

Rethinking Connectivity in a Multipolar World: Türkiye's Development Road

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Introduction

The global order is undergoing a transition from a post-Cold War, U.S.-led unipolar structure to a more fragmented and competitive multipolar system. This shift, shaped by growing geopolitical tensions, conflicts, economic rivalries, and the rising status of regional powers, has renewed interest in the strategic role of trade corridors. Both land and maritime connectivity routes have become key elements in states' efforts to secure economic influence and regional integration.

Several recent initiatives reflect this emerging landscape, including China's China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), the International North-

South Transport Corridor (INSTC), and the Türkiye-Iraq Development Road Project. The latter stands out as a practical example of Türkiye's evolving regional role and deepening cooperation with Iraq.

This Discussion Paper seeks to examine how the Türkiye-Iraq Development Road functions as a strategic asset for Türkiye in an increasingly multipolar world. It explores the project's significance for regional trade, connectivity, and diplomacy, with particular attention to its potential impact on Türkiye's position in the Gulf and broader Middle East. In doing so, the paper provides a comparative assessment of the Development Road alongside competing initiatives and highlights its role in promoting regional cooperation amid shifting power configurations in the international system.



(Haidar Mohammed Ali - Anadolu Agency)

Multipolarity and the Geopolitics of Connectivity

The contemporary international system is undergoing a profound structural transformation, marked by a shift away from U.S.-led unipolarity toward a more complex and fluid multipolar configuration. This transition is driven by several interrelated dynamics: the relative decline of U.S. global preeminence, the rapid economic rise of China since the early 2000s, and the increasing influence of regional powers seeking a policy of multi-alignment. These developments have been widely recognised in both scholarly discourse and strategic commentary as indicative of an emerging multipolar order that is increasingly shaping global political and economic settings.

One of the clearest manifestations of this systemic reconfiguration is the intensification of geopolitical competition and the proliferation of regionally anchored cooperation frameworks. Within this evolving environment, multilateralism—particularly when structured around shared interests—has shown resilience and utility. Additionally, the concept of the “middle power” has garnered renewed analytical relevance. While still subject to conceptual debate, a distinction has emerged between traditional middle powers, which generally align with established hegemonic structures, and emerging middle powers, which exhibit greater regional agency and pursue diversified engagement strategies (Jordaan, 2003; Laurence, 2023). The rise of these emerging actors not only reflects broader global shifts but also contributes actively to the reordering of international power relations.

Compounding these dynamics is the intensification of complex interdependence, as theorised by Keohane and Nye (1973), which underscores the growing importance of issue-specific cooperation in a multipolar world. However, this emerging order should not be mistaken for stable or institutionalised multipolarity. Rather, as Scott (2013) contends, the post-Cold War era is better understood as characterised by fragmented and fluid alignments. This logic is especially pronounced in the Middle East, where Kausch (2014) has termed the phenomenon “ad hoc multilateralism,” referring to short-term, interest-based partnerships that often substitute for formal regional integration. Notably, such approaches are not confined to smaller states; middle powers have increasingly adopted multi-vectored strategies to navigate regional dynamics, enhancing both their strategic autonomy and their operational adaptability (Pedi and Wivel, 2020).

Within this context, connectivity has emerged as a central strategic domain—both as a function of interdependence and as a tool of influence in the multipolar landscape. Broadly defined as the movement and integration of people, goods, services, and data across geographic and infrastructural spaces, connectivity transcends the realm of physical infrastructure. As Pieterse (2021) notes, it is a historically embedded and multi-dimensional concept, linking past and present through the evolution of human mobility and exchange. Building on this view, Khanna (2016) argues that connectivity now represents the dominant logic of international relations, eclipsing traditional globalisation in its capacity to shape the contours of power and influence.

In practical terms, connectivity materialises through networks of land-based and maritime corridors that facilitate trade, investment, and political engagement. As states pursue strategies of multi-alignment, these corridors increasingly serve as instruments for asserting national interests and reshaping regional hierarchies. Critically, the interactions among competing connectivity initiatives—whether cooperative or competitive—have become a key theatre for geopolitical contestation. As McCalla (2010) highlights, the efficient integration of such initiatives is essential to realising shared economic and security gains, necessitating a shift from zero-sum rivalry toward pragmatic cooperation.

