

RECONNECT CHINA

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Geopolitical Narratives Are Counterproductive:

The EU Global Gateway Faces the Belt and Road Initiative

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This policy brief maps the origins, shortcomings, and potential implications of a geopolitical reading of the Global Gateway vis-à-vis the Belt and Road Initiative. Despite the obvious geopolitical implications of such initiatives, it is argued that framing Global Gateway in a reactive and competitive geopolitical narrative could reduce its appeal to stakeholders in the Global South and strain relationships with China. Therefore, it is proposed to focus Global Gateway narratives on a proactive and positive agenda aligned with the national priorities of the partner countries and globally accepted goals such as those included in the 2030 Agenda.

Policy recommendations:

- **Avoid a reactive and competitive geopolitical framing of the Global Gateway.**
- **Emphasise a proactive and positive agenda in the narratives of the Global Gateway putting the focus on cooperation with partners along the Global South and Sustainable Development Goals.**
- **Increase ownership and the sense of ownership among partners from the Global South.**

ANALYSIS

When engaging with stakeholders from Africa, Asia, and Latin America to talk about connectivity initiatives such as the Global Gateway (GG) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), two complaints frequently arise. They can be summarised as follows: “we don’t want to choose sides” and “China approaches us to talk about development while you [Europe] come to talk about China”.

Against this backdrop, this brief explores how geopolitical narratives in Europe may contribute to reify and potentially intensify competition between the BRI and the Global Gateway which could be counterproductive when presenting this initiative to Global South actors which are focused on their own socioeconomic priorities rather than on EU geopolitical concerns and ambitions. In addition, these geopolitical narratives could fuel criticism against Global Gateway claiming that it favours the instrumentalisation of European development cooperation, undermining the ownership of Global South partners and the developmental potential of the initiative.¹

The first section of this brief briefly surveys the revival of geopolitics in Europe, as well as its diffusion in the Chinese strategic studies

community. The second section examines geopolitical readings of the BRI and their limitations. The third section explains why a geopolitical framing of the EU Global Gateway risks to reduce its appeal to potential partners and presents ideas for alternative framings.

THE REVIVAL OF GEOPOLITICS IN EUROPE AND CHINA

Since the 2007-08 Great Financial Crisis and its aftermath, interstate competition has escalated on a global scale. This pattern of interstate competition can be seen from Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean region², to the Red Sea region and the East Mediterranean³, to the Balkans⁴, as well as in the struggle for the control of the sea lines of communications coasting Eurasia⁵. From a geopolitical perspective, connectivity plans such as China's BRI, or the network of ad hoc "minilateral" initiatives involving the United States, its treaty allies, and India to support a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific", do not simply address the demands for infrastructure and economic development of developing (and in some case also developed) countries. Nor do they exclusively respond to political and economic drivers within the initiating countries. They also obey to a competitive logic in which the rest of the world is instrumentalised by great power competition, confirming to local stakeholders that «major powers» only care about pursuing their own interests and projecting their own values.

Crucially, this competitive logic, in turn, reflects long-established narratives rooted in geopolitics – or as it is more precisely defined today, "classical geopolitics" – and contribute to its reproduction. Although geopolitics could be merely defined as "the study of the international scene from a spatial viewpoint",⁶ it remains inextricably tied to its "imperialist, racist, environmental deterministic" origins that still resonate in the Global South⁷.

Throughout the 2010s and early 2020s, this revival of geopolitics in Europe has arguably continued to

gain momentum. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 has further propelled the popularisation of geopolitics beyond academia and within the public debate⁸. Geopolitics in the European public debate has increasingly become a byword for a vaguely defined "strategic outlook" to global politics. Arguably, there is no greater evidence of this development than the inauguration speech of the President of the European Commission Ursula von der Leyen, who in 2019, elliptically declared: "My commission will be a geopolitical commission⁹."

In contrast to Europe, geopolitics has largely remained absent from public debate in China, being a subject either exploited through an official nationalist narrative or discussed within the country's strategic community. The nationalistic discourse spread by the Communist Party of China has a strong anti-imperialist vein presenting China as a victim of geopolitics in the so-called Century of Humiliation¹⁰. This narrative has been frequently used by Chinese officials when engaging with stakeholders from the Global South, presenting its country as a victim of great powers competition. The aim is to create a sense of affinity with actors from countries that have suffered from foreign aggression by colonial and imperialist powers at some point since the 19th century¹¹.

