomed emerging regional groupings, such as the Negev Forum, which underscore the unique contributions of each partner including Israel’s role as an innovation hub linking new partners and regions to address shared strategic challenges. (The White House;, 2022)

Within this context, the I2U2 Group may be interpreted as a foundational platform for broader regional integration, paving the way for subsequent strategic initiatives such as the India Middle East Europe Economic Corridor.

### ***The India Middle East Europe Economic Corridor: An Innovative Historical Experiment and a Step into the Future.***

Although no official map has yet been publicly released outlining the precise route of the India Middle East Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), the corridor’s Memorandum of Understanding specifies that the project will consist of two main segments:

“The IMEC will be comprised of two separate corridors, the east corridor connecting India to the Arabian Gulf and the northern corridor connecting the Arabian Gulf to Europe. It will include a railway that, upon completion, will provide a reliable and cost-effective cross-border ship-to-rail transit network to supplement existing maritime and road transport routes enabling goods and services to transit to, from, and between India, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Israel, and Europe”. (The White House;, 2023)

The proposed geographical route of the project echoes historical efforts to link India with Europe via the Middle East, most notably reflecting the strategic approach employed by Britain during the colonial era to secure both maritime and overland trade routes connecting the metropole to its colonies in the Indian subcontinent.

Between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Britain relied heavily on the Cape of Good Hope route as a crucial artery for trade, primarily facilitated by the East India Company. (Roos, Dave;, 2020) As British influence expanded, the government abolished the Company’s privileges in 1858 through the Government of India Act, placing India under direct Crown rule (Government of India Act of 1858;, 2025) a status that remained until independence in 1947. In the same year, the proposal to construct the Suez Canal was put forward, (Kennedy, Robert C.;; 2021) and the canal was officially inaugurated in 1869, establishing the shortest maritime route between Europe and India. Six years

later, in 1875, Britain acquired Egypt's shares in the Suez Canal Company, thereby consolidating its influence in the region. This acquisition paved the way for the British occupation of Egypt in 1882, which lasted until their withdrawal in 1956 the same year the canal was nationalized. (Blumenthal, Ralph, 1975)

This historical dimension underscores that the success of economic corridors depends not only on infrastructure but also on effective geopolitical coordination. Within this context, the India Middle East Europe Corridor reinterprets the British historical experience by situating it within a contemporary framework of multilateral alliances, led by the United States in collaboration with India, Gulf and Middle Eastern countries, as well as European partners.

### ***Balancing China: A Core Element of U.S.-India Multilateral Cooperation***

Reflecting the profound geopolitical significance of the I2U2 Group for both the United States and India, it was announced on July 14, 2022 mere hours after the group's inaugural summit that an Indian company, in partnership with an Israeli firm, had acquired a 70% and 30% stake respectively in the Port of Haifa, as part of its privatization process. (Ministry of Finance, 2022)

This acquisition marks a strategic shift in India's regional policy, aimed at bolstering its presence in West Asia and countering China's expanding influence. The geopolitical significance of this move is amplified by the proximity of the acquired facility to the "New Haifa Bayport Terminal", which has been operated by China's Shanghai International Port Group since 2015. Construction of the terminal commenced in 2018, and it was officially inaugurated in 2021. (David, Ricky ben, 2021)

This development also aligns with Washington's broader objective of mitigating the security risks associated with deepening China-Israel cooperation, (Sobol, Mor, 2020) particularly given the port's proximity to naval facilities regularly used by the U.S. Sixth Fleet. (Zakheim, Dov S., 2021) Successive U.S. administrations have expressed concern over the potential for surveillance and espionage arising from Chinese control of strategic infrastructure, emphasising the geopolitical sensitivities surrounding critical maritime assets. (U.S. Naval Forces Europe and Africa, 2019)

In this context, India positions itself as a reliable strategic partner for the United States in efforts to counterbalance China's growing influence. Through targeted initiatives, New Delhi contributes to reshaping the geopolitical landscape across critical ports and maritime corridors. The Port of Haifa, in particular, is anticipated to serve as a pivotal node within the emerging India Middle East Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), a project increasingly regarded as a strategic alternative and potential competitor to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