For individual states, connectivity offers both a strategic asset and a policy instrument. It enables the recalibration of geopolitical posture and economic orientation, while also serving as a platform for advancing normative goals. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), for instance, exemplifies the use of connectivity to promote principles of openness, inclusivity, and consensus-building in foreign policy (Yongnian and Chi, 2017; Ampaw et al., 2025). At the same time, connectivity plays a dual role in regional security architectures: they provide mechanisms for cooperative threat mitigation—particularly in safeguarding critical trade routes—while also introducing new vulnerabilities, especially in the face of asymmetric threats such as terrorism, piracy, or unilateral policy actions that disrupt trade flows (Ries, 2019). On the other side, however, connectivity brings together new vulnerabilities in the form of what Farrell and Newman (2019) termed “chokepoint effect”, with which states geographically proximate to criti-

cal land and maritime routes may weaponise them by preventing or limiting access of others from these corridors. Therefore, connectivity necessitates the establishment of cooperative mechanisms between stakeholders and participants to provide a secure flow of goods and services.

Ultimately, connectivity must be understood as both a product of the structural change observed in the international system and a catalyst for further transformation. Within a multipolar and interdependent global context,

connectivity initiatives are not merely logistical undertakings—they are geopolitical instruments that traverse and intertwine the domains of diplomacy, security, development, and geo-economics. Their implementation reflects shifting power asymmetries, emerging regionalisms, and the recalibration of state behaviour in an increasingly networked world. The capacity of states and institutions to navigate and shape this connectivity landscape will be a key determinant of strategic relevance and influence in the decades ahead.

Türkiye-Iraq Development Road



(Mehmet Yaren Bozğun - Anadolu Agency)

The Türkiye-Iraq Development Road Project represents a transformative regional connectivity initiative with significant geo-economic and diplomatic implications. Officially launched on October 3, 2023, by Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani, the project envisions the creation of an integrated trade corridor stretching from the Grand

Al-Faw Port, which is currently near completion on Iraq's Persian Gulf coast, northward through Iraqi territory to the Turkish border at Ovaköy. From there, the corridor extends into Türkiye, linking with European markets via road and rail infrastructure.

Spanning approximately 1,200 kilometres and projected to cost near \$20 billion, the Development Road seeks to establish a fast, reliable, and competitive alternative to traditional maritime trade routes. In doing so, it offers substantial reductions in logistics time, cutting existing transit durations from 35 days via the Suez Canal and 45 days via the Cape of Good Hope to an estimated 25 days. The project's design positions Türkiye and Iraq as central nodes connecting the Gulf and European markets, reinforcing their role as pivotal actors in Eurasian trade and transit architecture. The corridor is scheduled for completion between 2030 and 2031, with considerable progress already achieved in infrastructure development. The involved parties are now discussing different financing models of the project, with ongoing consultations involving international stakeholders and financial institutions.

A significant milestone in the project's multilateral trajectory occurred during President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's official visit to Baghdad in April 2024, during which a quadrilateral memorandum of understanding was signed by Türkiye, Iraq, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. This

agreement marked the formal inclusion of Gulf actors, whose participation provides not only vital financial backing but also strategic alignment with their broader economic diversification goals. For Qatar and the UAE—both of which are actively seeking to reduce their reliance on hydrocarbon revenues—the Development Road offers a tangible opportunity to expand their influence within regional trade networks through investment in critical logistics infrastructure (Karaalp, 2024).

