



India, Europe and IMEC: Consultation with Experts

Event Summary

Tuesday October 14, 2025

- The Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP), in partnership with Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES), has initiated a research study to clarify the architecture of India–Middle East–Europe Corridor (IMEC), explore viable institutional models and sectoral partnerships that can bring the vision to life.
- As part of the study, the first closed-door expert consultation on IMEC was held at CSEP Auditorium on October 14, 2025, featuring a presentation on early findings by **Abhishek Agarwal**, Visiting Fellow, CSEP.
- The study will combine high-level strategic reflection with sector-specific policy analysis, covering technology and digital infrastructure, transport, energy, legal and regulatory standards, trade and supply chains, geopolitics, and security, to lay the groundwork for a credible, inclusive, and future-ready corridor.
- The discussants included a variety of stakeholders, including Government Officials, Embassies, Multilateral and Bilateral Agencies, Trade Organisations, Leading Think Tanks and select Private Sector.
- Expert Research Consultations feature a scholar presenting a working draft of evidence-based research to peers and practitioners. This closed-door, strictly off-record event seeks to enhance ongoing research by consulting key stakeholders in a round-table format.

From “a corridor” to “a network”

The speaker began by questioning the idea of IMEC as a single corridor, noting that global trade moves through multiple routes and modes that must reinforce one another. The discussion highlighted the policy vacuum created by limited government engagement amid shifting geopolitics and the growing role of think tanks and researchers in shaping the debate. The presentation concluded by raising key questions to clarify the many competing narratives surrounding IMEC.

Experts agreed that IMEC should be seen as a network with branches and redundancy rather than a single alignment replacing existing routes. Such an approach provides backup options when links are disrupted and gradually brings neighbouring countries into the system by consent. Several participants underlined that IMEC is not meant to replace the Suez route but to provide safe, time-certain alternatives that reduce risk and improve resilience for shippers.

Operational realities: capacity, routing, and timing

The conversation focused on the practicalities of moving goods. Experts observed that the capacity of the narrowest links would determine short-term throughput. The eastern Mediterranean section, moving through ports such as Haifa and Ashdod and onward by rail, was viewed as an early ceiling. These ports

currently handle only a few million containers, and while expansions are planned, capacity increases and rail connections will take time. A reasonable initial benchmark of around 1.5 million containers per year was discussed as a planning anchor that respects existing constraints.

Some participants noted that parts of IMEC already operate. Cargo currently travels across Saudi Arabia by road, with goods moving from Gulf ports to the Red Sea in about two days. Despite being expensive, some shippers willingly pay for speed and reliability to address tight delivery windows or uncertain maritime conditions. The broader takeaway was that a corridor can be commercially viable even if certain legs are costlier, as long as the overall service improves reliability.

Comparisons with the China - Europe rail link helped set expectations. The network took nearly a decade of steady investment to reach meaningful volumes. IMEC, being multimodal and crossing diverse regulatory systems, will require similar patience and practical milestones. For India, this means improving containerisation, easing inland transport, and expanding port capacity where demand exists. Coordination between ministries, state governments, ports, and logistics providers will be vital to ensure domestic challenges do not limit external ambitions.

The digital and customs spine

Experts agreed that without a strong digital and customs backbone, IMEC would remain a concept on paper. They emphasised the need for common data standards so that a shipment created in India can be processed seamlessly in the Middle East and the European Union. Consistent treatment of documents such as manifests, bills of lading, and rules of origin would ensure efficiency. Building connections between port community systems and customs platforms would also allow faster clearances. Since full integration is still a work in progress even within India, extending it across jurisdictions will need deliberate engineering and testing.

Participants noted that trade is executed by firms rather than governments. Two industry-led working groups were proposed. One would bring together operators from ports, rail, roads, and shipping to harmonise interfaces and operational procedures. The other would involve IT providers, customs agents, logistics aggregators, and traders to design a basic digital and clearance framework. Governments would provide direction and political support, but implementation must be led by practitioners familiar with daily operations.

The energy pillar

Energy connectivity was seen as a co-equal pillar of IMEC. The Middle East's renewable resources and India and Europe's growing demand present opportunities for stable, long-term flows. Green hydrogen and related fuels such as ammonia can become major export items, provided certification, transport, and offtake systems are clearly defined. Cross-border electricity and grid links, if well planned, can support industrial hubs and data centres while anchoring steady energy trade alongside container traffic.

Governance and finance: turning intent into systems

Participants also discussed the approaches to manage a network spanning multiple jurisdictions. Three options were highlighted. A light coordination model allowing agencies and firms to move in parallel while sharing information. A formal secretariat providing a small institutional framework to convene governments, regulators, and industry. And a hybrid structure, described as a moving tent, combining both by bringing together expert clusters on themes such as infrastructure, data, finance, and energy under a light central node. Most felt that starting with a flexible hybrid model would ensure momentum while leaving room for future formalisation.

Participants agreed that financing would need a layered approach. Private capital could lead where commercial

returns are visible, while public-private partnerships might suit shared assets. Multilateral banks and European financing instruments could support feasibility studies, standard setting, and risk mitigation. Project preparation, including early coordination on technical standards and social safeguards, was emphasised as critical to lower costs and prevent future delays.

India-Europe calculus and regional dynamics

For India, IMEC fits well with its broader efforts to modernise ports, expand rail freight, and build integrated logistics corridors. It can also strengthen India's connections with the western Indian Ocean and Mediterranean regions. For Europe, IMEC offers an opportunity to diversify supply chains, connect with growing markets, and advance the energy transition. A balanced and inclusive public narrative will be essential, especially if countries such as Egypt and Turkey are gradually brought into the framework. Participants agreed that positioning IMEC as a complementary network to existing sea routes would be critical to its success. Regulatory convergence and targeted capacity building in customs were also highlighted as key enablers.

The discussion also underscored the human dimension. Infrastructure development will create jobs and enable cross-border mobility, making it essential to integrate skills, safety, and community planning from the start to ensure local support and avoid disruptions.

Immediate, practical next steps

The discussion concluded with a set of broad recommendations. Participants proposed developing a realistic network map showing existing routes, capacities, and chokepoints. They highlighted the need to address missing rail and last-mile links in the Middle East and Eastern Mediterranean and to sequence financing alongside port upgrades. Industry-led working groups on logistics and digital integration were seen as immediate steps to align standards and procedures. Pilot projects could then test these systems from India to Europe through the Gulf and the Levant. Finally, experts called for clear, consistent public messaging that emphasises redundancy and complementarity with the Suez to maintain cooperation and trust among partners.

The central message of the consultation was that IMEC will work only if it is treated as a practical, modular build rather than a single grand project. Progress will depend on pilots, shared standards, and disciplined coordination. India, Europe, and Middle Eastern partners all stand to gain if the focus remains on execution rather than announcements.

All content reflects the individual views of the participants. The Centre for Social and Economic Progress (CSEP) does not hold an institutional view on any subject.

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