According to the memorandum of understanding associated with the proposed corridor, the project envisions the development of integrated infrastructure that includes electricity cables, digital connectivity networks, and pipelines for clean hydrogen, all aligned along a trans-regional railway system. This infrastructure is intended to strengthen supply chain resilience, facilitate more

efficient trade flows, and promote sustainability and economic integration across Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. (The White House;, 2023)

Since 2013, China has been advancing the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), (The Belt and Road Portal;, 2023) designed to link Asia, Europe, and Africa through an expansive network of transportation, energy, and communications infrastructure spanning over 100 countries and regions. (Belt and Road;, 2025) The steady expansion of Chinese investments particularly in ports situated near critical maritime choke points has generated strategic apprehensions in both Washington and New Delhi, given the geopolitical leverage such locations afford Beijing in projecting influence and shaping regional security dynamics. (The Print;, 2022)

Despite their shared ambition to enhance transcontinental connectivity, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the India Middle East Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) diverge significantly in focus and strategic orientation. While the BRI seeks expansive geo-economic integration through large-scale infrastructure and investment networks, IMEC emphasizes the development of efficient and secure transport corridors, resilient supply chains, and sustainable energy infrastructure, including clean hydrogen and digital connectivity. This distinction reflects differing priorities: Beijing's pursuit of global economic influence versus a U.S.-India-led model centred on strategic efficiency, sustainability. Consequently, states will weigh their options between alternative frameworks for connectivity, each offering different economic, political, and infrastructural incentives.

However, the successful implementation of the ambitious India Middle East Europe Corridor (IMEC) remains closely tied to the region's stability. Persistent conflicts, most notably the war in Gaza pose significant threats to the project's security and constitute major obstacles to achieving sustainable political and economic integration. These challenges will be explored in greater detail in the following section of the study.

### ***Section Three: The Implications of the Gaza War on U.S.-India Multilateral Cooperation.***

The military and security escalation resulting from the Gaza War produced both direct and indirect adverse effects on the trajectory of U.S.-India multilateral cooperation in the Middle East. This War disrupted the emerging regional dynamics that underpinned efforts to reshape political, economic, and strategic alliances across the area. dynamics which both India and the United States were aspiring to shape. The most prominent of these repercussions can be categorised as follows:

#### ***Suspension of the I2U2 Summits***

The I2U2 Group was established to foster regional integration within the economic and developmental sectors. The group reaffirmed its support for the "Abraham Accords and other peace and normalisation arrangements with Israel", expressing its aspiration to broaden cooperation through multilateral platforms such as the Negev Forum. (The White House, 2022)

Following the inaugural summit of the I2U2 Group in July 2022, a series of subsequent meetings took place to advance its agenda. In September 2022, on the sidelines of the United Nations General Assembly in New York, member states reiterated their commitment to deepening economic cooperation, assessing ongoing projects in agriculture and clean energy, and exploring future initiatives to further the group's objectives. (U.S Department of state, 2022) Furthermore, the first I2U2 Business Forum was convened in Abu Dhabi in February 2023, attracting extensive participation from both public and private sectors with the aim of accelerating collaboration and joint investment. (Ministry of External Affairs- Government of India;, 2023) In April 2023, the I2U2 Business Coalition was launched as a private sector initiative jointly formed by the U.S.-UAE Business Council, the UAE-Israel Business Council, and the UAE-India Business Council. (U.S. Department of State;, 2022) In September 2023, the group launched its official website, designed to enhance engagement with the business community. (Emirates News Agency – WAM, 2023)

The momentum of this cooperation was abruptly halted following the outbreak of the Gaza war. Since then, no further meetings have been convened, nor have any joint projects been announced. This suspension highlights a critical reality: the mere convening of meetings within the group does not necessarily translate into substantive progress on the ground. The deteriorating political and security environment, particularly due to the ongoing war, has generated considerable uncertainties that impede the advancement of initiatives such as the I2U2 Group as originally envisioned.