From Türkiye's vantage point, the Development Road exemplifies a new model of regional multilateralism emerging in an international environment shaped by multipolarity and interconnectivity. Beyond its economic utility, the project carries substantial diplomatic value. It has opened new channels of communication between Ankara and Baghdad, easing long-standing tensions and encouraging cooperation on shared security concerns. Historically, Türkiye's cross-border operations targeting the PKK in northern Iraq had been a persistent source of friction, often framed by the Iraqi government as infringements on national sovereignty. However, the cooperative framework of the Development Road has fostered mutual recognition of counterterrorism as a collective regional priority. In doing so, the project serves as a catalyst not only for trade and infrastructure development but also for political normalisation and shared security governance (Öztürk, 2024; Alaaldin, 2024). It is also worth noting that, as the PKK has commenced disarmament in accordance with Türkiye's "Terror-Free Türkiye" initiative, security challenges along the Development Road route are anticipated to diminish, thereby enhancing the safety prospects of the route.

In sum, the Türkiye–Iraq Development Road Project stands at the intersection of infrastructure, diplomacy, and geopolitics. It underscores how connectivity initiatives, when framed through inclusive partnerships and pragmatic regionalism, can serve as platforms for both economic transformation and political reconciliation in a volatile yet interdependent regional order.

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Major Trade Routes: Strategic Overlaps and Competitive Alignments

To contextualise the Türkiye–Iraq Development Road within the global connectivity landscape, it is essential to conduct a comparative assessment of other major trade corridors. Notable among these are the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the India–Middle East–Europe Corridor (IMEC), the International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC), and the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR). Each initiative reflects distinct geopolitical logics, infrastructural capacities, and implementation trajectories, and collectively they shape the evolving architecture of interregional connectivity.

China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)

Launched in 2015 under China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), CPEC is a flagship connectivity project aimed at linking China's Xinjiang province to Pakistan's Gwadar Port on the Arabian Sea. Beyond its logistical purpose, CPEC is designed to address China's so-called Malacca Dilemma—the strategic vulnerability posed by potential blockades in the South China Sea that could restrict China's access to critical Middle Eastern energy resources. As such, the corridor serves as a cornerstone of Beijing's long-term geostrategic calculus.

Despite its ambitious scope, CPEC has encountered persistent security challenges. The Gwadar region, in particular, has been the target of repeated terrorist attacks by groups such as the Baloch Liberation Army (BLA), Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), and Tehreek-e-Jihad Pakistan (TJP). These attacks—often directed at Chinese engineers, infrastructure sites, and local communities—have undermined investor confidence and cast uncertainty over the corridor's long-term viability (Hussain, 2024). While China and Pakistan continue to project an optimistic narrative through official statements, the actual pace of implementation remains cautious and measured (Afzal, 2020; Elmalı, 2024).

India–Middle East–Europe Corridor (IMEC)

Unveiled during the 2023 G20 Summit in New Delhi, the IMEC represents a strategic counterweight to China's BRI and specifically to CPEC. Backed by India, the United

States, the European Union, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, IMEC aims to establish a multimodal corridor linking Mumbai to Europe. The proposed route traverses the Indian Ocean to Jebel Ali in the UAE, then continues via land through Saudi Arabia and Jordan to Israel's Haifa Port, and onward by sea to Greece's Piraeus Port.

IMEC is emblematic of broader U.S.–China competition and notably excludes Türkiye—a decision that has drawn geopolitical scrutiny. Since the outbreak of Israel–Gaza conflict in October 2023, the security environment in the Red Sea has significantly deteriorated, largely due to Houthi attacks on commercial vessels. Given that approximately 12% of global maritime trade passes through this corridor, rising risk premiums—reportedly increasing from 0.7% to 2% of a vessel's tonnage—have led shipping firms to divert traffic to longer, safer maritime routes (Saul & Cohn, 2024). These developments have impeded IMEC's rollout, stalling implementation despite initial enthusiasm.

On the ground, progress has been limited primarily to India's bilateral diplomatic efforts, including negotiations with Greece and a free trade agreement with the European Union. While some Gulf states—most notably the UAE and Saudi Arabia—have committed funds to support road and railway construction, the project remains hindered by regional instability and coordination challenges. Despite initial momentum following the signing of a memorandum of understanding among its partners, the project has failed to adhere to its original timelines. Progress has been largely confined to India's pursuit of bilateral agreements with other participating countries like Greece and a free trade agreement with the EU, and the appointment of special envoys by actors such as France and Italy to manage diplomatic coordination (Oxnevad, 2025).

