

The Geopolitics of Perception: Non-Elite Views of the BRI and a New Policy Blueprint for the European Global Gateway

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Abstract

The global competition between China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the European Union's Global Gateway (GG) strategy is fundamentally determined by political and social acceptance at the local level. This article addresses the critical question: How do localised, non-elite perceptions of sovereignty loss and asymmetric risk in BRI projects provide a competitive policy blueprint for the EU's Global Gateway strategy? By adopting a Perception-First Strategy and utilising a comparative case study methodology across three distinct contexts – Sri Lanka, Kenya, and Uruguay – this analysis offers a detailed empirical mapping of the BRI's structural vulnerabilities. The study finds that the BRI's top-down, opaque model consistently generates a perception gap rooted in the loss of fiscal, economic, or digital sovereignty. This research systematically links these varied implementation failures to a unified set of actionable policy recommendations. Ultimately, the article demonstrates that the GG's success lies in offering a true, "trusted alternative" defined by high-transparency financing, robust local socio-economic integration mandates, and the promotion of open, competitive digital standards, thereby ensuring that strategic investments enhance local sovereignty rather than erode it.

Keywords:

BRI; Global Gateway; Sri Lanka; Uruguay; Kenya; Non-Elite Perception



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1. Introduction

The global infrastructure landscape has undergone a profound transformation, marked by a strategic competition between two divergent models of connectivity. Since its launch in 2013, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has emerged as the defining force of 21st-century global development, mobilising hundreds of billions in capital to reshape trade corridors and global supply chains (Santos & Borges, 2024). The BRI's sheer scale and speed established a new paradigm for infrastructure finance, a state-led model often criticised for its opacity and lack of sustainability standards (Calabrese, 2025; Lew et al., 2021). In what can be argued as a direct response to this geopolitical and economic challenge, the European Union (EU) launched the Global Gateway (GG) strategy in 2021. The GG is explicitly positioned as a "trusted alternative", promising to mobilise up to €300 billion toward high-standard, sustainable, and values-driven connectivity (EC, 2025). This paper is situated at the nexus of this competition, analysing how the on-the-ground realities of the BRI should directly inform and sharpen the strategic policy blueprint for the European initiative. The research question guiding this analysis is: How do localised, non-elite perceptions of sovereignty loss and asymmetric risk in BRI projects provide a competitive policy blueprint for the EU's Global Gateway strategy?

The core argument of this article is that the ultimate success of any grand strategic initiative is determined not by the volume of signed contracts or the goodwill of political elites, but by its sustained political and social acceptance. Therefore, the BRI's most significant strategic vulnerability lies in the geopolitics of perception, the widespread disconnect between high-level diplomatic agreements and the tangible, lived experiences of local communities. This paper contends that an analysis of non-elite views regarding issues of local inclusivity, governance, and digital standards reveals fundamental, repeated flaws in the BRI's implementation model. These perception failures, which lead to local exclusion, unsustainable debt, and a loss of trust, offer a precise, actionable blueprint for the GG to establish its credibility as a superior and more resilient alternative.

Despite extensive scholarly attention, the current literature on the BRI and the resulting geopolitical competition generally suffers from three key analytical limitations that this paper seeks to address. First, most studies maintain a macro-level focus, examining regional trends, geopolitical balances, or aggregate debt figures, rather than delving into the specific, localised, sub-national impacts of individual projects on communities (Beule & Zhang, 2022; García-Herrero & Schindowski, 2023; Inada, 2025; Rana & Xianbai, 2020). Second, research often adopts an elite-driven perspective,

prioritising the views of host-nation governments, official statements, and inter-state relations, thereby overlooking the crucial perspective of non-elite actors such as civil society, local media, and affected communities, whose sustained support is critical for long-term project stability (Hundt & Kim, 2019; Khaw, 2021; Sun et al., 2024). Finally, there is a lack of comparative policy linkage, as while critiques of BRI's failures are common, there is a scarcity of comparative analysis that systematically links diverse implementation failures across multiple continents to a unified set of direct policy recommendations for a competing strategy like the GG (Abeyagoonasekera, 2024; Garlick, 2018; Silin et al., 2018). In fact, most of these studies tend to focus on the success of the BRI on a wider geopolitical sphere and not on specific realities such as project implementation and the causes for a project's success or failure.

To close this gap, this article adopts a robust comparative case study methodology underpinned by a Perception-First Strategy. Through this strategy, we follow the views of some authors that political viability is inseparable from local acceptance, leveraging theoretical insights, such as those concerning societal polarisation, the impact of media bias, and exclusion by social group, to dissect how non-elite sentiment drives project success or failure (Bjornsgaard & Dukić, 2023; Choudhary et al., 2025). We systematically analyse the BRI's on-the-ground performance in three distinct contexts: Sri Lanka (Asia), focusing on the critical local backlash arising from debt-induced sovereignty loss; Kenya (Africa), examining the perceptions linked to socio-environmental degradation and failed local integration; and Uruguay (Latin America), where local media and civil society scrutiny exposed severe issues related to digital standards and market sovereignty. Section 2 presents the detailed comparative case studies, illustrating the evolution of local perception and the subsequent developmental outcomes. Section 3 synthesises these findings, systematically mapping the recurring BRI implementation failures onto competitive strategic opportunities for the Global Gateway. Finally, Section 4 offers a new policy blueprint, detailing specific, actionable recommendations for the European Commission to ensure the Global Gateway thrives as the world's truly "trusted alternative".