### ***Suspension of Saudi Arabia Israel “normalisation Talks”.***

At the beginning of 2023, clear signs emerged indicating progress in the “normalisation talks” between Saudi Arabia and Israel. In January 2024, former U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken expressed his intention to discuss normalisation with Saudi officials during his visit to the region. (Wong, Edward;, 2023) This momentum was further underscored by an unprecedented official visit in September, when Israeli Minister of Tourism Haim Katz traveled to Riyadh/ Saudi Arabia to participate in a multilateral tourism conference marking a notable development in the relations between the two countries. (Kingsley, 2023)

However, the outbreak of the war on Gaza marked a critical turning point for these political and diplomatic efforts. On October 14, 2023, Saudi Arabia announced the suspension of “normalisation talks” with Israel, (Al Jazeera News, 2023) representing a significant setback in a process on which Washington had placed considerable reliance as part of its broader vision for building regional alliances in cooperation with India.

The suspension of “normalisation talks” between Saudi Arabia and Israel presents a challenge to the realization of the ambitious India Middle East Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) project. Given that the corridor's proposed route passes through Saudi territory, its effective implementation requires a minimum degree of Saudi Israeli coordination and cooperation. Notably, neither Jordan nor Israel was among the signatories of the IMEC declaration, despite both

countries being geographically situated along the corridor's intended path. (The White House, 2023)

***The stalled initiation of the India Middle East Europe Corridor (IMEC).***

Merely 28 days after the announcement of the India Middle East Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) on September 9, 2023, the outbreak of the Gaza war on October 7 led to the suspension of the project's investment timeline.

These developments have presented unforeseen challenges to an ambitious Project that had been envisioned as a strategic alternative to traditional trade routes. India and its partners including Israel had placed considerable reliance on operating a segment of the corridor through the Port of Haifa, which is managed by India's Adani Ports in partnership with the Israeli "Gadot Group".

Although the Indian company affirmed the existence of a business continuity plan for the port, (Reuters, 2023) the war's repercussions have adversely impacted this critical component of the project particularly following the maritime blockade imposed in November 2023 by the Houthi group (Ansar Allah) on vessels destined for ports located in Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories. The blockade was later reinstated amid a renewed escalation of the war. (Motamedi, Maziar;, 2024)

This situation has contributed to an unprecedented surge in maritime insurance premiums, including those associated with the Port of Haifa. Trade reports indicate that shipping costs from India to Israel and Europe have increased fivefold compared to pre-war levels. Moreover, the ongoing escalation between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon has further heightened the security vulnerabilities surrounding the Port of Haifa, which is increasingly regarded as a potential target in the event of a broader regional confrontation. (Barakat, Abdul Tawab;, 2024)

Nonetheless, these initiatives maintain their strategic relevance, underpinned by the convergence of interests among key actors most notably the United States and India both of whom remain committed to revitalizing these projects once a more stable regional environment is established. This aspect will be examined in greater depth in the concluding section of the study.

***Section Four: Prospects for the Resumption of U.S. India Cooperation in the Middle East.***

The prospects for renewing U.S. India multilateral cooperation in the Middle East are contingent upon several critical factors that will shape the feasibility of reviving key regional initiatives most notably the I2U2 grouping and the India Middle East Europe Corridor (IMEC).

Despite the setbacks caused by the Gaza war and the subsequent suspension of key regional initiatives, recent political and economic signals most notably the joint announcement by Washington and New Delhi of their intention to convene a stakeholder meeting within the next six months suggest a renewed commitment to reviving multilateral cooperation. During his visit to Washington, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi reaffirmed India's dedication to working in

partnership with the United States to advance regional connectivity and infrastructure development through these frameworks. (Ministry of External Affairs - Government of India, 2025)

### ***Opportunities for Resuming I2U2 Summits.***

Within the framework of the I2U2 grouping, recent diplomatic developments suggest a potential resumption of its activities. In March 2025, a delegation of Israeli settlement leaders conducted a high-profile visit to the United Arab Emirates, (Middle East Eye, 2025) followed in April by a meeting in Abu Dhabi between UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed and Israeli Foreign Minister Gideon Saar. The two ministers discussed the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Gaza, explored de-escalation measures, and examined opportunities to strengthen bilateral ties. (United Arab Emirates Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2025)

These meetings could contribute to the resumption of I2U2 summits. There is a possibility that political and diplomatic considerations regarding the participation of Arab states such as the United Arab Emirates in multilateral frameworks involving Israel could be set aside, particularly against the backdrop of the enduring war on Gaza.