International North–South Transport Corridor (INSTC)

The INSTC, officially initiated in 2000, is a 7,200-kilometre multimodal corridor designed to link India to Russia via Iran, integrating maritime, road, and rail components across the Indian Ocean, Persian Gulf, Caspian Sea, and inland territories. As one of the earliest efforts to construct an alternative Eurasian trade route, INSTC has long been positioned as a platform for South–South and East–West interconnectivity.

Under United Nations General Assembly Resolution 74/15, the INSTC also carries an inclusive mandate to improve trade access for landlocked Central Asian countries. These states—often disadvantaged by limited infrastructural reach—stand to gain considerably from enhanced access to major global markets.

The corridor consists of three main branches: The Western Route connects Russia, Azerbaijan, Iran, and India; the Central or Trans-Caspian Route links Russia and Iran directly to India across the Caspian Sea; the Eastern Route extends through Russia, Central Asia, Iran, and India. While several segments are already operational, full integration remains a work in progress. Nevertheless, the INSTC is viewed as a key mechanism for promoting a more balanced and diversified interregional trade system.

Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR) – The Middle Corridor

The TITR, commonly known as the Middle Corridor, constitutes one of the most strategically significant trade routes linking China and Southeast Asia to Europe via Central Asia and the South Caucasus. The route passes through Kazakhstan, crosses the Caspian Sea, continues through Azerbaijan and Georgia, and reaches Europe via Türkiye.

Türkiye plays a central role within this corridor, serving as both a geographic bridge and a logistical hub for Eurasian overland trade. Compared to the Northern Corridor—which runs through Russia—the Middle Corridor offers a geopolitically safer and increasingly attractive alternative for freight transport, especially following disruptions caused by the Russia-Ukraine war.

In 2022, usage of the Middle Corridor surged, with container traffic increasing by 33% compared to the previous year (World Bank, 2023). This growth reflects both operational advancements and the corridor's rising importance as a secure and resilient trade pathway. The successful integration of the Middle Corridor with other emerging connectivity initiatives will be essential to realising greater efficiency and strengthening economic interdependence across Eurasia.

Taken together, these corridors, each with its geopolitical orientation, operational capacity, and structural risks, form a complex and interlinked landscape of global trade. The Development Road's geostrategic logic and multilateral design position it as a credible alternative and a complementary node in this evolving matrix of connectivity. As such, the Development Road must be analysed not in isolation but as part of a wider effort to reconfigure trade geographies in a multipolar and interdependent global order.

Assessing the Development Road from a Comparative Perspective

Within the broader context of global and regional connectivity initiatives, it is imperative to evaluate the Türkiye-Iraq Development Road Project through a comparative lens, particularly in terms of its strategic advantages. Analysing the project with alternative trade routes reveals not only elements of competition but also substantial potential for integration and cooperative engagement. The Development Road, when viewed at a regional scale, transcends a bilat-

eral framework between Türkiye and Iraq. It represents a broader model of multilateral cooperation by incorporating Gulf partners, notably Qatar and the UAE. In this sense, the project exemplifies practices of multilateral diplomacy, reflecting the strategic pragmatism increasingly characteristic of regional actors in a growingly multipolar international system.

Table 1: Comparative Assessment of Development Road Project with Major Connectivity Projects

