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## TRADE ROUTE INITIATIVES: BEGINNING OF A NEW GAME IN POWER POLITICS

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### Abstract

The recent multilateral talks regarding the new trade route ‘India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEEC) on the sideline of Group-20 summit have brought ahead the importance of traditional ways of inter-linkages between nation states in 21st century also. The announcement of this new project came as a surprise to many. Political analysts are busy to discuss cone and prone of this new design since then. Many of them see it as the alternative or competitor of China’s ambitious project ‘Belt and Road Initiatives’. Some other countries have also put forward another plans or projects to explore the new emerging possibilities in this region. The newly initiated ‘Developmental Route’ by Turkey could also be seen in this direction. Despite this ongoing discussion or debate about the nature and practicality of these designs, one thing is certain these traditional means of interaction have acquired the importance as the means of trade and interaction in this era of technological advancement too. Voices are also heard about the feasibilities and reliabilities regarding these initiatives in this dynamic and fragile World Order. The dynamics of this positivity were not without problems and challenges. Emerging scenario in West Asia and Middle-East, instability in Afghanistan, have made these initiatives quite complicated and dubious due to variety of nature. Besides this, many thinkers see all these initiatives cautiously due to strategic reasons. They predicate these initiatives as starting point of the new great game of the ‘power politics’ in emerging ‘World Order. Hence, the present study will deal the issue of this “Trade Route Initiatives: Beginning of a new game in Power Politics” to understand the real nature of these initiatives.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Globalization in the twenty-first century has accelerated human interactions, yet the significance of traditional routes of exchange and connectivity has not diminished. Historically, trade corridors such as the ancient Silk Route played a decisive role in shaping civilizations by enabling the movement of commodities, cultures, and ideas across continents. In today's world, these pathways are being re-imagined as instruments not only of commerce but also of strategic influence and political engagement.

A notable development in this direction has been the announcement of the **India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEEC)** during the Group-20 summit, which generated wide interest and debate. Some observers perceive it as a counterbalance to China's ambitious **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**, while others highlight Turkey's **Developmental Route** as another competing framework for regional connectivity. Collectively, these projects underline the growing importance of transport and communication corridors in redefining economic and geopolitical landscapes.

Such initiatives, however, cannot be assessed merely as infrastructural undertakings. They embody the aspirations of emerging powers, the contestation among established ones, and the pursuit of influence in a volatile and shifting international order. The present paper seeks to examine these projects through economic, strategic, and political lenses, and to explore whether they represent opportunities for cooperation or the opening phase of a renewed struggle for dominance in global politics.

### 1.1 Issue

In this globalized world, technologies have closely interlinked the events, happenings and human contacts throughout the world. The world seems to be 'shrinking' and transformed into global village. But no one can take risk to underestimate the importance of traditional ways of inter-linkages. In the decade of nineties, these means of transportation and cultural exchange have also found greater importance due to economic, strategic and cultural objectives. Regional connectivity and grouping has emerged as the key feature in this era. The recent multilateral talks regarding the new trade route 'India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEEC) on the sideline of Group-20 summit have brought ahead the importance of traditional ways of inter-linkages between nation states in 21st century also.

### 1.2 The Objectives

The announcement of this new projects came as a surprise to many. Political analysts are busy to discuss cone and prone of this new design since then. The question arises, what objectives make these different stakeholders so aspire to take these projects of highly expensive and problematic in nature. It is better to understand this scenario in these three folds; economic, strategic and political aspects.

- i. Economically, in this globalized world, space and time has lost their importance. Technologies have closely interlinked the events, happenings and human contacts throughout the world. The world seems to be 'shrinking' and political, social, cultural and economic relationships among nations become more and more interlinked. Consequently, the non-polarity and uncertain world order seems to be reality in international relationship. Traditional powerhouse i.e. US and Russia has gradually losing their gripes in international arena. China, India, Brazil have been emerging new power houses in economic field with fastest growing economies in this 21st century. It is very tough task to maintain so high growth rate of 7 to 8 percent for a long time with traditional means. Surplus commodities and money demands the new areas of supply. Hence, these countries are looking for a better means of transportation and paths for the trade.