### ***Prospects for Resuming Saudi Israeli “normalisation Talks” with U.S. Facilitation.***

On March 24, 2025, U.S. President Donald Trump praised the “Abraham Accords”, describing them as a “tremendous success” and emphasizing the growing interest of additional countries in joining the framework. (Reuters;, 2025) This statement raises questions about which countries may move toward normalisation , particularly in light of the possible resumption of Saudi Israeli “normalisation talks”.

In a related development, U.S. Energy Secretary Chris Wright conducted an official visit to Saudi Arabia as part of a regional tour. During a press conference held in Riyadh on April 13, 2025, he addressed efforts to strengthen cooperation in critical energy sectors. (U.S Department of Energy;, 2025) Secretary Wright announced:

The Trump administration has revived talks with Saudi Arabia over a deal granting the kingdom access to U.S. nuclear technology and potentially allowing uranium enrichment, aiming to develop a “commercial nuclear power industry”. The agreement, previously pursued by the Biden administration as part of a broader normalisation effort with Israel, is expected to see “meaningful developments” this year, according to Mr. Wright. He noted that “relationships are always package deals”, highlighting multiple areas of potential cooperation. (Nereim, Vivian;, 2025)

It is important to acknowledge that the prospect of recommencing the “normalisation talks” at this juncture remains remote due to the ongoing Gaza war. The escalation of hostilities has profoundly tarnished Israel’s regional and international standing, thereby compromising the U.S. strategic framework aimed at fostering economic integration and regional stability through this avenue. Moreover, these developments have impeded the momentum of the normalisation

agenda. Consequently, the United States may find it necessary to defer further progress on the normalisation agreements until the emergence of more conducive geopolitical conditions.

***Prospects for Renewing the (IMEC) with Indian Backing.***

Despite the ongoing war on Gaza, indicators of the potential resumption of the India Middle East Europe Corridor (IMEC) project have begun to emerge through logistical arrangements and memoranda of understanding. These developments reflect the firm commitment of the participating parties particularly India to ensure the continuity of the initiative. The Memorandum of Understanding on the Economic Corridor stated that:

“In support of this initiative, Participants commit to work collectively and expeditiously to arrange and implement all elements of these new transit 2 routes, and to establish coordinating entities to address the full range of technical, design, financing, legal and relevant regulatory standards”. (The White House, 2023)

The prospects for advancing the corridor’s implementation can be evaluated by closely monitoring developments across two interconnected geographic levels, with particular emphasis on the countries officially engaged in the initiative.

***The East Corridor Connecting India to the Arabian Gulf.***

The Eastern Corridor, connecting India to the Arabian Gulf, constitutes a critical geopolitical component within the broader India Middle East Europe Economic Corridor project. This corridor has witnessed significant advancements in cooperation between India and key Gulf states, notably the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.

In February 2024, India and the United Arab Emirates signed a framework agreement aimed at operationalizing the corridor, which encompassed the establishment of a digital logistics platform designed to enhance supply chain efficiency. (Ministry of External Affairs- Government of India, 2024) Furthermore, during the fifteenth session of the Joint Committee in December of the same year, two major initiatives were launched: the “Virtual Trade Corridor” and the “Maitri” platform, both intended to streamline and digitize commercial operations between the two countries. (Ministry of External Affairs- Government of India, 2024)

