

Transforming India–Middle East Relations in the Digital Age: The Role of Digital Diplomacy, Digital Public Infrastructure, and the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC)

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ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of digital technologies in the twenty-first century has significantly transformed the nature of international relations and diplomatic practices. The increasing use of digital platforms, social media, artificial intelligence, digital payment systems, and data-driven governance mechanisms has created new avenues for communication, cooperation, and strategic partnerships among nations. In this evolving global landscape, digital diplomacy has emerged as a crucial instrument of contemporary foreign policy. India has achieved remarkable success in the fields of digital governance and Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) through initiatives such as Digital India, Aadhaar, the Unified Payments Interface (UPI), and various e-governance platforms, positioning itself as a global leader in digital transformation. Traditionally, India–Middle East relations have been primarily shaped by energy trade, economic cooperation, and the Indian diaspora. However, in recent years, these relations have evolved into a more comprehensive and multidimensional partnership. Growing collaboration between India and Middle Eastern countries, particularly the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and other regional actors, in areas such as digital payments, fintech, cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, smart cities, and technological innovation is redefining the contours of bilateral and regional engagement. Furthermore, the proposed digital networks, data connectivity frameworks, and technological infrastructure under the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) are creating new opportunities for regional integration and cooperation.

The findings of the study indicate that digital diplomacy is transforming India–Middle East relations beyond the traditional energy-centric framework and ushering them into a new phase characterized by technological cooperation, innovation, digital connectivity, and strategic partnerships. India's Digital Public Infrastructure and technological capabilities provide a strong foundation for effective collaboration with the digital transformation agendas of Middle Eastern countries. Consequently, digital diplomacy is emerging as a critical pillar of future India–Middle East engagement by strengthening economic integration, enhancing technological cooperation, and promoting regional connectivity. As both regions increasingly embrace digital transformation, digital diplomacy is expected to play a pivotal role in shaping a resilient, innovation-driven, and strategically interconnected partnership in the years ahead.

Keywords: Digital Diplomacy, India–Middle East Relations, Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), Digital Cooperation, UPI, Digital India, IMEC, Technological Partnerships, Connectivity, Geopolitics.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

In the global landscape of the twenty-first century, digital technologies have profoundly influenced the nature of governance, economies, societies, and international relations. The rapid advancement of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has created new dimensions of connectivity, communication, and cooperation among states. The growing adoption of the Internet, social media, artificial intelligence, big data, cloud computing, and digital platforms has transformed traditional diplomatic practices into a new form commonly referred to as **digital diplomacy**. Today, digital diplomacy extends far beyond the conventional function of promoting and communicating foreign policy. It has emerged as an effective instrument for advancing national interests, enhancing a country's global image, expanding strategic partnerships, and

strengthening international cooperation. By enabling real-time communication, broader public engagement, and more efficient policy coordination, digital diplomacy has become an integral component of contemporary foreign policy and global governance.

The interconnected processes of globalization and digitalization have also redefined the concept of power in international politics. In the contemporary era, a nation's influence is no longer determined solely by its military or economic capabilities; rather, its technological competence, digital infrastructure, and capacity for innovation have become equally significant determinants of its global standing. In this context, **Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI)** has emerged as a crucial component of modern development models. Mechanisms such as digital identity systems, digital payment platforms, and secure data exchange frameworks not only enhance the efficiency of domestic governance but also create new opportunities for international cooperation. Over the past decade, India has achieved remarkable progress in the field of digital transformation. Initiatives such as **Aadhaar**, **Unified Payments Interface (UPI)**, **DigiLocker**, **CoWIN**, and other digital platforms have positioned India as a global leader in Digital Public Infrastructure. India's digital model is founded on the principles of affordability, accessibility, and inclusive development, making it an exemplary framework for many developing countries. Consequently, India has been actively leveraging its digital capabilities to promote international cooperation and diplomatic engagement, while sharing its technological expertise and digital governance experiences at the global level.

The Middle East has long occupied a significant position in India's foreign policy. Energy security, trade interests, strategic cooperation, and the presence of a large Indian diaspora have traditionally constituted the principal pillars of India–Middle East relations. As the region is home to some of the world's leading oil and natural gas producers, the Middle East plays a crucial role in meeting India's growing energy requirements. Furthermore, India's economic and strategic engagement with countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, and Israel has expanded considerably over the years.

In recent years, these relationships have evolved beyond the traditional domains of energy and economic cooperation to encompass areas such as technology, innovation, cybersecurity, and digital transformation. Many Middle Eastern countries are currently implementing ambitious programs aimed at economic diversification and digital modernization. Saudi Arabia's *Vision 2030*, the United Arab Emirates' digital governance initiatives, and Israel's strong technological innovation ecosystem are collectively transforming the region into an important hub of the global digital economy. Within this changing environment, opportunities for digital cooperation between India and the Middle East have grown substantially. Collaboration in sectors such as digital payment systems, fintech, cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, startup ecosystems, and e-governance is creating new avenues of engagement and redefining the nature of bilateral and regional partnerships. These emerging areas of cooperation are not only strengthening economic ties but also fostering deeper strategic connectivity and technological collaboration between India and Middle Eastern countries.

In recent years, the **India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC)** has emerged as a particularly significant development in the context of India–Middle East relations. This initiative extends beyond physical infrastructure and trade connectivity, placing considerable emphasis on digital connectivity, data flows, fiber-optic networks, and advanced communication infrastructure. The concept of a digital corridor possesses the potential to strengthen global supply chains, e-commerce, digital trade, and technological cooperation. Through this framework, cooperation between India and the Middle East appears to be evolving from traditional energy-based relations toward a partnership increasingly founded on knowledge exchange, innovation, and digital collaboration. In the contemporary global order, digital technologies, data, and connectivity are increasingly viewed as strategic assets that shape economic competitiveness and geopolitical influence. Consequently, the evolving digital engagement between India and the Middle East transcends the realm of technological cooperation and carries broader geopolitical, economic, and diplomatic significance. Emerging collaboration through initiatives such as Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), digital diplomacy, and IMEC is generating new opportunities for regional integration, economic development, strategic partnerships, and global digital governance. Against this backdrop, examining the changing dynamics of India–Middle East relations has become essential for understanding contemporary international relations and the growing significance of digital diplomacy. The study of these developments offers valuable insights into how digital technologies are reshaping

interstate cooperation, redefining strategic partnerships, and contributing to the emergence of a more interconnected and digitally integrated regional order.

