

Trump and US-leaning  
Asia—with implications for  
Hungary

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### *Abstract*

*The incoming Trump administration appears to take a hawkish stance on China. However, virtually half of Asia can be categorised as US-leaning, placed within a multi-level system of US-led alliances and partnerships. How far does US influence extend in Asia? How does the economies and demographic weight of the US-leaning half of Asia relate to that of the China-leaning half of Asia? What are the implications of all this for Hungary?*

### Introduction

Being hawkish on China has always been a trademark of President-elect Donald Trump. His recent appointees—Marco Rubio, Mike Waltz, and Pete Hegseth, who are selected for the roles of Secretary of State, National Security Adviser, and Secretary of Defense, respectively—seem to confirm that this will hold for the incoming Trump administration, too.<sup>1</sup> How realistic the apparently hawkish China stance of the second Trump administration will be depends on how much influence the US wields in Asia. Over the decades, the United States has built partnerships and alliances in Asia on several levels, and the importance of these will likely increase if the Trump administration goes after China. By demanding all its allies increase their military spending and become more self-reliant on defence, Trump moves towards great power competition based on offshore balancing. If the US strategy in the region shifts towards such a grand strategy, this will significantly increase the importance of the US-leaning half of Asia.

This trend may also have significant implications for Hungary's connectivity strategy, making it more difficult for Hungary to reconcile its China relations with its US alliance. On the other hand, it could enhance opportunities for Hungary to build ties with the US-leaning half of Asia, for example through participation in the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) or through economic relations with countries of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF).

Trump simultaneously promised to continue to curtail China's influence and to pursue protectionist policies on the global level as well. The combination of these two, however, represents a dilemma for Trump. Containing China works best if the US can convince as many countries as possible to side with it vis-à-vis China. Convincing countries to side with it vis-à-vis China, however, works best if the US offers them benefits in international trade and investment, which, in turn, would require the Trump administration to make some significant exemptions on its overall protectionist policies for a large number of countries. During his first term, Trump withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnerships, the main US-led economic initiative in Asia at the time, and, in 2023, he vowed to also withdraw from the current main US economic initiative in Asia, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework.<sup>2</sup> Yet, if he does so, he may push the region towards China. How Trump attempts to solve this dilemma will be crucial in the upcoming months.

Whereas the military alliance and partnerships described in this paper will most likely be solid elements of the international order throughout the upcoming years, the economic alliance and partnership networks described in this paper represent potentials that are actualised to varying degrees rather than a *fait accompli*. Suppose the Trump administration decides that containing China is worth the price of offering strategic partners significant exemptions from the planned protectionist policies. In that case, they can integrate into a new global economic network covering half of Asia.

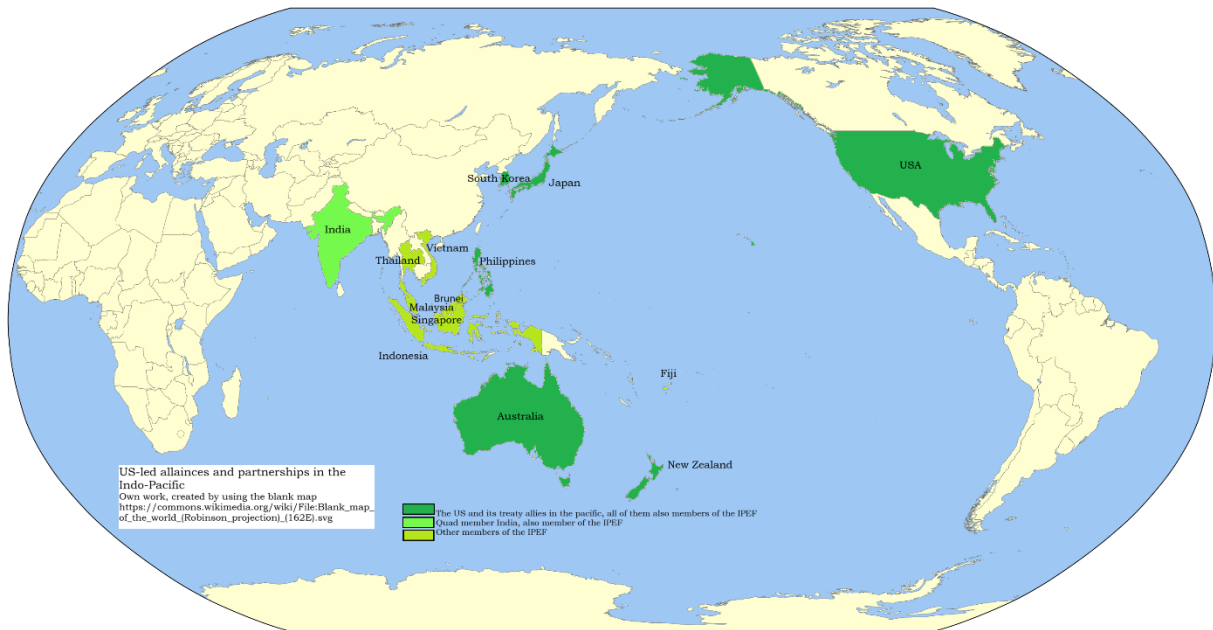
## From the Quad to the IPEF: US allies and partners in the Indo-Pacific