In March 2025, high-level bilateral discussions were held between India and the United Arab Emirates, focusing on key strategic areas including the development of port infrastructure, customs integration, digital trade platforms, and renewable energy cooperation particularly in solar energy networks and green hydrogen production. (TIE Staff- Eye on India, 2025) Subsequently, in April 2025, the “Free Trade Warehouse Zone” in Mumbai was officially inaugurated in the presence of Dubai's Crown Prince, Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed. This milestone event represented a pivotal advancement in enhancing supply chain efficiency and advancing India's broader commercial and logistical ambitions within the framework of the corridor initiative. (Emirates News Agency – WAM, 2025)



With regard to cooperation with Saudi Arabia, a joint statement issued on April 22, 2025 following the visit of the Indian Prime Minister to Riyadh

“Expressed mutual commitment to work together to realize the vision of connectivity as envisaged in the Corridor (IMEC), including the development of infrastructure that includes railways and port linkages to increase the passage of goods and services, and boost trade among stakeholders, and enhance data connectivity and electrical grid interconnectivity. In this regard, both sides welcomed the progress under the MoU on Electrical Interconnections, Clean/Green Hydrogen and Supply Chains signed in October 2023. Both sides also expressed satisfaction on the increase in shipping lines between the two countries”. (Ministry of External Affairs - Government of India, 2025)

Reflecting ongoing efforts to deepen the logistical partnership within the broader framework of the corridor initiative, which had already been set in motion following the project’s initial announcement.

In October 2024, Fulk Marine Services a subsidiary of the Saudi Public Investment Fund launched the “India Gulf” maritime service, establishing direct connections between key Gulf ports, including Dammam and Umm Qasr, and major Indian ports such as Navi Mumbai and Mundra. (Saudi Press Agency, 2024) Subsequently, in April 2025, the Saudi Ports Authority announced the introduction of an additional shipping route linking the Port of Jeddah with these Indian ports, as well as with other strategic ports in the region, including Jebel Ali in the United Arab Emirates. (The Gulf Observer, 2025) These developments reflect a growing emphasis on maritime connectivity as a cornerstone of Saudi-Indian logistical cooperation within the broader framework of the India Middle East Europe Economic Corridor.

This emerging cooperation aligns with the broader development plans for Indian port infrastructure, particularly the Navi Mumbai Port, (Jawaharlal Nehru Port Authority (JNPA), 2025) which presented an expansion blueprint during a site visit by a corridor-related delegation in April 2025. (Daily Shipping Times, 2025) Meanwhile, Mundra Port maintains strategic linkages with key Gulf ports through the Adani Logistics Group (Mundra Port, 2025) a major stakeholder that also holds ownership of the Port of Haifa thereby underscoring a geostrategic continuum that connects India with the Eastern Mediterranean via the Gulf.

Although Indian Saudi cooperation in commercial shipping routes and port infrastructure has not been officially incorporated into the formal announcement of the India Middle East Europe Economic Corridor, it nonetheless constitutes a de facto extension of the Eastern Corridor component, which seeks to link India with the Arabian Gulf. The absence of formal acknowledgment of these arrangements may be attributed to the suspension of “normalisation talks” between Saudi Arabia and Israel. Should these talk resume, the potential exists for the formation of an integrated transregional corridor spanning India, the Gulf states, Jordan, and

culminating at the Port of Haifa which is operated under an Indian Israeli partnership thus completing a geo-economics arc between South Asia and the Eastern Mediterranean.

### ***The Northern Corridor connecting The Arabian Gulf to Europe.***

The Eastern Corridor serves as the strategic foundation for extending the route northward toward Europe, thereby necessitating the consolidation of India's partnerships with key European stakeholders most notably France, Italy, Germany, and the European Union. Strengthening these ties is essential for ensuring the viability of the broader transregional connectivity envisioned by the India Middle East Europe Economic Corridor.