Besides this, energy security is the real issue that impels these growing economies to find new areas of enriched hydrocarbon. The Central Asia and West Asia will likely to be remain the major oil and gas producer in future also, but how to reach these areas without any roadblock will be more important. At present this competition is focused on the control over extraction and transportation of oil and gas from this region to outside world. The crucial issues involved include: the large reserves of oil and gas, claims of ownership over these resources by various countries and multiple route options for pipeline.<sup>1</sup>

- ii. Strategically, as history reveals, the Central Asia and West Asia will remain the focal points for strategic gain in international politics. Huge natural resources and strategic location made these areas very fragile. All the major powers i.e. US, Russia, China have stakes here with one reason to other, hence always remained busy in consolidating their position. These initiatives automatically produced the space for all the stakeholders without any confrontation.
- iii. Politically, the non-polarity and uncertain world order seems to be reality in international relationship. Traditional powerhouse i.e. US and Russia has gradually losing their gripes in international arena. This pattern seems to have changed the nature of international relations and foreign policies from what it was just a few years ago. New entrant came to forefront to fill up the space. All these new power houses want to lay greater role globally and at the regional level. Countries like China, India, Turkeye have changed their substance from older one to newer one. Policy makers are giving emphasize on the vision based on

close interaction and mutual respect. Revival of these traditional paths of interaction automatically create that space of mutual respect and understanding. With the realization of these routes, people to people contact will increase and bring about unity and cooperation among them, which further consolidates and strengthen position of these countries as a major block in international rearrangements.

Despite this ongoing discussion or debate about the nature and practicality of these designs, one thing is certain these traditional means of interaction have acquired the importance as the means of trade and interaction in this era of technological advancement too.

## 2.0 VARIOUS INITIATIVES

This initiative of connectivity across the national boundaries is not a new phenomenon to the world to inter-connect the people and explore the prospects in economic and commercial field. In the past 'Ancient Silk Route' had the same reputation and potential as a transport access to the entire region. The ancient Silk route was not one road but many. It was actually based on a network of roads generally going east to west, but with spurs into southern Iran, the northern Eurasian steppe and south, over the Hindu Kush to the Indian subcontinent. And over time, it came to be associated not only a series of transport corridors, but also with ideas and institutions. Hence, all these projects have the roots in this ancient and historical gateway to the world. China and India have emerged as leading players and contenders in executing the serious initiatives in this direction. A brief understanding of these is very fruitful to reach out any conclusion.

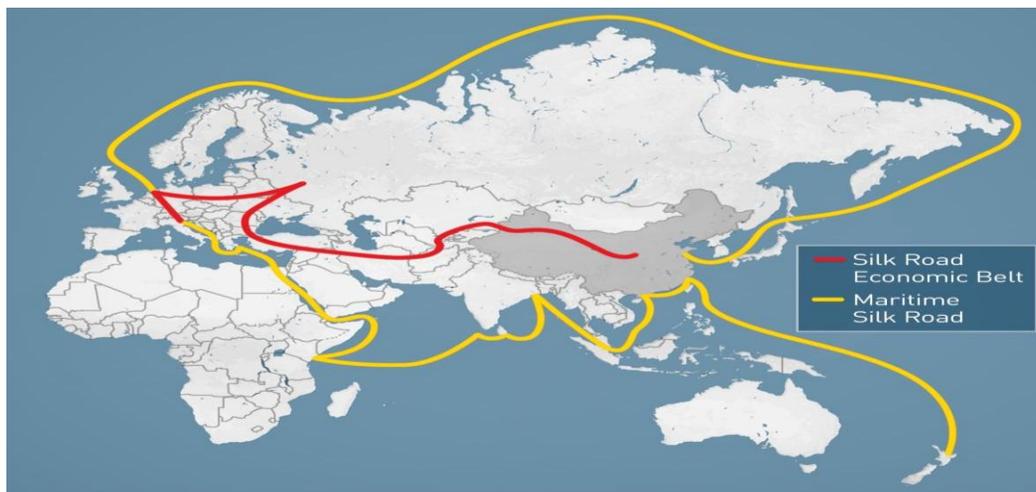
### 2.1 China's Initiative

China could be seen as leader that took the first step to explore possibility in this direction and reorients its policies and perspectives in a sudden pace. It has opened up its economy and now is promoting traditional means of interaction at regional level. China has given preference to regional connectivity in its foreign policy formation. The recent trial of Cargo-train by China's Railway from Beijing to Madrid, has shown its eagerness towards these objectives. Furthermore, the initiative of 'One Belt One Road' (OBOR) and participation of top regional stakeholders has established it as a center of attraction throughout the globe.