Initiative	Construction Status	Security Risks	Positioning in a Multipolar Order	Türkiye's Role
Development Road	Advanced stage; major infrastructure components nearing completion	Low to moderate (PKK threat reduced via Türkiye-Iraq cooperation and "Terror-Free Türkiye" initiative; PMF viewed as relatively cooperative)	Neutral and inclusive; aims to promote multilateralism outside U.S.-China rivalry	Founding actor alongside Iraq; key integrator and stakeholder
CPEC	Moderate progress; Gwadar Port operational with ongoing expansions	High (persistent BLA attacks and instability in Balochistan region)	China-centric; integral part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)	Indirect competitor; Türkiye remains outside the core route
IMEC	Conceptual phase; preliminary agreements signed but infrastructure development delayed	High (security risks from Gaza conflict and Red Sea disruptions)	U.S.-aligned; strategic counterbalance to BRI	Excluded from the route
INSTC	Partially operational; additional segments under construction	Moderate (regional tensions and international sanctions on Iran)	Multipolar alignment; emphasises strategic flexibility and regional diversification	Potential partner for corridor integration via Iran
TITR (Middle Corridor)	Highly operational; experienced increased utilization following the Russia-Ukraine war	Low to moderate (relatively stable but contingent on regional dynamics)	Neutral orientation; supports Eurasian connectivity diversification	Core corridor country; serves as geographic and logistical pivot

Security Perspective

From a security standpoint, the Development Road Project may face identifiable risks, which have been largely attributed to the PKK terrorism operating in Northern Iraq and Southeast Anatolia. Potential sabotage or disruptive actions by the PKK and other hostile non-state actors to the project's critical road and railway infrastructure were cited as major insecurity factors surrounding the Development Road. Yet, the emergence of a new political development centred around the goal of achieving a "Terror-Free Türkiye" has generated a high degree of optimism regarding the prospects for PKK disarmament, potentially eliminating one of the major security impediments to the Development Road's sustainability. In June 2025, the PKK held a symbolic ceremony in Sulaymaniyah in which guns were burnt in a cauldron, publicly declaring a new step to be taken in the peace process. This development, from the perspective of the Development Road, increased the prospects for a much more secure connectivity environment in the region.

On the other hand, the rapprochement between Ankara and the new transitional Syrian administration in Damascus also merits attention. Should ongoing negotiations between Türkiye, Syria, and the U.S. lead to a gradual integration of the YPG-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) into the central government's security apparatus and other political institutions, this could create a more favourable security environment for potential future extensions of the Development Road into Syrian territory and also diminish other potential security risks. When it comes to other parameters of security risks, especially in the context of the Shiite militia in the region, risks of further disruptions due to attacks by Hezbollah or its affiliates have been significantly reduced after the fall of the Assad rule in Syria. PMF's positioning regarding the project is estimated to be shaped by political and economic calculations, as they also become parts of the Iraqi politics.

In contrast, the security risks confronting CPEC and IMEC appear to be intensifying or, at least, constant. CPEC continues to suffer from persistent terrorist attacks, predominantly orchestrated by the BLA, targeting infrastructure, Chinese personnel, and Pakistani security forces. Although there has been speculation regarding a possible Chinese military deployment (People's Liberation Army) to safeguard the project, such measures remain hypothetical and fraught with political complexities. It is important to highlight that many of the primary sources of speculation, misinformation, and disinformation originate from India, a longstanding rival of Pakistan (Murtaza and Saud, 2025).

Indian actors are acutely aware that such narratives are likely to provoke a strong public backlash within Pakistan and amplify existing anti-Chinese sentiment. This sentiment has already been exacerbated by the Baloch Liberation Army's propaganda, which portrays China as an exploiter of Pakistan's resources while framing its attacks as acts of resistance in defence of national interests.

The IMEC initiative, meanwhile, is increasingly embedded in the broader regional instability engendered by the war in Gaza since October 7, 2023. In addition to the ongoing Red Sea crisis, Iranian-backed proxy groups, particularly the Houthis, have markedly enhanced their operational reach, sometimes targeting maritime vessels in the Indian Ocean and conducting strikes against Saudi Arabia on multiple occasions before and the UAE in 2022. These developments amplify the threat spectrum facing critical land and maritime segments along the IMEC route. While multinational initiatives such as the Biden administration's Operation Prosperity Guardian, the EU's EUNAVFOR ASPIRES mission, and the most recent unilateral air campaigns under the Trump administration seek to contain these threats, prevailing assessments indicate that long-term deterrence remains uncertain (Worth, 2025; Milliken, 2025; O'Neill, 2025).