Regarding cooperation with France which constitutes the northwestern anchor of the corridor via its integration into the European railway network French President Emmanuel Macron visited India in January 2024 and held high-level talks with Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Both leaders underscored the strategic importance of the corridor in bolstering trade resilience and enhancing regional energy transmission capabilities. Prime Minister Modi also welcomed France's appointment of a dedicated envoy for the project, (Ministry of External Affairs- Government of India, 2024) Gérard Mestrallet, who was part of the official French delegation and is expected to coordinate France's involvement in advancing the corridor initiative. (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs;, 2024)

In September 2024, Gérard Mestrallet conducted an official visit to the Indian state of Gujarat to evaluate infrastructure components relevant to the corridor most notably Mundra Port, which functions as a critical logistical node within the corridor initiative. During the visit, Mestrallet underscored the strategic value of the direct maritime route between Mundra and Marseille, noting that it offers a "competitive edge" in facilitating trade flows. The visit culminated in a preliminary agreement to enhance cooperation between the French government and Indian public and private sector stakeholders, thereby laying the groundwork for the project's preparatory implementation phase. (Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs;, 2024)

Following Prime Minister Modi's visit to France in February 2025, the joint statement released by both sides reaffirmed the strategic relevance of the India Middle East Europe Economic Corridor in promoting regional integration and fostering sustainable economic growth. Particular emphasis was placed on the pivotal role of the Port of Marseille as a Mediterranean gateway, underscoring its function as a key terminal for European connectivity within the broader framework of the corridor. (Ministry of External Affairs- Government of India;, 2025)

Regarding Italy, Prime Minister Narendra Modi met with Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni in November 2024, during which both leaders agreed to advance the India Middle East Europe Economic Corridor initiative. (Ministry of External Affairs- Government of India;, 2024) Subsequently, in February 2025, Italy initiated discussions to appoint a special envoy dedicated to the project. (Rossi, Emanuele;, 2025) This process culminated in April 2025 with the official

appointment of Francesco Talu as Italy's special envoy, (Rossi, Emanuele;, 2025) coinciding with the visit of the Italian Foreign Minister to India (April 11-12, 2025). (Ministry of External Affairs- Government of India;, 2025)

Both parties underscored the strategic significance of initiative India Middle East Europe Economic Corridor (IMEEC). (Ministry of External Affairs- Government of India;, 2025) And Both parties underscored the strategic significance of integrating Italy's maritime activities in the Mediterranean with India's operations in the Arabian Sea, framed by the Italian Foreign Minister as the "Cotton Road" corridor. (Ministry of External Affairs- Government of India;, 2025)

Regarding Germany, Chancellor Olaf Scholz visited India in October 2024 and participated in the seventh round of bilateral government consultations. (Ministry of External Affairs- Government of India;, 2024) Although these consultations were not formally conducted within the framework of the India Middle East Europe Economic Corridor initiative, their focus on sustainable development and clean energy two foundational pillars of the corridor reflects a strategic convergence of priorities and provides an essential basis for potential future cooperation under the project.

At the European Union level, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen conducted an official visit to India in February 2025, (Ministry of External Affairs- Government of India;, 2025) accompanied by several commissioners. During this visit, concrete measures were agreed upon to advance the India Middle East Europe Economic Corridor project. (Ministry of External Affairs- Government of India;, 2025)

These developments underscore the potential for the imminent resumption of I2U2 summits and pave the way for the India Middle East Europe Economic Corridor project to advance, once the situation in Gaza and the broader Middle East stabilizes.

## **CONCLUSION**

An analysis of the regional and international drivers influencing U.S. India convergence in the Middle East over recent years reveals a multilateral cooperation encompassing intertwined political, economic, and geopolitical aspects. These dimensions are prominently reflected in initiatives such as the I2U2 framework and the India Middle East Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), both of which embody significant strategic realignments within the regional and global contexts. Key developments include the advancement of Arab Israeli normalisation efforts under U.S. auspices; the emergence of new regional alliances that transcend traditional frameworks while deliberately excluding China; and India's ascendance as a pivotal actor in reshaping trade and logistics corridors across the region.

Despite the considerable challenges posed by the Gaza war to the trajectory of this cooperation, subsequent developments have revealed tangible opportunities for its revival. These dynamics

indicate that the continuation of U.S. India cooperation in the Middle East remains a plausible prospect, particularly in light of evolving regional and international shifts.

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