### 2.2 One Belt One Road (OBOR) or renamed Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

China's grand design in name of 'OBOR' or renamed 'BRI' could be seen as the first step to explore possibility in this direction. It is a combination of a network of roads, high-speed railways, fiber-optic lines, transcontinental submarine, optical cable projects and satellite information passageways. China also wants to establish a pipeline corridor along this Road. It will not only provide a solution of security problem but also makes maintenance of pipeline very easy. Hence, these economic interests are the main reason behind China's activism.<sup>ii</sup>

Inspired by this ancient Silk Route, this new project of 'OBOR' has also not only one road but as many as six routes which will include several railways line, roads, ports and other infrastructure. It is actually spread out on the networks of land roads and sea routes across the many countries from Asia to European continent, connecting the emerging ASEAN economies at one end, the China in the Centre and developed European market at the other end. The emerging consumer market in South Asia is also not left behind as it will also be connected by a sub branch. The maritime trade route will start from South China Sea to Indian Ocean and then to West Asia and Africa. It will impact 4.4 billion people and has the budget of \$1 trillion of it.<sup>iii</sup> This project has adopted the same philosophy of ancient Silk Route behind it, As Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed it at Nazarbayev University, Astana (Kazakistan) on 07 September 2013. He declared 'All round development and people to people contacts' will be the key objectives of this project.<sup>iv</sup> After that China has put forward it as the former's main agenda, not only due to historical point of view but also changing nature of International dynamics.



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### China's Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI)

It has given birth to new hopes as well as some serious concerns also. As the project progressed, its ill effects began to surface. Controversy started after that. India strongly rejected and criticized all the efforts that are monopolistic in nature. Geopolitical and economic factors made 'OBOR' quite complicated and dubious due to variety of reason. Main stake holder country like India has shown some serious reservation in this initiative. The other countries like USA, Japan, Australia and European world although have shown interest in the beginning yet all of countries are reluctant in the joining of this project. Even country like Pakistan who emerged as a close associate in the development of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) a sub-branch of this project, felt the heat at domestic level time to time. Hence, a strategic dimension is going to emerge in this region. Some scholars have put forward some serious questions on the Chinese intention regarding this project. They even see it as an instrument of power politics and declare that a newer version of power politics is eminent in Asian Continent. As Harish K. Thakur observed that the chief objective of China behind the CPEC is 'to strategically undermine the position of India by having access to the disputed territories of Jammu and Kashmir'. China has even made to rethink by this opposition to re-christened this concept as " Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)" as 'One Belt One Road' (OBOR) indicating the hegemonic posture of 'One Nation' in this globalised world in which 'many belts and many roads' exist. Hence, the success of this grand project is not as easy as it looks like. For a better understanding of this issue, it is pertinent to give a close realistic look on China's interests in this project.

## II. Indian Initiatives

India is on the brink of fastest economic growth and striving hard to achieve the goal of \$5 billion economy. Simultaneously, energy demand is rising rapidly day by day with growing economy at an average annual rate of 7 to 8%. This emerging economic alignment impels India to look for reliable long-term source of energy to boost up its economy. Russia, Central Asia, West Asia and Middle East have the potentials to meet out India's energy demand, but how to get easy access there will be more important. India is not having direct physical link with these countries. That's why India is trying hard to make arrangements for direct access in these areas with likeminded countries. The efforts of revival of ancient trade routes i.e. Silk Route, Spice route, North-South corridor, renovation of Chabahar port in Iran and connect it to Zarang and Delram in Afghanistan and further to Uzbekistan, and latest envisaged India-Middle East Europe corridor (IMEEC) on the sideline of Group-20 summit could be seen in this direction. The laying of TAPI gas pipeline initiative could also be seen in the same direction. If all these initiatives could have been materialized fully, it will present great opportunities for India to get fulfill its rising energy demand. A brief outlook of all these initiatives will clarify the real emerging situation in this direction.

### A. TAPI GAS PIPELINE

Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline project had assumed significance as an alternative source of gas in the beginning of 21st century. These four major stakeholders of this project had signed the Gas Pipeline Framework Agreement (GPFA) in December 2010. Turkmenistan had agreed to supply 27 billion cubic meters of natural gas per year from its Daulatabad gas field to Afghanistan-Pakistan-India through 1680 km long pipeline project. vii But this much talked and awaited project has lost its credibility for the time being due to Pakistan's anti India campaign, deteriorating security condition in its Northwest Frontier region, Afghanistan' local conflict and destabilized political set up. Both the later countries have been emerged major conflict areas since then, the security concerns put this project of high stakes on hold. Therefore, practical implementation of the project is still to be understood as a mere dream. viii