The states that comprise the US-leaning half of the Asia Pacific have varying degrees of political proximity to the United States, forming four concentric rings. The innermost ring is the five states that make up the **Five Eyes** states.

1. The Five Eyes is the intelligence agreement between Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The intelligence sharing of these five states is supported by a series of agreements aiming for military convergence, such as the ABCANZ Armies agreement, the AFIC, the AUSCANNZUKUS, the CCEB, and the TTCP agreements. Out of these five states, Australia and New Zealand are located in the Asia-Pacific.

2. The second ring is the collective security **treaty allies of the United States**. Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines belong to this group in the region. They have US bases on their soil.
3. The third ring is **the Quad** (the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue), the loose strategic coalition between India, the US, and two major treaty allies of the latter, Australia and Japan. Briefly established in 2007-2008 and then re-established in 2017, the Quad has the undeclared but obvious aim of containing China.<sup>3</sup> The Quad is not a collective security arrangement but rather a loose strategic partnership, analogous perhaps to the strategic partnership between the United States and China against the Soviet Union in the seventies and eighties.
4. The outermost ring is the IPEF, i.e., the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework. The IPEF consists of the four Quad member states (Australia, India, Japan, and the United States); seven out of the ten ASEAN nations, namely Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Vietnam and Thailand; US treaty allies South Korea and New Zealand; and the Pacific island nation Fiji. Before establishing the IPEF in 2022, the US had been criticised for focusing too much on security arrangements in its Asia policy, allowing China to dominate trade and investment partnerships with the BRI (Belt Road Initiative) and the RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership). That said, America's IPEF is still embryonic. At this point, it does not include a uniform lowering of tariffs.<sup>4</sup>

Militarily relevant is that the US alliances in the Indo-Pacific practically encircle China. To the east, Japan, the Philippines, and de facto US ally Taiwan form the First Island Chain from a naval perspective, enclosing China to the littoral seas, and shutting it off from the open ocean. On the north, the Island Chain links with US treaty ally South Korea, representing a linkage between it and the continent. In the south, Indonesia, though unaligned, represents a firm stand against China in the South China Sea dispute and maintains security cooperation with the US, making it more US-leaning than China-leaning on security affairs. Indonesia completes the First Island Chain from the Philippines to the strategic Strait of Malacca, where virtually all of China's crude oil imports from the Gulf region pass through. Further west, India completes a strategic encirclement around China with the two countries' shared border in the Himalayas.



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Revealing the potential of the IPEF, its combined population is larger than, and its combined GDP of the same order of magnitude as, the combined GDP of China plus China-leaning countries that are not members of IPEF. As the closest non-IPEF partners of China in East, Southeast, and South Asia, I categorised Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Pakistan (North Korea should also be added to this group, however the IMF has no data for it) : According to the IMF, the combined nominal GDP of Cambodia, China (Hong Kong and Macao included), Laos, Myanmar, and Pakistan for the year 2024 is estimated to be 19,2 trillion USD. In comparison, the combined nominal GDP for 2024 of the Asian members of the IPEF (excluding the United States and the three Oceanian member countries, Australia, Fiji, and New Zealand)—that is, Brunei, India, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam—is estimated to be 13,7 trillion.<sup>6</sup>