CONCEPT AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF DIGITAL DIPLOMACY

The rapid advancement of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the digital age has brought significant transformations to the traditional practice of diplomacy. Historically, diplomacy was largely confined to direct interactions, negotiations, and formal meetings among state representatives. However, the proliferation of the Internet, social media, artificial intelligence, and digital communication technologies has given rise to a new form of diplomatic engagement known as **digital diplomacy**. Digital diplomacy refers to the use of digital technologies and online platforms to achieve foreign policy objectives, enhance public engagement, disseminate information, manage crises, and promote international cooperation. It enables governments to engage not only with other states but also with global citizens, international organizations, private-sector actors, and diaspora communities through direct and real-time communication. The theoretical foundations of digital diplomacy are closely associated with the concepts of **soft power** and **network diplomacy**. According to the theory of soft power, a nation can influence others through attraction rather than coercion, utilizing its culture, values, policies, and technological achievements. In the digital era, this influence has become significantly more extensive through social media platforms, digital networks, and technological innovations. Digital technologies have amplified the capacity of states to project their image, communicate their narratives, and strengthen their international influence across geographical boundaries. Similarly, the concept of network diplomacy highlights that contemporary world politics is no longer driven exclusively by states. International organizations, multinational corporations, technological institutions, civil society organizations, and transnational networks have emerged as influential actors in global affairs. Digital technologies have enhanced connectivity among these diverse stakeholders, facilitating greater collaboration, information exchange, and policy coordination. As a result, diplomacy has increasingly evolved into a multidimensional and network-based process that transcends traditional state-centric interactions.

In the contemporary context, **Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI)** has emerged as a critical foundation of digital diplomacy. Components such as digital identity systems, digital payment platforms, and secure data exchange mechanisms not only strengthen domestic governance but also create new opportunities for international cooperation. India's digital initiatives, including **Aadhaar**, **Unified Payments Interface (UPI)**, and **DigiLocker**, represent notable examples of how digital technologies can promote innovation, efficiency, and inclusive development. These achievements have positioned India as a global model of digital transformation and have significantly enhanced its soft power by showcasing its technological capabilities and governance innovations. The expansion of digital diplomacy has also altered the nature of international relations. In the contemporary world, power is no longer determined solely by military strength and economic resources; technological capabilities, data governance, cybersecurity resilience, and digital connectivity have become equally important indicators of national influence. Consequently, digital technology has emerged as a vital instrument of global cooperation, competition, and influence-building. States increasingly rely on digital platforms and technological partnerships to advance their strategic interests, shape international norms, and strengthen their position within the evolving global order. In this regard, digital diplomacy has become an indispensable component of twenty-first-century foreign policy and international engagement.

Evolution of India–Middle East Relations

The relationship between India and the Middle East has a long and rich history rooted in trade, maritime connectivity, cultural exchanges, and people-to-people interactions. Since ancient times, Indian merchants have been actively engaged in commercial activities with countries across the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf region. Following independence, India's policy toward West Asia was primarily guided by the principles of energy security, non-alignment, and regional stability. Over time, changing global dynamics and evolving economic priorities have transformed these relations into a more comprehensive and multidimensional partnership. India's rapid economic growth and increasing energy demands have elevated the strategic importance of the Middle East within its foreign policy framework. A substantial portion of India's crude oil and natural gas requirements is sourced from the region, making countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Iraq, Kuwait, and

Qatar particularly significant partners. Energy cooperation has not only strengthened economic ties but has also fostered strategic trust and long-term partnerships between India and Middle Eastern states.

Beyond the energy sector, trade and investment cooperation have emerged as crucial pillars of India–Middle East relations. In recent years, bilateral trade between India and countries in the region has witnessed substantial growth. The United Arab Emirates, in particular, has become one of India's most important trading partners. Initiatives such as the **Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA)** have provided fresh momentum to economic engagement and facilitated deeper commercial integration. Furthermore, investment cooperation has expanded into a wide range of sectors, including infrastructure development, renewable energy, logistics, port development, financial technology (fintech), and advanced technologies. These developments reflect the growing diversification of India–Middle East relations and underscore the increasing importance of economic and strategic collaboration in shaping the future trajectory of bilateral and regional engagement.

India–Middle East Digital Cooperation

Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) has emerged as a critical component of contemporary digital governance, providing citizens with access to essential digital services such as digital identity, digital payments, and secure data exchange. Over the past decade, India has established a comprehensive and inclusive DPI ecosystem through the development of platforms such as **Aadhaar, Unified Payments Interface (UPI), DigiLocker, e-KYC, and CoWIN**. A defining characteristic of this model is its foundation on the principles of affordability, accessibility, and public welfare. India's DPI framework not only enhances domestic administrative efficiency but has also become an important instrument of international cooperation.

The success of India's digital governance model has received recognition from international organizations, including the World Bank and the G20, which have highlighted it as a notable example of inclusive and technology-driven development. Countries in the Middle East, particularly the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, have demonstrated growing interest in India's digital transformation experience and technological solutions as part of their own digital modernization strategies. Consequently, DPI has emerged as an effective instrument of India's digital diplomacy and a significant source of its global soft power, enabling the country to project technological leadership and foster international partnerships. India's **Unified Payments Interface (UPI)** has revolutionized the digital payments landscape by providing a fast, secure, and low-cost payment mechanism. As one of India's most successful digital innovations, UPI has transformed the way financial transactions are conducted and has positioned India among the world's leading digital payment economies. By 2025, UPI was processing more than 18 billion transactions per month, making it one of the largest real-time payment systems globally. The remarkable success of UPI has enhanced India's standing in the global digital payments ecosystem and demonstrated the potential of scalable digital public infrastructure.