Yet, even though China has missed out the popularisation of the geopolitics lexicon and arguments that occurred in Europe, it is possible to see a more widespread endorsement of geopolitical thinking in the country's academic community, and more precisely, in those environments within the academic community more closely linked to the military establishment. In the 2010s, Anglophone scholars such as Yoshihara and Holmes highlighted the embrace of seapower-centred geopolitical arguments – rooted in the work of one of the key figures in late 19th century geopolitics, Alfred Thayer Mahan – in China since the turn of the century¹². Chinese

scholars who publish in English have also shed light on the proliferation of studies indebted to other classical geopolitical arguments, such as those of Mackinder and Spykman, which, in contrast to Mahan, show a continental orientation focused on the control of strategic areas in the Eurasian “world island”¹³. Even quasi-authoritative documents such as the 2013 edition of the PLA’s *Science of Military Strategy*, which is the closest text to what could be considered a Chinese military doctrine, exhibit the indirect influence of classical geopolitical thinking in its definition of the “strategic space” in which Beijing must operate to protect its national interests¹⁴.

THE GEOPOLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

The geopolitical dimension of the BRI has been frequently overstated in the West by those who regard it as a geopolitical masterplan and therefore miss its dominant economic dimension¹⁵. This misrepresentation has been facilitated both by specific traits of the PRC’s political system and the spatial framing of the BRI¹⁶. The propagandistic logic that permeates policy making in China allows slogans and keywords to function as organising principles of internal policy making¹⁷. The continuing rise of the BRI as the centrepiece of Chinese discourse-making throughout most of the 2010s – as showed by the initiative’s enshrining in the constitution of the Chinese Community Party in 2017 – turned it into an “omnibus programme” for a myriad of globally spread initiatives. These initiatives were carried out by both bureaucratic actors and state-adjacent actors, who perceived it necessary to attach themselves to the dominant policy discourse to advance their objectives.¹⁸ These domestic drivers, combined with the inherent *regional* geopolitical character of the BRI and the extension of this initiative beyond Eurasia, have facilitated external perceptions of the initiative as a *global* geopolitical masterplan.

Looking at the governance structure of the BRI could shed some light on this issue. The National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC), China’s top macroeconomic management agency, plays the most important role in the implementation of the BRI, given that the official blueprint of this initiative was issued by this Commission plus the ministries of commerce and foreign affairs¹⁹. Neither the military nor the security apparatus has had an explicit role in the conception and implementation of the BRI. Nevertheless, the asymmetry between the size of the Chinese economy and those of most of the other involved countries, paves the way for obvious economic and geopolitical synergies. The colossal size of the Chinese economy entails asymmetric economic interdependence in its favour when boosting trade and financial links with other economies, allowing Chinese stakeholders to exert more influence on foreign actors to accommodate their interests and values²⁰. Leaving aside the uneven accuracy of some of the narratives analysing this vector of Chinese influence, “debt trap diplomacy²¹”, “economic coercion”²², and “weaponisation of the economy²³”, Chinese authorities have long been aware of the reputational damage of geopolitical framings on the BRI. Therefore, Chinese leaders have not only avoided geopolitical references to their speeches on the BRI and on BRI authoritative documents, but have also instructed other relevant actors in China, such as journalists and academics, to do so²⁴.

THE EU GLOBAL GATEWAY RAISES THE RISK OF REIFYING GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION

The Global Gateway is a “flagship initiative” of the von der Leyen Commission, aiming “to boost smart, clean and secure connections in digital, energy and transport sectors, and to strengthen health, education and research systems across the world”²⁵. In short, it constitutes the EU’s response to the proliferation of major connectivity plans since the early 2010s. Recent journalistic