China and its closest partners in South and Southeast Asia; Source: International Monetary Fund <a href="https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2024/October">https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2024/October</a>	Estimated nominal GDP in 2024 billion USD
China	18273
Hong Kong	402
Pakistan	375

Myanmar	64
Macao	53
Cambodia	47
Laos	15
SUM	19230

7

Asian members of the IPEF; Source: International Monetary Fund <a href="https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2024/October">https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2024/October</a>	Estimated nominal GDP in 2024 billion USD
Japan	4070
India	3889
Korea	1870
Indonesia	1403
Singapore	531
Thailand	529
Philippines	470
Vietnam	468
Malaysia	440
Brunei Darussalam	16
SUM	13686

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Though smaller than that of China and its partners, the economy of the US-leaning half of Asia is roughly on the same order of magnitude. The combined GDP of the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and Fiji for 2024 is estimated to be 31,2 trillion USD, making the entire IPEF 44,4 trillion USD, which is more than double that of China and its close Asian partners. In terms of GDP-PPP for 2024, the ten Asian member states of IPEF are estimated to stand at 37,6 trillion, while the above-described group of China and its close partners is at 39,8 trillion.

It is also worth comparing growth rates: The IMF forecast goes as far as 2029, but as it has no nominal GDP data for Pakistan for that year, we can only compare the growth rates of the two groups of countries for 2029, and their growth rates till then in GDP-

PPP. In this category in 2029, the Asian members of IPEF are predicted to stand at 51,6 trillion USD, while the China & co. group is at 52,4 trillion USD.<sup>9</sup>

China and its closest partners in South and Southeast Asia; Source: International Monetary Fund <a href="https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2024/October">https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2024/October</a>	Estimated GDP-PPP in 2024 billion USD	GDP-PPP estimate for 2029, billion USD
China	37072	48836
Pakistan	1584	2117
Hong Kong	570	712
Myanmar	284	334
Cambodia	140	205
Macao	90	121
Laos	75	94
SUM	39815	52421

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Asian members of IPEF; Source: International Monetary Fund <a href="https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2024/October">https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/weo-database/2024/October</a>	Estimated GDP-PPP in 2024 billion USD	GDP-PPP estimate for 2029, billion USD
India	16020	24015
Japan	6572	7474
Indonesia	4658	6531
Korea	3258	3962
Thailand	1772	2220
Vietnam	1632	2374
Malaysia	1373	1842
Philippines	1367	2029
Singapore	880	1090
Brunei Darussalam	41	51

SUM	37573	51590
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This shows that the economy of the US-leaning half of Asia is not only of a similar size to that of China and its close partners but is growing faster.<sup>12</sup> Regarding population, the ten Asian members of IPEF combined, represent 2,24 billion people, while the China plus group represents 1,76 billion.<sup>13</sup>

China and its closest partners in South and Southeast Asia; Source: United Nations, <a href="https://population.un.org/dataportal/home">https://population.un.org/dataportal/home</a>	Population in millions
China	1 419
Pakistan	251
Myanmar	55
Cambodia	18
Laos	8
Hong Kong	7
Macao	1
SUM	1 759

14

Asian member states of IPEF; Source: United Nations, <a href="https://population.un.org/dataportal/home">https://population.un.org/dataportal/home</a>	Population in millions
India	1 451
Indonesia	283
Japan	124
Philippines	116
Vietnam	101
Thailand	72
Republic of Korea	52
Malaysia	36
Singapore	6
Brunei	0,5