The expansion of cross-border payment systems based on UPI and related technologies has the potential to simplify and enhance financial transactions for trade, tourism, and diaspora communities. Growing cooperation between India and Middle Eastern countries in the field of digital payments is creating new opportunities for economic integration and digital commerce. Furthermore, such collaboration contributes to the development of the digital economy, promotes financial inclusion, and strengthens economic connectivity between the two regions. As digital payment networks become increasingly interconnected, they are expected to play a crucial role in facilitating seamless economic exchanges and fostering deeper technological and financial cooperation between India and the Middle East.

India–UAE Digital Cooperation

The **United Arab Emirates (UAE)** has emerged as one of India's most significant digital and technological partners in recent years. Bilateral relations between the two countries have expanded considerably, encompassing key sectors such as the digital economy, artificial intelligence, fintech, data management, and smart governance. This growing collaboration reflects the shared commitment of both countries to harness technological innovation as a driver of economic growth and strategic partnership. The **Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA)** between India and the UAE has provided a strong institutional

framework for enhancing digital trade and technological cooperation. Both countries are actively promoting collaboration in digital payment systems, startup ecosystems, innovation-driven projects, and advanced technological research. Such initiatives are contributing to the creation of a robust digital partnership that complements existing economic and strategic ties.

A notable development in this regard has been the efforts to integrate India's **Unified Payments Interface (UPI)** with the UAE's **AANI** payment platform. This initiative is expected to facilitate faster, more secure, and cost-effective cross-border transactions between the two countries. Given that the UAE is home to more than three million Indians, the integration of digital payment systems holds particular significance for the Indian diaspora, businesses, and remittance flows. By simplifying financial transactions and enhancing payment interoperability, this cooperation has the potential to strengthen economic connectivity and improve financial inclusion. Consequently, digital cooperation between India and the UAE extends beyond immediate economic benefits and is increasingly becoming a cornerstone of their long-term strategic partnership. The UAE also serves as a critical gateway for India's engagement with West Asia and global markets. Through deeper collaboration in digital technologies, both countries are seeking to enhance their competitiveness and influence within the regional and global digital economy. As technological innovation continues to shape international relations, India-UAE digital cooperation is expected to play a pivotal role in advancing economic integration, fostering innovation, and strengthening strategic connectivity between the two nations.

India-Saudi Arabia Technological Cooperation

In recent years, technological and digital cooperation has emerged as an increasingly significant dimension of India-Saudi Arabia relations. Saudi Arabia's **Vision 2030** program places strong emphasis on digital transformation, economic diversification, and technological innovation as key drivers of sustainable development. In this context, India's expertise in information technology and its extensive experience in digital transformation have become highly valuable for Saudi Arabia's modernization agenda. India and Saudi Arabia have entered into several agreements aimed at enhancing cooperation in areas such as digital infrastructure, electronics manufacturing, e-health, e-learning, and emerging technologies. In 2023, the two countries signed a memorandum of understanding to strengthen collaboration in digitization and electronics manufacturing, providing new momentum to their growing technological partnership. These initiatives reflect a shared commitment to leveraging technology as a catalyst for economic growth and innovation. Cooperation between the two countries is also expanding in strategic sectors such as **artificial intelligence (AI), cloud computing, cybersecurity, smart cities, digital skills development, and advanced technologies**. Indian information technology companies are actively participating in Saudi Arabia's digital transformation programs by contributing technical expertise, innovative solutions, and human capital. Furthermore, collaboration in digital education, e-governance, research and development, and innovation-driven development projects continues to gain momentum, creating new opportunities for knowledge sharing and capacity building. This technological partnership extends beyond immediate economic benefits and contributes significantly to strengthening strategic trust between the two countries. By fostering deeper cooperation in digital technologies and innovation, India and Saudi Arabia are laying the foundation for a long-term strategic relationship aligned with the demands of the digital age. As both countries pursue ambitious digital transformation agendas, their growing collaboration has the potential to position them as key partners in the emerging knowledge-based global economy. Consequently, technological cooperation is becoming an important pillar of India-Saudi Arabia relations, complementing traditional areas of engagement such as energy security and trade while opening new avenues for strategic and economic collaboration.

India-Israel Cybersecurity and Innovation Cooperation

India-Israel relations are increasingly characterized by cooperation in innovation, research, and advanced technologies. Israel is widely recognized as one of the world's leading innovation hubs and plays a prominent role in sectors such as cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, defense technology, and startup ecosystems. Recognizing Israel's technological expertise and innovation-driven economy, India has incorporated cooperation in these areas as a vital component of its strategic partnership with Israel. In 2026, the two countries elevated their bilateral relationship to the level of a **Special Strategic Partnership** and reaffirmed their commitment to

long-term cooperation in cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, and emerging technologies. This development reflects the growing importance of technological collaboration in shaping the future trajectory of India–Israel relations and underscores the strategic value both countries attach to innovation-led cooperation. Cybersecurity has emerged as a critical dimension of national security in the digital era. As governments, businesses, and societies become increasingly dependent on digital networks and data systems, the risks associated with cyber threats, cybercrime, and digital vulnerabilities have grown substantially. In this context, cybersecurity cooperation between India and Israel has acquired particular significance. Both countries are actively enhancing collaboration in areas such as cyber defense, data protection, critical digital infrastructure security, cyber resilience, and technological research. Through knowledge sharing, joint training initiatives, and collaborative research programs, India and Israel are working to strengthen their capacities to address emerging cyber challenges. Beyond cybersecurity, growing cooperation among startups, innovation hubs, research institutions, and technology companies has accelerated knowledge transfer and technological development. Collaborative initiatives in artificial intelligence, advanced digital technologies, agricultural technology, healthcare innovation, and defense applications have further expanded the scope of bilateral engagement. Such partnerships not only contribute to technological advancement but also foster entrepreneurship, research excellence, and innovation-driven economic growth. This expanding cooperation strengthens India's digital capabilities while simultaneously reinforcing the long-term strategic partnership between the two countries. By combining Israel's technological innovation with India's scale, market potential, and digital transformation experience, both nations are creating new opportunities for mutually beneficial collaboration. Consequently, cybersecurity and innovation cooperation have emerged as key pillars of India–Israel relations, contributing to economic modernization, technological progress, and enhanced strategic resilience in an increasingly digital and interconnected world.