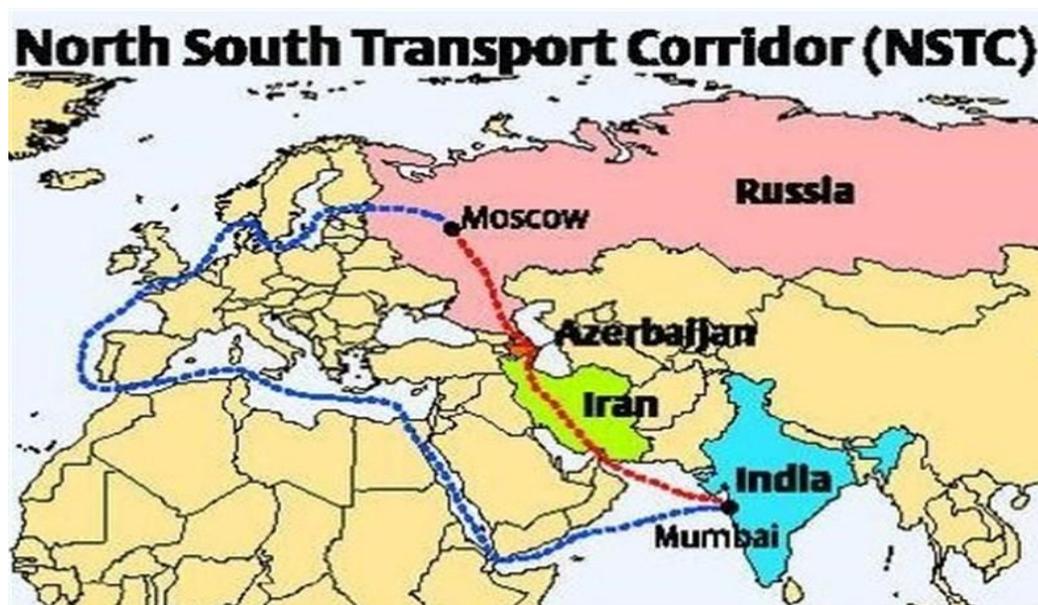
TAPI Gas Pipeline

Source:

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## B. NORTH-SOUTH CORRIDOR

North-south transport Corridor came to existence after multi levels agreements. The main agreement was signed among India, Iran and Russia in September 2000 and earlier through a tripartite transport agreement among India, Iran and Turkmenistan in 1995. It envisages the utilization of a land- cum-sea route leading up to Turkmenistan. For instance, goods from Bombay can be shipped to the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas and then can be sent by rail to Sarakhs on the Iranian- Turkminstan border along, what has been described as the new silk road. The goods could reach interior Turkmenistan through Tajden and Mary.ix The use of that corridor, which extended beyond Turkminstan, can spin off trade benefits, not only with the CARs, but also with the entire former Soviet Union and beyond. In its final shape North-South trade corridor originates in Russia, provides a corridor for trade through Central Asia and then proceeds through Iran to India.x Another initiative of 'Trilateral agreement between India, Iran and Afghanistan' that will commence from Chabahar port to Melak region in south east to Zarang in Afghanistan and proceed to Delram and further to Uzbekistan suffered setback and put on hold for the time being after Taliban return in Afghanistan.



North South Transport Corridor

Source:

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## 3.0 TRILATERAL AGREEMENT BETWEEN INDIA, IRAN AND AFGHANISTAN

Under the first India-Central Asia Dialogue, a Track-II initiative organized on 12-13 June 2012 in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, India launched 'Connect Central Asia policy'. The main objective of this policy is to strengthen people-to-people engagement and gain direct access to this land locked region. Trilateral agreement was signed between India, Iran and Afghanistan to connect Central Asia through Chabahar Port in Iran. The route will commence from Chabahar Port and pass through the Melak region in south east of Iran to Zarang in Afghanistan and proceed to Delram and further to Uzbekistan. According to this agreement Iran has accepted to build a new transit route that connects its Melak region in the southeast to Zarang in Afghanistan. India would then build up a 210 km road to connect Zaranj to Delaram in Afghanistan. Related to this, Iran, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan have signed an agreement on transport corridor. This route will commence from Uzbekistan's Termez province and will proceed to Iran via Afghanistan's Mazar-e-Sharif and Heart and lead to Iran's Bandar Abbas and Chahbahar port. India and Iran have further signed a protocol to connect Chahbahar to the nationwide Iranin railroad network, aiming to boost