It is noteworthy that Iran's proxies, especially Hezbollah, have experienced significant attrition following the Syrian civil war, losing a critical ally and logistics platform (Yuhas and Iwaza, 2024). Consequently, their capacity for independent disruptive action against regional connectivity initiatives has likely diminished relative to previous years. However, the Houthis, perceived as a comparatively fragile yet operationally volatile proxy, continue to represent an unpredictable risk for the progress of the key components and segments of the IMEC route in the security context of the Middle Eastern connectivity.

Feasibility Perspective: Construction and Integration

When evaluated through the lens of feasibility, the Türkiye-Iraq Development Road Project presents several distinct advantages relative to other major regional connectivity initiatives. A comparative analysis with key trade corridors reveals important divergences in terms of infrastructural progress, logistical complexity, and integration potential.

Relative to the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), the

Development Road benefits from a shorter overall route length and a more advanced stage of infrastructure completion, encompassing port, road, and rail components. By the time the Development Road reaches operational status, IMEC is likely to remain in its early implementation phase, with most progress limited to high-level memoranda and provisional timelines. In particular, the land segment spanning the Arabian Peninsula, from the UAE to Israel, requires significant construction before becoming operational. Moreover, the effective realisation of IMEC's intermodal logistics vision hinges on the development of coordinated port-road and port-railway linkages, which, as of now, remain largely conceptual and lack operational frameworks.

In contrast, CPEC already possesses functional land corridors and an operational maritime hub at Gwadar Port. However, numerous infrastructure segments, including road and energy corridor expansions, are still under development. Beyond its technical progress, CPEC's feasibility remains heavily constrained by persistent security risks within Pakistani territory. Ensuring the uninterrupted functioning of its land-based routes remains the most critical determinant for the long-term viability of the project.

The International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), on the other hand, boasts a wide array of operational links and is currently undergoing further expansion. It has gained particular relevance for landlocked Eurasian states seeking diversified access to global markets (Vinokurov et al., 2023). While theoretical synergies between the INSTC and the Development Road may be envisioned, particularly through potential linkages with Iran's Bandar Abbas Port, such prospects are tempered by the continued presence of international sanctions on Iran, which constrain infrastructural integration and financial cooperation. In addition to this, for such an integration to happen, Iran should demonstrate credible levels of willingness and enthusiasm.

From a macro-regional standpoint, the Development Road's high degree of feasibility positions it as a potential complement to the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR), commonly referred to as the Middle Corridor. By introducing a Gulf dimension to the broader Asia-Europe connectivity matrix, the Development Road could enhance the strategic scope and market access of the Middle Corridor. This becomes especially significant in light of China's expanding influence in global trade routes, with the country having established itself as a central node in international supply chains over the past two decades (Hoang et al., 2023). In this context, a strategic convergence

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between the Development Road and the Middle Corridor may be seen not only as feasible but also mutually reinforcing.

To this end, the Turkish Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure has expedited the development of domestic integration infrastructure along Türkiye's section of the Development Road (Bocuoğlu Bodur and Calkaya, 2024). This effort significantly enhances the prospects for enhanced interconnection between the Middle Corridor and Gulf markets, further consolidating Türkiye's status as a key logistical and commercial hub within the transcontinental connectivity architecture.

Multipolarity Perspective

From the perspective of multipolarity, the Türkiye-Iraq Development Road Project can be situated within a broader connectivity landscape wherein middle powers and regional powers increasingly pursue strategies of multilateralism and multi-alignment. When compared with initiatives such as the IMEC, the CPEC, the INSTC, and the TITR, the Development Road stands out as a clear manifestation of economic and diplomatic multilateralism. In contrast to IMEC and CPEC, both of which are heavily shaped by the antagonistic dynamics of U.S.-China great power rivalry or pull and push factors of the U.S.-led Arab-Israeli normalisation plan, the Development Road avoids entrenchment within rigid geopolitical polarisations and offers wider manoeuvring spaces for interested parties from the Gulf and other potential European investors. Therefore, it acts with a visible inclusivity.