Strengthening India–Middle East Relations through Digital Diplomacy

Digital cooperation has provided a new dimension to India–Middle East relations, transforming the nature of engagement between the two regions. Through digital diplomacy, India has been able to showcase its technological achievements, Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), and innovation capabilities on the global stage. This has not only enhanced India's soft power but has also strengthened its international reputation as a leader in digital transformation and inclusive technological development. At the same time, Middle Eastern countries have benefited from India's expertise and experience in achieving their own objectives related to digital transformation and economic diversification. The significance of digital diplomacy extends far beyond technological cooperation. It serves as an important mechanism for building trust, enhancing policy coordination, promoting economic integration, and strengthening strategic partnerships. Growing collaboration in areas such as digital payment systems, cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, data governance, and technological innovation is deepening the relationship between India and Middle Eastern countries. These emerging areas of cooperation are creating new opportunities for knowledge exchange, institutional collaboration, and sustainable economic growth, thereby expanding the scope of bilateral and regional engagement.

In the contemporary global order, data, technology, and digital connectivity are increasingly regarded as strategic assets that influence economic competitiveness, geopolitical influence, and national security. Against this backdrop, the evolving digital cooperation between India and the Middle East represents more than an expansion of economic and technological relations. It is also contributing to regional stability, strategic balance, and the development of a future-oriented digital economy.

By facilitating greater connectivity, innovation, and technological integration, digital collaboration is helping both regions adapt to the opportunities and challenges of the digital age. Consequently, digital diplomacy has emerged as a key driver in the transformation of India–Middle East relations. It has created new avenues for cooperation that complement traditional pillars such as energy, trade, and strategic security while introducing technology and innovation as central components of bilateral engagement. As digital technologies continue to reshape international relations, digital diplomacy possesses the potential to elevate India–Middle East cooperation to unprecedented levels, fostering a more resilient, interconnected, and strategically significant partnership in the years ahead.

IMEC and the Role of Digital Connectivity

The **India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC)** was announced during the **G20 Summit held in New Delhi in September 2023**. The initiative brings together several major partners, including India, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, the European Union, France, Germany, Italy, and the United States. IMEC aims to strengthen trade, transportation, energy cooperation, and digital connectivity between India, the Middle East, and Europe. Rather than being merely a transportation corridor, the project has been envisioned as a comprehensive and multidimensional connectivity network designed to enhance regional integration and economic cooperation. The primary objectives of IMEC include reducing the cost and transit time of goods, improving the resilience and security of supply chains, and creating new opportunities for trade and investment. By integrating ports, railways, logistics networks, energy infrastructure, and digital systems, the corridor seeks to facilitate more efficient movement of goods, services, and information across participating regions. Such connectivity is expected to promote economic growth, strengthen commercial ties, and enhance strategic cooperation among member countries. In addition to its economic significance, IMEC carries considerable geopolitical importance. The initiative is widely viewed as a potential alternative to China's **Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)**, offering India and its partner countries a more diversified, transparent, and balanced framework for regional connectivity. Through IMEC, participating states seek to establish sustainable infrastructure networks and strengthen strategic linkages while reducing vulnerabilities associated with overdependence on any single connectivity model. Consequently, the corridor is increasingly regarded as an important component of the emerging geopolitical and geoeconomic landscape. By connecting South Asia, the Middle East, and Europe through an integrated network of transportation, energy, and digital infrastructure, IMEC has the potential to reshape regional connectivity patterns and redefine economic interactions across these regions. The initiative reflects a broader shift toward collaborative, technology-driven, and strategically oriented connectivity frameworks that aim to promote long-term prosperity, resilience, and regional stability.

The Concept of a Digital Corridor within IMEC

One of the most significant and innovative features of the **India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC)** is its digital dimension. Unlike traditional connectivity projects that primarily focus on railways, ports, and energy infrastructure, IMEC places digital connectivity at the core of its vision. The initiative envisages strengthening data flows, digital communications, cloud services, and high-speed internet networks across India, the Middle East, and Europe. By integrating digital infrastructure into a broader connectivity framework, IMEC seeks to create a more interconnected and technologically advanced economic corridor capable of supporting the demands of the digital age.

The concept of a **digital corridor** is based on the premise that future economies will not rely solely on the movement of goods and services but will increasingly depend on the exchange of data and digital services. As digital technologies continue to transform global economic activities, data has emerged as a critical resource driving innovation, productivity, and economic growth. In this context, the digital component of IMEC possesses the potential to institutionalize digital cooperation among India, the Middle East, and Europe, thereby fostering deeper technological integration and economic collaboration. Furthermore, the initiative can serve as a catalyst for the growth of digital trade, artificial intelligence, fintech, cloud-based services, and innovation-driven industries across participating regions.