SUM	2 242
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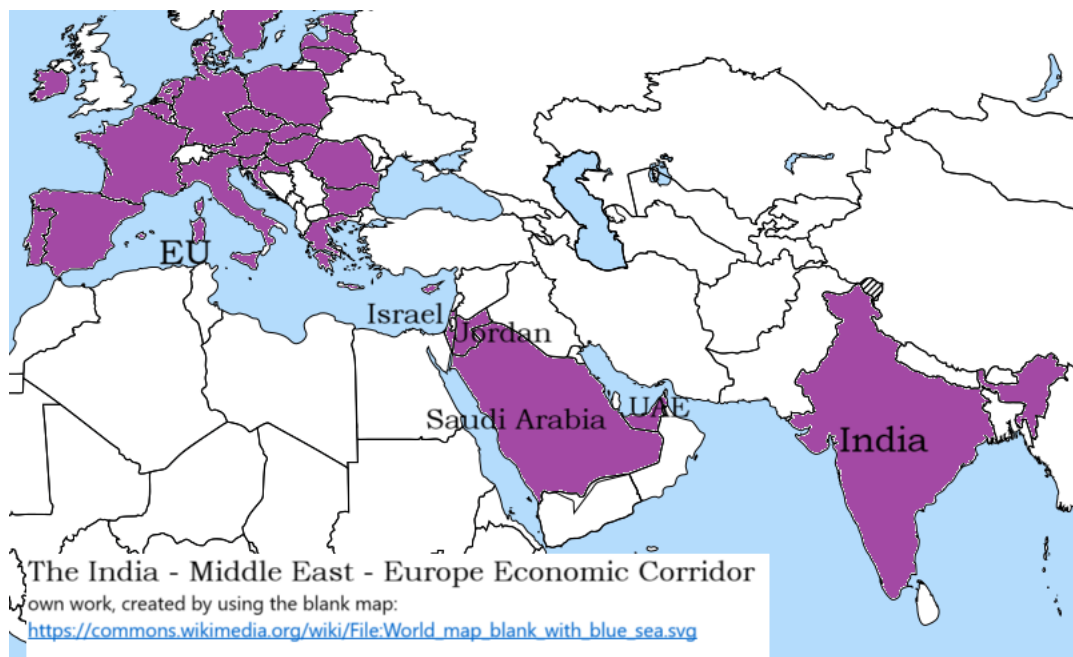
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For Hungary, the sheer size of IPEF shows the opportunities this region may offer in the long run. Also, as we can see, its economic growth is getting faster than China's. In the long run, the engine of Asia's growth is shifting towards the south. Instead of with China, building relations with this half of Asia would not be troublesome for Hungary's alliance with the United States. While mainly consisting of treaty allies and strategic partners of the US, IPEF also includes some countries that could rather be categorised as unaligned, such as Thailand, yet even such countries are viewed favourably by the US, so building relations with them would also grant the same benefits to Hungary.

## Alternatives to China's BRI in the Middle East: The IMEC and the Iraq Development Road

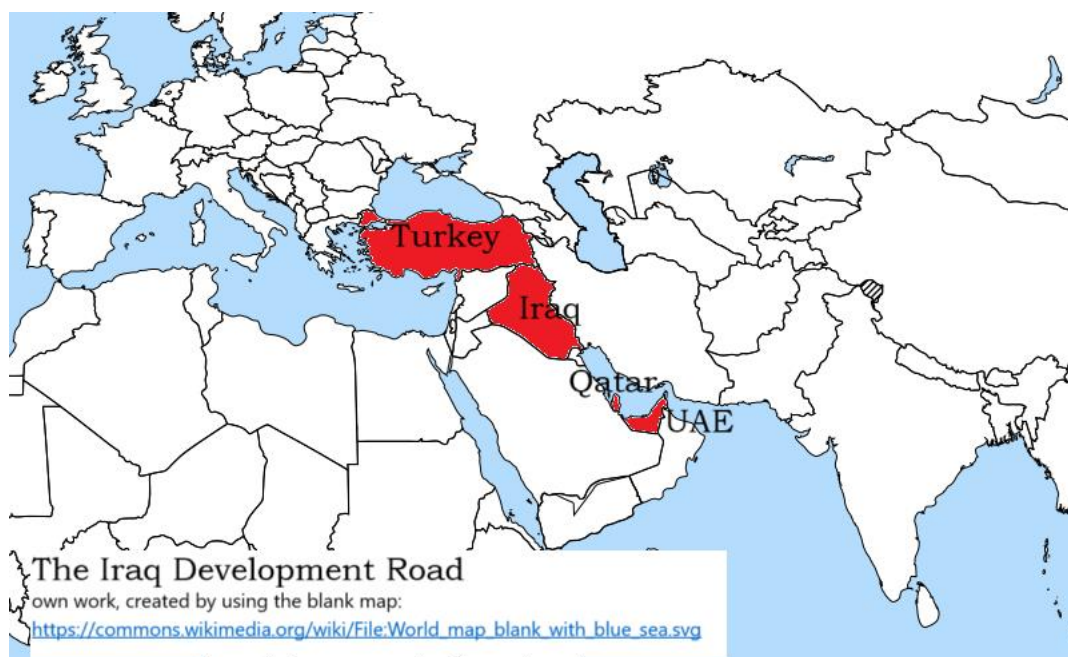
The counterpart of the IPEF in Wet Asia is the IMEC, the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor, which consists of the United States, the European Union, India, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, and Israel, established on the sides of the 2023 G20 summit in New Delhi.<sup>16</sup> As its name suggests, the IMEC aims to connect Europe and India through the Middle East and offer an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative. It is not yet clear what routes will be prominent for IMEC. One option is to take the task by literally passing through the participant countries. This would mean a land route from the Gulf across Saudi Arabia and Jordan to the Mediterranean ports of Israel. This could also be a suitable way to directly connect gas and oil pipelines from the Gulf to the Mediterranean through Israel by connecting already existing pipelines in Saudi Arabia to those in Israel, making European access to these energy supplies much easier than before.<sup>17</sup> While this option is practical for the transport of goods between Europe and the Gulf States, it is less practical for trade between Europe and India, as this way cargo would be shipped between India and the Gulf States by sea, then from the Gulf to the Mediterranean on land, and then on sea across the Mediterranean to Europe again. The traditional, entirely maritime route through the Suez Canal is used for shipments between India and Europe. Along this route, the seaports of Israel, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia could play a supporting role. This option would pass through the Suez Canal, located in Egypt, which is not a member of the initiative but is a close partner of both the United States and Saudi Arabia and, therefore, would probably be a reliable partner of IMEC as well. The Italian port of