2. Comparative Case Studies: Local Views and Developmental Outcomes of the BRI

Within the intricate tapestry of international legal governance, a critical analysis of the BRI must be grounded in specific national contexts. While proponents hail its

potential to bridge the global “infrastructure gap” and accelerate development, critics simultaneously raise profound concerns over transparency, long-term debt sustainability, and the strategic implications of increased Chinese influence (Feingold, 2023). To better understand the multifaceted impact of this initiative, this section examines three distinct countries from the Global South, moving beyond the conceptual framework to an empirical analysis of the BRI. The study focuses on non-elite perceptions documented in national and international media to trace the journey from initial promise to eventual implementation failure in specific high-profile projects.

The three case studies – Sri Lanka, Kenya, and Uruguay – represent distinct regional contexts but share common experiences regarding the negative local outcomes of the BRI model. Their engagement timelines with the BRI framework provide important context:

- Sri Lanka (Asia): Became an early, foundational partner, officially joining the BRI when the project was launched in 2013 (Nedopil, 2025). Key projects like the Colombo Port City development commenced shortly after in 2014, although the major project that defines the perception failure – the Hambantota Port – was initiated in the pre-BRI era (2007) and later folded into the initiative, making it an early and high-stakes test case.
- Kenya (Africa): A central node in the Maritime Silk Road in East Africa. While it formally joined the BRI framework along with other African nations, its flagship project, the Mombasa-Nairobi Standard Gauge Railway (SGR), was signed in 2013, effectively making it a debut BRI project that shapes public perception across the continent (Nedopil, 2025).
- Uruguay (Latin America): While China's trade relations were significant years prior, Uruguay formally joined the BRI later in 2018 (Nedopil, 2025). This relationship is now defined by the push for a bilateral Free Trade Agreement (FTA) and the integration of Chinese digital technology, which frames public scrutiny around market sovereignty and digital standards rather than infrastructure debt.

These varied entry points illustrate that the structural flaws generating negative local perceptions (debt unsustainability, poor governance, and failed local integration) were embedded in China’s infrastructure financing model both before and after the BRI’s formal launch. In each of the subsequent subsections, we analyse the evolution of local perception and specifically identify the most egregious developmental failure that the EU’s GG must systematically avoid.

2.1. The BRI in Sri Lanka: Debt Traps and Sovereignty Loss

Sri Lanka serves as the pivotal case for understanding how large-scale, opaque BRI projects translate into an acute local perception failure centred on national sovereignty and economic distress. China's substantial investments, particularly in the Hambantota Port and the Colombo Port City, were initially promoted by political elites as transformative mega-projects that would accelerate growth and global status (Rosendal, 2025). However, this elite narrative rapidly fractured under the weight of financial non-viability, leading to a profound shift in non-elite public opinion from initial hope to deep-seated suspicion. This shift was fuelled by the visibility of the projects' failures and a growing sense that the nation's political autonomy was being exchanged for unsustainable debt.

The Hambantota Port remains the most powerful symbol of this perceived developmental failure. The port was largely financed through Chinese sovereign loans at non-concessional, high-interest rates from the China Exim Bank, but it consistently failed to generate sufficient revenue due to poor commercial viability and questionable initial feasibility studies (Hillman, 2018). The turning point for public perception was the 2017 agreement, which saw the debt-ridden government grant a 99-year lease and a 70% equity stake in the port to the state-owned China Merchants Port Holdings (Shepard, 2017; The Sunday Times, 2017). This transaction was universally reported in local and international media as a classic example of "debt-trap diplomacy", a term that resonated powerfully with the non-elite public (Chellaney, 2017). Protests, documented by local and international newspapers, began in earnest in late 2016 and early 2017, involving affected port workers, farmers whose land was slated for an adjacent industrial zone, and vocal nationalist groups (Shepard, 2017; UTV News, 2017). These demonstrators publicly decried the lease as the "sale of the country" and the transformation of the port into a "Chinese colony", sentiments that underscored a public fear of ceding national control and having their economic destiny dictated by a foreign power (Daily FT, 2016; Forum, 2017). The port's revenue consistently failed to cover even the interest payments, with some reports indicating that annual income was less than 1% of the total loan due (Jones & Hameiri, 2020; SLPA, 2023).