In the contemporary digital era, data is increasingly regarded as a strategic asset with profound economic, political, and security implications. Consequently, the establishment of data corridors and fiber-optic networks has become a key element of IMEC's broader connectivity agenda. The proposed fiber-optic infrastructure is expected to facilitate high-speed data transmission between India, the Gulf region, and Europe, providing the foundational infrastructure necessary for the expansion of digital services, cloud computing, artificial intelligence, e-commerce, and financial technologies. Enhanced digital connectivity can also improve efficiency, reduce transaction costs, and support the development of knowledge-based economies. Moreover, the digital infrastructure envisioned under IMEC has the potential to strengthen the security and resilience of global internet connectivity. At present, a significant proportion of global data traffic depends on a limited number of communication routes and digital infrastructure networks. By creating an alternative and strategically diversified

digital pathway, IMEC could contribute to greater redundancy, reliability, and security in international data flows. Such diversification is increasingly important in an era characterized by growing concerns over cyber threats, digital sovereignty, and the strategic importance of data governance.

Therefore, the digital corridor component of IMEC represents far more than a technological enhancement to a transportation and trade network. It embodies a forward-looking vision of connectivity in which physical, economic, and digital infrastructures are integrated to support sustainable growth, innovation, and strategic cooperation. Through its emphasis on digital connectivity, IMEC has the potential to transform the relationship between India, the Middle East, and Europe by creating a technologically interconnected ecosystem that promotes economic integration, digital transformation, and long-term regional prosperity. This initiative is particularly significant for India, as the country seeks to establish itself as a major hub of the global digital economy. The development of data corridors and fiber-optic networks can create new opportunities for India's digital services sector, information technology industry, and technology companies. By enhancing digital connectivity with the Middle East and Europe, IMEC has the potential to strengthen India's position within global digital value chains and expand its role in the international digital marketplace. One of the most direct impacts of digital connectivity can be observed in the fields of **digital trade and e-commerce**. Through IMEC, digital platforms, online services, fintech solutions, and cross-border digital transactions can be made more efficient, secure, and accessible. This, in turn, is expected to facilitate the expansion of digital trade among India, the Middle East, and Europe. India is currently one of the world's fastest-growing digital economies, while the Gulf region is emerging as a significant center for digital investment and technological innovation. By connecting these dynamic regions with European markets, IMEC can create an extensive digital trade network that promotes economic integration and technological collaboration.

Such connectivity is likely to generate substantial opportunities for **small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), startups, and technology-driven firms** by providing them with greater access to international markets. Improved coordination among digital payment systems, e-commerce platforms, and financial technologies can further reduce barriers to cross-border trade. As a result, business efficiency can be enhanced, transaction costs can be lowered, and economic activities can be accelerated across participating regions. The digital ecosystem envisioned under IMEC therefore has the potential to support entrepreneurship, innovation, and inclusive economic growth on a transregional scale. Furthermore, IMEC should not be viewed solely as an infrastructure development project; it also serves as an important mechanism for **regional economic and digital integration**. Economic integration refers to the processes through which different national economies develop deeper levels of interdependence, cooperation, and connectivity. Digital connectivity significantly enhances this process by enabling the seamless exchange of information, services, capital, and technological knowledge across borders. One of the key advantages of digital integration is that it extends regional cooperation beyond physical connectivity and traditional trade relations. By fostering knowledge sharing, technological innovation, digital entrepreneurship, and collaborative research, digital integration contributes to the creation of a more dynamic and interconnected regional economy. Such developments can generate long-term benefits, including sustainable economic growth, employment creation, productivity enhancement, and increased global competitiveness. Consequently, the digital dimension of IMEC represents a transformative opportunity to strengthen economic linkages and promote innovation-driven development across India, the Middle East, and Europe.

Challenges

Cybersecurity

With the expansion of digital diplomacy, Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), and digital connectivity, **cybersecurity** has emerged as one of the most significant challenges in contemporary international relations. The growing digital cooperation between India and the Middle East has created substantial economic, technological, and strategic opportunities; however, it has also increased exposure to cyber threats and vulnerabilities. In the digital era, governments, financial institutions, energy infrastructure, communication networks, and digital payment systems have become potential targets of cyberattacks. Consequently, the success and sustainability of digital cooperation depend largely on the strength and resilience of cybersecurity frameworks. The seriousness of cyber threats in India can be understood from the increasing number of cyber

incidents targeting critical digital infrastructure. As digitalization expands across sectors, cyberattacks have become more frequent, sophisticated, and disruptive. The growing dependence on digital platforms for governance, financial transactions, public services, and communication has amplified the potential risks associated with cybercrime, data breaches, ransomware attacks, and cyber espionage. These challenges highlight the need for robust cybersecurity policies, advanced technological safeguards, and effective international cooperation in cyber defense. Similarly, the Middle East has become an important target for cyber threats due to its rapidly expanding digital infrastructure and strategic economic significance. Countries such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia have invested heavily in digital transformation initiatives, smart city projects, and advanced technological systems. While these developments have accelerated economic modernization, they have also increased vulnerabilities to cyberattacks. Government institutions, financial systems, energy facilities, and critical infrastructure remain among the primary targets of cybercriminals and state-sponsored cyber actors. The interconnected nature of digital networks means that cybersecurity challenges are no longer confined within national borders. As India and Middle Eastern countries deepen their cooperation in digital payments, fintech, artificial intelligence, cloud computing, and data exchange, ensuring the security of digital ecosystems becomes increasingly important. Cyberattacks on one part of an interconnected network can have far-reaching consequences across multiple sectors and countries. Therefore, cybersecurity has become a crucial component of digital diplomacy and technological cooperation. Addressing these challenges requires greater collaboration in cyber defense, threat intelligence sharing, capacity building, cybersecurity regulations, and the protection of critical digital infrastructure. Strengthening cooperation in these areas can help India and Middle Eastern countries build resilient digital ecosystems capable of supporting long-term economic growth, technological innovation, and secure digital connectivity. Consequently, cybersecurity is not merely a technical concern but a strategic imperative for sustaining the future of India–Middle East digital cooperation and ensuring the success of initiatives such as Digital Public Infrastructure and the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). The use of digital payments, data exchange mechanisms, cloud services, and artificial intelligence-based systems is expanding rapidly between India and Middle Eastern countries. As a result, the protection of sensitive information and critical digital infrastructure has become increasingly important. Any cyberattack targeting these systems could have consequences extending far beyond economic activities, affecting national security, public service delivery, and international cooperation. Consequently, cybersecurity has become a fundamental requirement for ensuring the reliability, resilience, and sustainability of digital cooperation initiatives. The growing integration of digital ecosystems between India and the Middle East has elevated cybersecurity from a purely technical concern to a strategic policy issue. As digital platforms become more interconnected, vulnerabilities within one system can potentially affect multiple sectors and countries. Therefore, safeguarding digital infrastructure, securing data flows, and protecting critical networks have become essential components of contemporary digital diplomacy and international technological cooperation.