Trieste, with a Central European historical heritage and having served as the main port of Austria-Hungary, is, at the same time, definitely in the focus of IMEC, as it is the closest Mediterranean port to Central Europe.<sup>18</sup> While the route through Trieste does not pass through Hungary, as the entire European Union is also part of the IMEC, it would also be possible for this initiative to use the port of Piraeus and pass through the same North-Macedonia-Serbia-Hungary-Austria route that the Chinese BRI develops.



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One more US-leaning economic corridor in the region is the Iraq Development Road. Countries that signed the memorandum of understanding, thereby launching the initiative in April 2024, were Iraq, Turkey, Qatar, and the UAE.<sup>20</sup> The route connects the Ocean Route with Europe on land, from the Gulf through Iraq and Turkey. An advantage of this route is that it may be the most direct land route between Europe and the Indian Ocean. As land routes running through Turkey reach Europe through the bridges over the Bosphorus, the European railway network would be directly expanded to the Persian Gulf, an arm of the Indian Ocean. The initiative somewhat revived the idea of the Berlin-Baghdad railway by Imperial Germany before the First World War, which aspired to establish a route to the Persian Gulf and, therefore, the Indian Ocean by avoiding the Suez Canal. This route would bring the Gulf closer to Europe than any other route, and from Hungary's perspective, it would be ideal, as the most straightforward way from Istanbul to Western Europe would run through Hungary.



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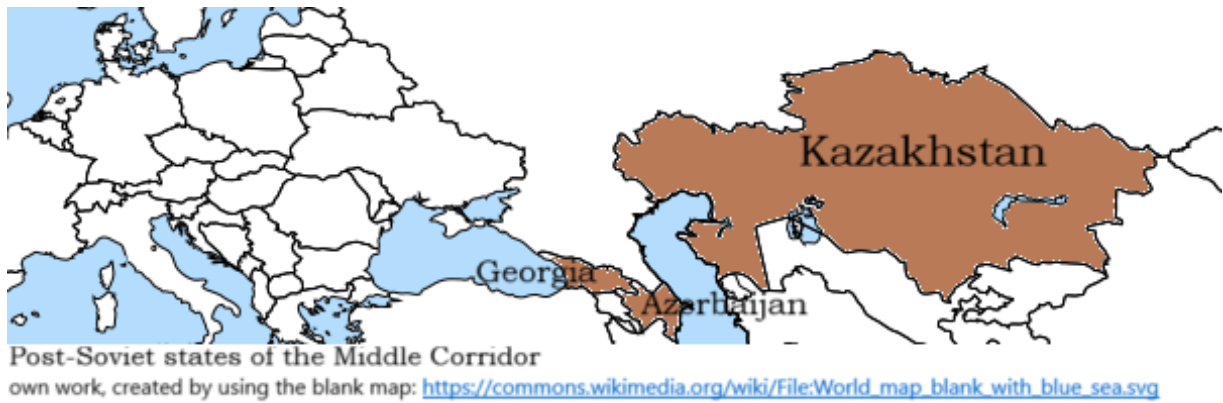
## Where US and Chinese interests oddly coincide: The Middle Corridor