IMEC, positioned explicitly as a counterweight to China's BRI, may not elicit uniformly positive perceptions among all its participating states. Rather than aligning unconditionally with either pole in the emerging great power competition, many actors demonstrate a preference for strategic realignment and diversified engagement, an increasingly prominent foreign policy trend in a multipolar system. Examples of such multi-alignment strategies are abundant. India simultaneously engages in the INSTC alongside Iran, a country under U.S. sanctions, while also anchoring the initial segment of the IMEC route. Similarly, the UAE plays a central role in IMEC's Gulf connectivity segment while simultaneously participating as a stakeholder in the Development Road. Saudi Arabia's investments in both IMEC (through land and railway infrastructure) and CPEC (through some promises for energy projects centred on Gwadar Port) further illustrate how regional and middle powers leverage connectivity initiatives to maximise strategic autonomy under multipolar conditions (Haris, 2022;

Abrar, 2024). In the Gulf context, this strategy makes sense. Suorsa (2017) describes this strategic behaviour as "omni-directional hedging" through which states are unwilling to align themselves with one power or power bloc to avoid any long-term economic loss due to the changing nature of the multipolar global power system. This strategy is, in other words, a safety valve of the middle powers and the existing power configuration where regional powers have some weight in the system allows such states to act in a multi-aligned way.

This broader preference for multivectoral alignments, emphasising flexible partnerships over bloc-based rivalries, enhances the strategic appeal of the Development Road. Unlike IMEC and CPEC, the Development Road is not situated at the epicentre of U.S.-China geopolitical competition. Rather, it embodies a regional initiative wherein Türkiye expands its economic and transport diplomacy through inclusive, strategically cooperative frameworks with its neighbouring geography. Türkiye's pragmatic and inclusive approach is further exemplified by its openness to Iranian participation in the Development Road project from its inception, despite the prevailing U.S. sanctions regime. Echoing India's manoeuvring through a sanctions waiver to sign a 10-year contract for the Chabahar Port, Türkiye has pursued a solution-oriented strategy to maintain inclusivity without allowing external geopolitical constraints to undermine its regional connectivity agenda (Sajjanhar, 2025). Moreover, Türkiye has actively pursued domestic infrastructure development to capitalise on the diversion of INSTC trade flows toward the Middle Corridor as a result of sanctions against Russia, thus positioning itself as an essential node in the evolving Eurasian connectivity network.

In this regard, the Development Road holds a distinctive advantage. It offers a non-polarised, regionally driven investment and cooperation platform that avoids forcing regional states into adversarial alignments between the U.S. and China. Türkiye's emphasis on fostering integration with complementary connectivity projects across the region further reinforces this characteristic and opens up spaces for new collaboration frameworks for interested actors. Additionally, Türkiye's connectivity-centred regional diplomacy has produced tangible geopolitical dividends. Enhanced cooperation with Iraq in counterterrorism efforts and the deepening of normalisation processes with Gulf states, particularly the UAE, are indicative of how infrastructure diplomacy can catalyse broader strategic realignment and regional stabilisation.