In this context, cybersecurity cooperation between India and Middle Eastern countries has assumed greater significance. Particular attention has been given to India's collaboration with Israel, which is widely regarded as a global leader in cybersecurity innovation and cyber defense technologies. Bilateral cooperation in areas such as cyber defense, threat intelligence, digital infrastructure protection, and cybersecurity research has contributed to strengthening the resilience of both countries against emerging cyber threats. Such partnerships demonstrate the growing recognition that cybersecurity is an indispensable pillar of strategic and technological cooperation in the digital age. Addressing cyber threats effectively requires comprehensive measures, including information sharing, joint training programs, technological collaboration, capacity building, and the development of common cybersecurity standards and regulatory frameworks. Strengthening cooperation in these areas can enhance preparedness against cyberattacks, improve incident response capabilities, and foster greater trust among participating countries. Moreover, coordinated cybersecurity strategies can help ensure the secure functioning of digital payment systems, cloud platforms, data networks, and other critical digital services that support economic and social activities. Therefore, cybersecurity represents one of the most significant challenges facing India–Middle East digital cooperation. At the same time, it also offers an opportunity for deeper strategic collaboration and institutional engagement. If addressed effectively, cybersecurity cooperation can provide a secure foundation for digital diplomacy, Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), and digital connectivity initiatives. This, in turn, will contribute to creating a more resilient, secure, and sustainable digital ecosystem capable of supporting long-term economic integration, technological innovation, and regional cooperation between India and the Middle East.

Data Sovereignty and Data Governance

In the digital age, **data** has emerged as a new strategic asset. Just as natural resources and energy were critical sources of national power during the industrial era, data has become a fundamental driver of economic development, technological innovation, and national security in the twenty-first century. In the context of growing digital cooperation between India and the Middle East, including digital payment systems, artificial intelligence, cloud services, and the proposed digital corridor under the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), the significance of data has increased substantially. Consequently, **data sovereignty** and **data governance** have emerged as critical policy and security concerns. Data sovereignty refers to a country's legal and regulatory authority over data generated by its citizens, institutions, and organizations. Governments seek to ensure that sensitive data remains secure and is managed in accordance with national laws, regulations, and strategic interests. As digital transactions, cross-border data flows, and technological collaboration between India and Middle Eastern countries continue to expand, important questions arise regarding where data should be stored, who should exercise control over it, and how its security and privacy can be guaranteed. In recent years, India has taken significant steps to strengthen its regulatory framework concerning data protection, privacy, and digital governance. Similarly, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf countries have been developing comprehensive regulatory mechanisms related to data protection, cybersecurity, and digital governance. However, differences in national legal frameworks, regulatory standards, and data localization requirements may create challenges for cross-border data flows and digital cooperation. Divergent approaches to data management and privacy protection can complicate efforts to establish seamless digital connectivity and interoperable digital ecosystems. The importance of data governance becomes even more pronounced in the context of **IMEC**, as the initiative extends beyond the transportation of goods and energy to include digital networks and data corridors. Ensuring the seamless flow of data between India, the Middle East, and Europe will require the development of common standards, transparent regulations, interoperable frameworks, and secure data management systems. Effective data governance can facilitate the growth of digital trade, artificial intelligence applications, fintech services, cloud-based innovations, and e-commerce activities by creating a predictable and secure digital environment. Conversely, weak data protection mechanisms and inadequate governance frameworks can increase the risks of cybercrime, data breaches, unauthorized surveillance, and digital mistrust. Such vulnerabilities may undermine confidence in digital platforms and hinder the expansion of cross-border technological cooperation. Therefore, establishing robust governance structures is essential for maintaining trust and ensuring the long-term sustainability of digital integration initiatives.

In this regard, India and Middle Eastern countries must work collaboratively to develop a comprehensive data governance framework that balances data security, privacy protection, digital rights, and economic innovation. Enhanced cooperation in regulatory harmonization, cybersecurity standards, data protection policies, and digital governance mechanisms can contribute to a secure and resilient digital ecosystem. Such an approach will not only strengthen digital cooperation but also support the broader objectives of economic integration, technological advancement, and strategic connectivity envisioned under IMEC and other regional digital initiatives.

Impact of Regional Geopolitical Tensions

The Middle East is widely regarded as one of the world's most strategically significant and geopolitically sensitive regions. For decades, the region has faced challenges arising from political instability, regional conflicts, strategic rivalries, and security concerns. Despite the growing digital, economic, and strategic cooperation between India and Middle Eastern countries, regional geopolitical tensions continue to pose significant challenges to the sustainability and expansion of these partnerships. In recent years, developments such as the Israel–Palestine conflict, competition between Iran and several Gulf states, and broader regional security concerns have affected the stability of the Middle East. The consequences of these tensions extend beyond political and security affairs, influencing trade, investment, energy supply chains, and digital connectivity initiatives. The success of ambitious projects such as the **India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC)** is closely linked to the maintenance of regional stability and a secure geopolitical environment.