In contrast to the IMEC and IPEF, which explicitly aim to counter China's influence and offer alternatives to the Belt and Road Project, The Middle Corridor (the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route) represents an economic corridor where the interests of China and the United States oddly coincide. The Middle Corridor runs from Turkey through Georgia and Azerbaijan to the Caspian Sea; crossing the Caspian Sea, it reaches post-Soviet Central Asia and, through that—China. As a transport route, this corridor assures a connection between China and Europe, avoiding Russia, which made it a practical transport route since the start of the Russia-Ukraine war. While it represents one of the corridors of China's Belt and Road Initiative, it also represents Europe's only access that avoids both Russia and Iran on the way to the crude oil and natural gas riches of Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan. Third, it represents the only geographical link between Turkey and its Central Asian kin states that again avoids both Russia and Iran.

Several factors regarding the Middle Corridor seem to make it a promising initiative for Hungary. First, in contrast to the northern route—which links Europe with China through Russia, entering Europe north of Hungary across Poland—the Middle Corridor would logically pass through Hungary. Reaching the Black Sea and Turkey via Georgia, it would move on via Hungary into Continental Europe. From the Black Sea, the Danube

is an ideal river route, while from Turkey, the most practical land route to Europe leads through Bulgaria, Serbia, and Hungary.

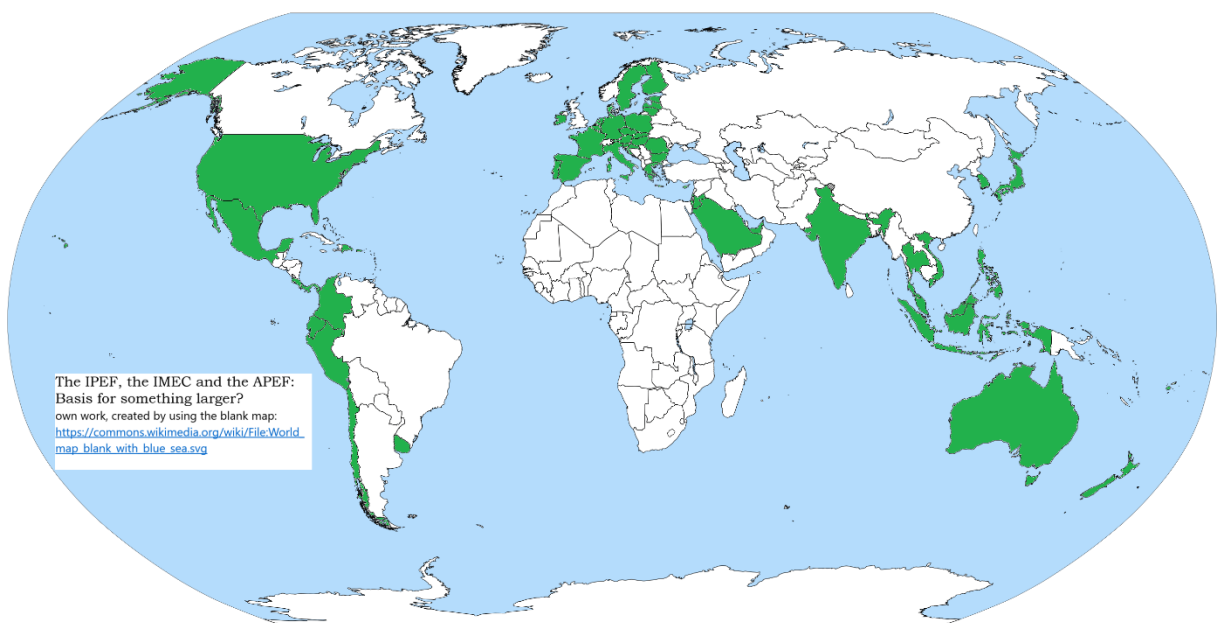
Regarding this corridor's energy aspect, Kazakhstan has one of the largest proven crude oil reserves and the single largest proven uranium reserve in its soil among all countries. Turkmenistan has one of the largest proven natural gas reserves, while Azerbaijan also has both a sizeable crude oil reserve and a natural gas reserve. The proven oil reserves of Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan represent 1.8% and 0.42%, respectively, of the proven reserves of the World, which makes their combined share half of that of Russia, which stands at 4.8%.<sup>22</sup> Regarding proven natural gas reserves, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan stand at 3.8% and 0.5%, respectively, of the global total. While this is much smaller than Russia's share of 24.3%, it still is significant, in league with the United States and Saudi Arabia, standing at 5.3% and 4.2%, respectively.<sup>23</sup> This means that with the proper pipelines, the region could represent a significant energy source for Europe, diversifying its suppliers and reducing its dependence on Russia. As these countries are located close enough to Europe to deliver their oil and gas through pipelines and transport through pipelines is much more cost-efficient than transport by ships, these three countries could be a pivotal energy source for Europe. Besides oil and gas reserves, Kazakhstan also has the second largest proven uranium reserve in the world, right after Australia, standing at 13% of Global reserves, significantly higher than that of Russia, standing at 8%,<sup>24</sup> thus with sufficient Uranium-enrichment capacity developed, Kazakhstan could supply Europe to a degree, that could end Europe's dependence on Russian uranium. Geographically, on the other hand, with Russia on to the north and Iran to the south, the Azerbaijan-Georgia corridor is the only geographical route where these energy supplies can reach Europe, avoiding both Iran and Russia. As Iran or Russia controlling the flow of energy from this region to Europe would annul its rule as an alternative to them, this shows the utmost importance of keeping the Azerbaijan-Georgia corridor outside the control of Russia or Iran. It is also interesting to note, that despite its close relations with Russia, China also seems to put a great emphasis on prioritizing energy supplies from this region as opposed to Russia: Instead of accelerating the construction of the Power of Siberia 2 pipeline from Russia, China doubled down on pipelines from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan.<sup>25</sup> As Russia pursues a great power agenda of its own, while Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan have no ambitions like that, China also seems to see them as more secure suppliers than Russia.