investigations, however, have revealed how its tribulated roll-out was mainly due to internal conflict within EU actors over the risk of sending “the wrong signal” to China. Internal EU documents show concerns about the “not necessary” “antagonistic dimension” that emerged from the Global Gateway, as well as doubts about the von der Leyen Commission’s decision by 2021 to weaponise connectivity as a “foreign policy tool”, even though it remained inadequately funded²⁶. These difficulties in the planning and launching of the initiative, as well as its willingness to emphasise a rhetorical dimension focused on challenging China while providing little economic substance to the strategy, underscore the delicate balance that Brussels must maintain while navigating Sino-American great power competition and striving to enact its vision of “strategic autonomy”. Simply put, the tribulations of the Global Gateway evidence that EU bureaucratic actors view connectivity plans as both a necessary tool in the current landscape of global politics, and as a potential source of friction with great powers such as China already playing this game.

In addition, rhetorical emphasis on geopolitics might also send the wrong signal to potential partners for Global Gateway in the Global South which tend to favour diversification in their diplomatic and economic engagement with other countries instead of overdependency on a reduced number of partners. In fact, von der Leyen’s own recent depiction of the Global Gateway in her November 2023 speech on the EU’s China policy given in Berlin falls in these very same pitfalls. The President of the European Commission lauded the Global Gateway as evidence of an example of the EU “being more geopolitical”, presenting the project not just as a platform to create more resilient supply chains, but to make use of “our massive economic assets in a much more strategic way” in a world where “geopolitics and geoeconomics cannot be seen as separate anymore.²⁷”

Against this backdrop, it is worth noting that even the official webpage of the Global Gateway invites geopolitics-informed perceptions of competition. For instance, the individual projects of the initiative are grouped in three macro-areas: “Latin America and the Caribbeans”, “Sub-Saharan Africa”, and – tellingly – “Middle East, Asia and the Pacific”²⁸. This categorisation reflects the tangible geographical contiguity across the Eurasian “world island”, as well as the necessity to articulate connectivity between Western European consumer markets, Gulf energy markets, and the supply chains hubs in the Asia-Pacific. Yet, at the same time, this type of articulation of political space does inherently reflect a classical geopolitical imagination moulded along those very same lines that tend to overemphasise the strategic value and outreach of the BRI. In particular, the continuing use of a “geographically ambiguous” geopolitical concept such as the “Middle East” to which North Africa is reflexively attached as an appendix²⁹, notwithstanding the clear linkages between North Africa itself and the Sahel to European security³⁰, shows the persistence of classical geopolitical imagination in the EU communication of the Global Gateway.

This narrative is not welcomed by Global South countries, since most of them do not want to take sides in a geopolitical confrontation between great powers, but to diversify their links with foreign actors. This stance is shared by many member states inside the EU³¹. The remarks by governmental³², corporate³³, media³⁴, and NGO voices³⁵ defending that position in the Global South are pervasive. We have taken as an illustrative example the remarks by Ferdinand Marcos Jr. at the press conference following the 2022 ASEAN-EU Commemorative Summit, since they were made by the head of the state of a democratic country with close military cooperation with the West and active territorial disputes with China. He said that: “the Philippines for our part has taken an independent policy and we absolutely refuse to go back to the situation of the Cold War where we have to pick

sides in terms of who the superpower is that we are aligned with.”³⁶

CONCLUSIONS

The seductive power of classical geopolitics for European society is evident, looking at a time when its lexicon and arguments are inconsiderably reintroduced in the public debate not only by media but also by officials. This trend is understandable in an international environment characterised by the end of the US unipolar moment, the global rise of China, and the return of major wars in Europe itself. Yet EU bureaucratic actors may be advised to at least refrain in their strategic communications from further legitimising classical geopolitical readings of the Global Gateway, and more broadly of the EU’s own external action, by carefully avoiding framings and terminology that could be even vaguely associated to it. Such an approach would provide a modest yet direct contribution to mitigate the risks of further reifying a geopolitical competition between the BRI and the Global Gateway which in turn could further damage EU-China relations and reduce the appeal of the Global Gateway to Global South audiences at

an inflection point of global politics. On the contrary, it would be conducive to the defence of EU interest and values to underline the positive agenda of the Global Gateway and how its high standards in areas such as good governance, ownership, and sustainability confer a particularly high development impact to this EU initiative³⁷.

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ENDNOTES

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