Digital infrastructure and data networks have become fundamental pillars of modern economies and international connectivity. Consequently, any form of regional conflict has the potential to disrupt the security, reliability, and operation of these networks. Cyber warfare, digital espionage, and attacks on critical infrastructure have emerged as new dimensions of geopolitical competition in the twenty-first century. As states increasingly rely on digital systems for governance, commerce, communication, and national security, digital infrastructure has become both a strategic asset and a potential vulnerability. Therefore, digital cooperation between India and the Middle East must be understood not only from an economic and technological perspective but also through the lens of security and geopolitical risk. India has traditionally pursued a balanced and pragmatic approach in its engagement with the Middle East, maintaining constructive relations with diverse actors across the region. This balanced foreign policy enables India to sustain dialogue, cooperation, and strategic engagement even amid regional tensions and conflicts. By avoiding excessive alignment with competing regional blocs, India has been able to preserve its credibility and expand its partnerships across the Middle East. Such an approach is particularly important in the context of emerging digital and technological cooperation, which requires stable and predictable diplomatic relationships.

Digital diplomacy can play a significant role in addressing these challenges by creating new avenues for communication, confidence-building, and collaborative problem-solving. Through digital platforms, technological partnerships, and institutional cooperation, countries can strengthen mutual trust and enhance coordination in areas such as cybersecurity, data governance, and digital infrastructure protection. These mechanisms can contribute to reducing misunderstandings and promoting greater regional cooperation in an increasingly interconnected digital environment. Although regional geopolitical tensions present substantial challenges to India–Middle East digital cooperation, growing economic interdependence and technological integration also offer opportunities to mitigate these risks. Shared interests in digital transformation, innovation, trade, and connectivity can serve as incentives for sustained cooperation despite political differences. Therefore, ensuring long-term stability and the success of digital initiatives will require continued political dialogue, stronger regional partnerships, confidence-building measures, and the development of resilient digital ecosystems. By prioritizing these elements, India and Middle Eastern countries can strengthen their cooperation and maximize the benefits of digital diplomacy in an evolving geopolitical landscape.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Governance and Regulation

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as one of the most transformative technologies driving digital transformation in the contemporary era. It is no longer merely a tool of technological innovation; rather, it has become a critical driver of economic development, administrative efficiency, national security, and international competitiveness. In the context of growing digital cooperation between India and Middle Eastern countries, the role of AI is becoming increasingly significant. AI-powered systems are being rapidly adopted across a wide range of sectors, including healthcare, education, finance, energy management, smart cities, cybersecurity, and e-governance, thereby reshaping the way governments, businesses, and societies operate. India has emphasized the development and responsible use of artificial intelligence through its national AI strategies and digital transformation initiatives. Simultaneously, countries in the Middle East have demonstrated a strong commitment to advancing AI capabilities. The United Arab Emirates became the first country in the world to appoint a dedicated Minister of State for Artificial Intelligence, highlighting its ambition to become a global leader in emerging technologies. Likewise, Saudi Arabia has prioritized artificial intelligence and advanced technologies as key components of its **Vision 2030** agenda, investing heavily in research, innovation, and digital infrastructure. These developments illustrate that both India and Middle Eastern countries view AI as a fundamental pillar of future economic growth, governance modernization, and technological advancement. Despite its immense potential, the expansion of AI also presents a range of complex challenges. Issues such as **algorithmic bias, data privacy concerns, lack of transparency, employment displacement, digital inequality, and the potential misuse of AI technologies** have emerged as major concerns for policymakers and regulatory authorities. The increasing reliance on AI systems raises important questions regarding accountability, fairness, and ethical decision-making. Without appropriate safeguards, AI-driven technologies may reinforce existing social inequalities, undermine public trust, and create new forms of digital exclusion.

Furthermore, AI has introduced new security challenges at both national and international levels. AI-enabled cyberattacks, deepfake technologies, autonomous weapon systems, and sophisticated disinformation campaigns have emerged as significant threats to political stability, cybersecurity, and national security. These developments have intensified debates regarding the governance of emerging technologies and the need for international cooperation in regulating their use. As AI capabilities continue to evolve, governments face the challenge of balancing innovation with security, ethical considerations, and public accountability. The importance of AI governance and regulation becomes even more pronounced in the context of expanding digital cooperation between India and the Middle East. Differences in regulatory frameworks, ethical standards, and technological policies may create obstacles to cross-border digital collaboration if not adequately addressed. Therefore, greater coordination on AI-related standards, governance mechanisms, and ethical principles is essential for fostering trust and interoperability among digital ecosystems. To maximize the benefits of AI while minimizing associated risks, India and Middle Eastern countries should work together to develop common regulatory frameworks, data protection standards, ethical guidelines, and mechanisms for responsible AI deployment. Such cooperation can facilitate innovation, enhance technological collaboration, and ensure that AI contributes to sustainable economic development and social progress. Consequently, effective AI governance is likely to become a crucial component of future India–Middle East digital cooperation, supporting digital diplomacy, technological partnerships, and the broader objectives of regional and global digital transformation. A key objective of AI governance is to establish an appropriate balance between innovation and regulation. Excessive regulation may hinder technological advancement and limit opportunities for innovation, while insufficient oversight can increase social, ethical, and security-related risks. Therefore, India and Middle Eastern countries must develop policy frameworks that simultaneously encourage technological innovation and safeguard citizens' rights, privacy, and security. Achieving this balance is essential for fostering public trust in AI technologies and ensuring their responsible and sustainable deployment across different sectors. Consequently, effective governance and regulation of artificial intelligence are crucial for the long-term success of India–Middle East digital cooperation. A robust and collaborative AI governance framework will not only make technological development more secure, transparent, and accountable but will also strengthen digital diplomacy, economic cooperation, and regional stability. By promoting responsible innovation, harmonizing regulatory approaches, and enhancing international collaboration, India and Middle Eastern countries can harness the transformative potential of AI while mitigating its associated risks. In this regard, AI governance is likely to emerge as a cornerstone of future digital partnerships, supporting sustainable development, technological progress, and deeper strategic engagement between India and the Middle East.