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## Conclusion

These US-leaning economic alliances and partnerships cover much of the globe; thus, if these frames are filled with meaningful content, they have the potential to form a global economic network. The IPEF covers half of the Asia-Pacific; the IMEC covers half of the Middle East and includes the European Union; and both initiatives include India and the United States. If we add the Americas Partnership for Economic Prosperity (APEP), a US economic initiative for Latin America and the Caribbean, similar to that of the IPEF, that includes Barbados, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Mexico, Panama, Peru, Uruguay, the three initiatives make up a global network covering North America, Europe, half of Asia including half of the Middle East, and also half of the Americas.



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As we saw, states that are members of alliances or partnerships with the US are similar in population and GDP size compared to China and its close Asian partners. Trump's hawkish stance on China suggests that the importance of this half of Asia will increase in the upcoming years. Still, Trump also voices a general protectionist stance. Yet, his upcoming administration may nonetheless give significant exemptions to Asian countries that could be, or already are, strategic partners of the US vis-à-vis China. This would be the most efficient way to contain China: making the US a more attractive partner. The implication for Hungary is that, as opposed to China, relations with this other half of Asia are not problematic regarding its alliance with the United States; enhancing ties with these countries would most likely enjoy support from the US. The IMEC, the Iraq Development Road, and the Middle Corridor also represent economic corridors that could benefit Hungary and represent alternatives to China's Belt and Road. Also, the combination of these economic initiatives may serve as the basis of a new global structure, further emphasising their significance.

## Endnotes

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<sup>3</sup>Akiko Fukushima: Australian Strategic Policy Institute; 30 November, 2018 The Quad as a caucus for cooperation, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/the-quad-as-a-caucus-for-cooperation/> accessed: December 4, 2024

<sup>4</sup>Demitri Sevastopulo: Joe Biden waters down Indo-Pacific Economic Framework to win more support -US president dilutes wording on regional trade deal as he departs on first Asia trip; Financial Times, May 20, 2022 <https://www.ft.com/content/91207c37-c9bd-4737-abf5-afc71200f8a1> accessed: December 4, 2024

<sup>5</sup>own work, created by using the blank map

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<sup>9</sup>International Monetary Fund, World Economic Outlook Database, October 2024

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