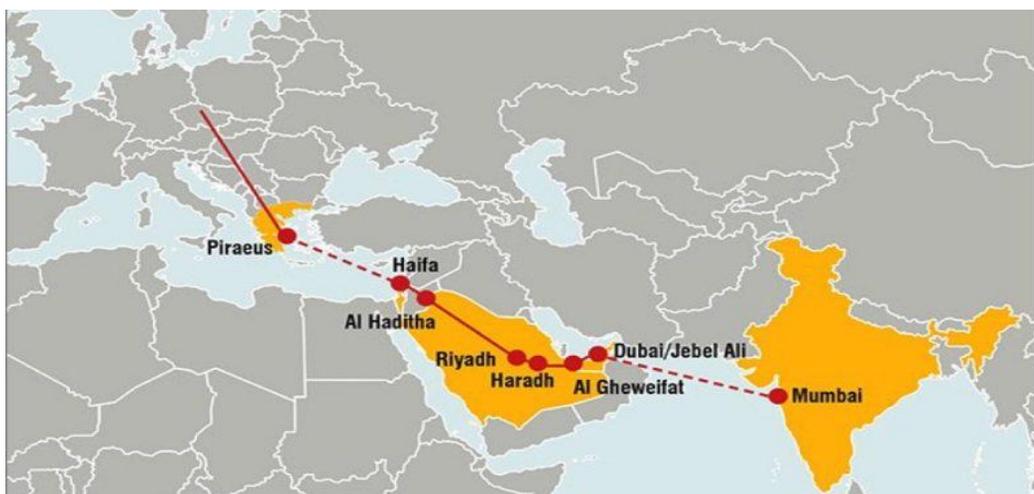
**TRILATERAL AGREEMENT BETWEEN INDIA, IRAN AND AFGHANISTAN**

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#### 4.0 THE LATEST IMEEC

The latest India-Middle East-Europe (IMEEC) opens up new transport routes and avenues for cooperation between member countries on technology, design, finance and regulatory standards as announced during in this prestigious G-20 meeting. IMEEC is an agreed name for a trans-continental land Sea Route that will connect India to Middle East than proceed to Europe and then to US. A project, the plan under this route is to transport goods from Indian ports to Fujairah in the UAE by ship, and from there move the containers by train to Haifa in Israel via Sadie Arabia. From Haifa, the containers will move to Europe with Italy, France, the UK and the US having already joined the alliance. All the stakeholders have agreed to convene a high level meeting to develop an action plan within sixty days to make it reality. This is the key point that for a success of these types of initiatives some basic parameters are to be framed first. Hence, this effort would trigger a powerful momentum with accompanying flows of imports and exports, tourists and people to people interaction, requiring viable means to these types of activities. And, it will not push countries into debt trap as collaborative and inclusive in nature, but final draft is yet to come. The deteriorating condition in West Asia in shadow of ongoing war between Hamas and Israel has put some serious questions about its practicality.



**Proposed IMEE Corridor**

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## 5.0 THE POLITICS

The dynamics of international relations are witnessing sudden changes in this twenty first century. The recession in US economy has opened the gate for new entities to take advance position on world stage in this globalize world. Shift of global politics from Euro-Atlantic to Asia-Pacific and now Indo-Pacific led to the building of new kinds of permutation and combination as the vital instruments in enhancing national interests in this period. These initiatives of trade routes have also been seen very closely by the scholars all around the world. They have put forward some serious questions on the intentions regarding these projects. They even see it as an instrument of power politics and declare that a newer version of power politics is eminent in Asian Continent. China has even made to rethink by this opposition to re-christened this concept as “Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)” as ‘One Belt One Road’ (OBOR) indicating the hegemonic posture of ‘One Nation’ in this globalize world in which ‘many belts and many roads’ exist.<sup>xiii</sup> Of other major powers This game is not as simple as it seems, the stakes of other major powers cannot be ruled out. The energy resources in the adjoining regions of these projects have always been remained the bone of contestation. Hence all these players are also busy to make access here by using various tools to secure their share of uninterrupted energy supply thereby making the region strategically woeful. Trade routes provides the opportunity to major powers to cooperate in materializing these projects. Thus a scenario of competition and cooperation has emerged consequentially thereby prepare a fertile land for new great game of competitive-influence-building measures among all the stakeholders including USA, Russia, China, and other Western Countries. India has also no left behind in this emerging scenario.

To sum up, Asian resurgence has changed the parameters of emerging world order in this new 21st century. China and India has emerged as major players in international relations in this era. Policy makers of both countries are busy in transforming policy making and its orientation. Both the countries have been working on new design of its foreign policy. These projects of trade routes initiatives as the combination of foreign policy and economic development strategy, are emerging as new innovative and strategic tools in international scenario. Economies of both India and China are also growing rapidly that seeks markets and guarantee energy supplies to sustain its growth. Both are making effort to gain access to reliable long-term sources of energy. This scenario brought India directly in a competing position with China. It creates problem and suspicion in the mind of policy makers of both countries. Hence, a strategic dimension is going to emerge in global politics.

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