Future Prospects

Digital cooperation between India and the Middle East has emerged as an important reality in contemporary international relations; however, its future potential extends far beyond its current scope. Initiatives such as **Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), digital payment systems, artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, data governance, and the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC)** have laid a strong foundation for deeper and more comprehensive collaboration. In the coming years, these developments have the potential to transform India–Middle East relations into an increasingly multidimensional partnership characterized by technological innovation, economic integration, and strategic connectivity.

One of the most promising areas of future cooperation lies in the **digital economy**. India is among the fastest-growing digital economies in the world, while the Gulf countries are actively pursuing economic diversification strategies aimed at reducing their dependence on hydrocarbon revenues and transitioning toward knowledge- and technology-based economic models. As a result, the capabilities and developmental priorities of both sides are highly complementary. Significant opportunities exist in areas such as digital trade, fintech, e-commerce, startup ecosystems, and innovation-driven entrepreneurship. These sectors are likely to become major drivers of economic engagement and technological collaboration in the years ahead. The proposed digital corridor, data networks, and fiber-optic connectivity under IMEC have the potential to elevate digital connectivity between India, the Middle East, and Europe to unprecedented levels. Enhanced digital infrastructure can facilitate seamless cross-border data flows, expand digital services, and support the growth of innovation-based industries. By combining India's expertise in Digital Public Infrastructure with the investment capabilities and technological ambitions of Middle Eastern countries, a new model of international digital cooperation may

emerge. Such a model could serve as an example of how digital technologies can be leveraged to promote inclusive growth, regional integration, and sustainable development. Furthermore, substantial opportunities exist for cooperation in emerging sectors such as **artificial intelligence, cybersecurity, cloud computing, green technologies, and smart cities**. Countries such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia are investing heavily in these fields, while India possesses significant technological expertise, a large pool of skilled professionals, and a rapidly expanding innovation ecosystem. Greater collaboration in these areas can stimulate job creation, accelerate technological innovation, and contribute to long-term economic growth across the region. Digital diplomacy is also likely to become an increasingly important instrument of India's foreign policy in the future. Through the global promotion of its Digital Public Infrastructure model, digital payment systems, and technological innovations, India can strengthen its position as a trusted and reliable digital partner. Such engagement will enable India to expand its influence beyond traditional economic cooperation and foster deeper strategic and technological partnerships with Middle Eastern countries. In this regard, digital diplomacy can serve as a bridge connecting economic interests, technological collaboration, and broader geopolitical objectives.

Overall, the future prospects of India–Middle East digital cooperation suggest that it may become one of the most dynamic and influential dimensions of bilateral and regional relations in the coming decades. If current initiatives are implemented effectively and supported by sustained political commitment, institutional cooperation, and technological innovation, both sides will be well positioned to play a significant role in shaping the evolving global digital order. Consequently, digital cooperation is expected to emerge as a key pillar of future India–Middle East relations, driving economic prosperity, technological advancement, and strategic partnership in an increasingly interconnected world.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that digital diplomacy has introduced a new dimension to India–Middle East relations. Traditionally, the relationship between the two regions was primarily based on energy security, trade, investment, and the Indian diaspora. However, in the digital age of the twenty-first century, new areas of cooperation—including Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI), digital payment systems, cybersecurity, artificial intelligence, and digital connectivity—have emerged as significant pillars of engagement. As a result, India–Middle East relations are no longer confined to economic and political cooperation but are increasingly evolving into a technology-driven and knowledge-based strategic partnership. The study demonstrates that India's Digital Public Infrastructure model, particularly initiatives such as Aadhaar, the Unified Payments Interface (UPI), DigiLocker, and other digital platforms, has become an important instrument of its digital diplomacy. These initiatives have strengthened India's position as a reliable and trusted technological partner in the global digital landscape. Digital payment cooperation with the United Arab Emirates, technological partnerships with Saudi Arabia, and cybersecurity and innovation collaboration with Israel represent significant examples of this transformation. Such initiatives have enhanced India's soft power while simultaneously providing Middle Eastern countries with new opportunities to advance their digital transformation agendas. The findings further indicate that the India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) is emerging as a transformative initiative in the evolution of India–Middle East relations. IMEC is not merely a transportation and trade corridor; it is also an ambitious effort to establish a comprehensive framework of regional connectivity through digital infrastructure, data corridors, fiber-optic networks, and digital trade. If implemented successfully, the initiative has the potential to accelerate both economic and digital integration among India, the Middle East, and Europe, thereby contributing to greater regional interdependence and connectivity. At the same time, the study highlights several challenges that may affect the future trajectory of digital cooperation. Cybersecurity risks, concerns related to data sovereignty, regional geopolitical tensions, and the complexities surrounding the governance and regulation of artificial intelligence present significant obstacles to deeper collaboration. In particular, political instability in certain parts of the Middle East and the growing sophistication of cyber threats pose serious challenges to the security and sustainability of digital initiatives. Therefore, the success of digital cooperation will depend not only on technological advancement but also on effective governance, regulatory coordination, international cooperation, and mutual trust among participating countries.

Overall, the study argues that digital diplomacy has become a crucial catalyst in the transformation of India–Middle East relations. Digital cooperation is creating new opportunities for economic growth, technological

innovation, digital inclusion, and regional integration for both sides. As digital technologies and connectivity continue to play an increasingly important role in international relations, cooperation between India and the Middle East is expected to deepen further in the coming years. Consequently, digital diplomacy is not only strengthening contemporary relations but is also laying the foundation for a more comprehensive and resilient strategic partnership in the future. In conclusion, the convergence of India's digital capabilities and the Middle East's technological ambitions is creating a new paradigm of cooperation based on innovation, connectivity, and shared development. This emerging partnership has the potential to shape the future of regional and global digital governance, while contributing to a more interconnected, secure, and digitally empowered international order.

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