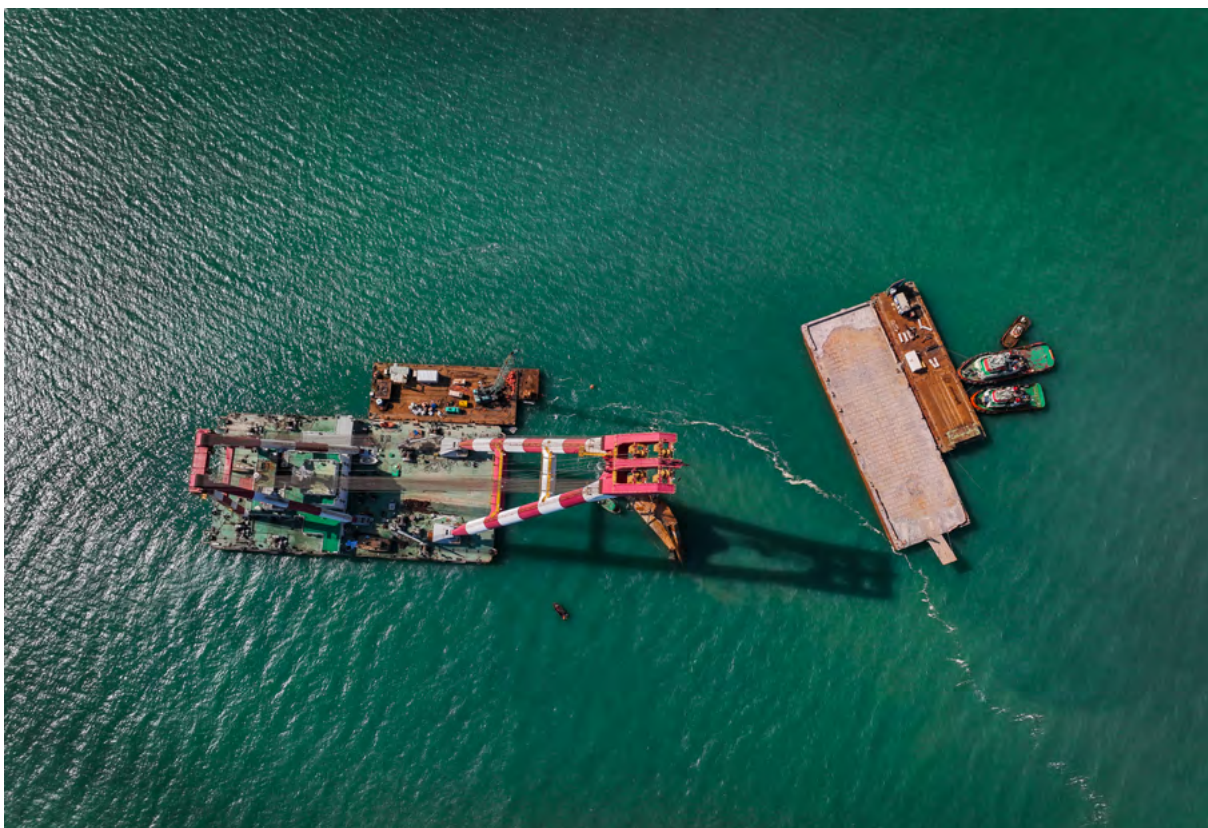
Conclusion

The Türkiye-Iraq Development Road Project serves as a compelling example of how connectivity initiatives can advance multilateral cooperation, offering economic, diplomatic, and political dividends for both regional stakeholders and global powers. Emerging amid a global transformation marked by the ascent of middle powers and the diffusion of influence in a multipolar order, the project reflects a broader shift toward strategic flexibility and multi-alignment. In this evolving landscape, states increasingly seek to capitalise on their geographic advantages or leverage strategic partnerships to actively shape regional corridors, thereby expanding their foreign policy autonomy beyond traditional alliance structures.

This study's comparative analysis of the Development Road vis-à-vis other major connectivity initiatives—namely the IMEC, CPEC, INSTC, and the Middle Corridor—underscores Türkiye's proactive approach to regional integration. The Development Road enhances Türkiye's geoeconomic relevance, aligns with broader trans-region-

al connectivity objectives, and offers clear logistical advantages in a crowded and competitive trade environment. Furthermore, the project's political viability is bolstered by growing diplomatic cooperation between Türkiye and Iraq, demonstrating how connectivity can facilitate the resolution of longstanding disputes and foster convergence around shared strategic interests.

Ultimately, the Development Road should be viewed not as an instrument of exclusion or zero-sum competition but as a pragmatic initiative that promotes multilateralism, strengthens interregional linkages, and reinforces the cooperative logic of connectivity in a multipolar world. Future research would benefit from examining the Development Road through the lens of key regional and global actors—including the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the European Union (EU), and BRICS—in order to gain deeper insights into the geopolitical ramifications of connectivity in an increasingly interdependent global system.



(Mehmet Yaren Bozğun - Anadolu Agency)

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