Beyond the immediate economic concerns, the implementation of BRI projects significantly impacted local social formations, particularly religious communities, which often serve as powerful conduits for non-elite organisation and opinion. The Colombo Port City project, a colossal land reclamation effort, generated fierce opposition, not only

from coastal fishing communities – that protested the environmental destruction of their traditional livelihoods – but also from religious groups (Echelon, 2024; Hiru News, 2016; Rupasinghe, 2018). The Catholic Church, a dominant institution in the coastal belt, became a central mediator for the displaced fishing population. While the highest levels of the religious hierarchy often hesitated to challenge the powerful political and financial elite directly, grassroots environmental activists and local priests leveraged the Church's sacred infrastructure to mobilise the affected communities (Ivry, 2023; Sunday Times, 2017; Withanage, 2020). This dynamic, reported extensively in independent Sri Lankan outlets, highlights how the BRI's material disruption intersected with, and sometimes splintered, existing local power structures, creating powerful, localised opposition rooted in socio-ecological concerns.

Conversely, the Chinese state also engaged in Buddhist soft power diplomacy, attempting to use the shared historical Buddhist ties between the two nations to mitigate criticism and garner public goodwill, often through official "people-to-people" exchanges and strategic narratives (Daily Mirror, 2024; Rosendal, 2022, 2025). This engagement was sometimes used by the ruling elite to legitimise the Chinese projects in the eyes of the majority Sinhalese-Buddhist population. However, the sheer visibility of the economic collapse in 2022 – marked by crippling shortages and widespread political unrest – ultimately overwhelmed any positive soft-power narrative (Perera, 2022; Shepard, 2017). When the country faced default and mass bankruptcy, non-elite perceptions unequivocally linked the nation's financial distress to the large, opaque, and commercially non-performing projects of the prior regime, regardless of their purported cultural benefits (Timberman, 2025). This outcome demonstrated that in Sri Lanka, the material reality of debt and elite corruption – a process often facilitated by the lack of transparency in the BRI financing model – was the decisive factor in shaping negative non-elite views toward the Chinese economic engagement. The failure of the BRI in gathering favourable local perspectives was thus framed internally as a crisis of governance and sovereignty, not just a matter of poor investment return (Kulamannage, 2019).

2.2. The BRI in Kenya: Socio-Environmental Impacts and Fiscal Viability

In Kenya, the primary BRI project – the Standard Gauge Railway (SGR) connecting the port of Mombasa to the interior – has exposed a profound gap between the government's elite narrative of accelerated development and the non-elite perception of

fiscal burden and social disruption. Financed by the China Exim Bank and constructed by Chinese state-owned enterprises, the SGR was initially hailed as a transformative venture that would cut logistics costs, boost regional trade, and modernise national infrastructure (Wissenbach & Wang, 2017). However, local perception quickly soured due to its questionable economic viability, high public debt, and direct socio-economic harm, which led to a growing public sentiment that the project prioritised Chinese interests over Kenyan welfare (ADF, 2023; Ogollah et al., 2019).

The core of this negative perception is the project's fiscal non-viability and land expropriation from locals, as the SGR has consistently failed to generate enough revenue to cover its massive operational costs and interest on the nearly USD 3.6 billion Chinese loan that funded its first phase; and the Kenyan governments have continuously expropriated land from the communities living in the targeted zones for the project to build its infrastructure (Kiplagat, 2019; Nyabiage, 2025; Otinga, 2025; Soy, 2023). This financial strain translates directly into public anxiety about debt distress, with local media extensively reporting on the national budget's increasing allocation to SGR debt repayment rather than public services, fuelling the fear of a debt trap that defined the non-elite discourse in Sri Lanka (Brautigam, 2022; Ndunyu, 2025; Omondi, 2025). This fiscal non-viability is visibly compounded by the fact that the SGR has stalled near Naivasha, failing to reach the planned terminus at Malaba on the Ugandan border and therefore undermining its strategic purpose as a regional trade corridor (ABS, 2023; Sandner et al., 2023).

This fiscal burden has been compounded by severe socio-economic and environmental impacts that have fuelled localised opposition, particularly among vulnerable communities. The most acute opposition stemmed from the project's perceived attack on local livelihoods, particularly the Port of Mombasa's trucking and logistics sector (Irandu & Owilla, 2020). The Kenyan government, as part of its commitments under the loan, effectively mandated that a significant volume of freight be transported via the SGR rather than by road, devastating thousands of local truck owners, drivers, and ancillary businesses – a crisis widely reported in Kenyan outlets (Kimanthi & Kitimo, 2022; Marlow, 2025; Ochieng, 2022; Yusuf, 2020). Additionally, over the years, protestors and trade and transport unionists argued that the SGR created minimal long-term local jobs while simultaneously destroying a robust, locally-owned logistics economy, crystallising the non-elite view that the railway served to transfer local value to Beijing (Kakai, 2018; Kuo, 2022; Marlow, 2025). This transfer of local value is

facilitated by the reliance on Chinese operational management and the use of Chinese labour for key technical roles, limiting local skills transfer and economic benefit.

Furthermore, the SGR's construction through critical protected areas, including the Nairobi National Park and the Tsavo ecosystem, drew international and local environmental condemnation, which amplified local concerns about a perceived lack of environmental and social safeguards in the project's execution (Anyango, 2021; Nyumba, 2021; Nyumba et al., 2021; The National Assembly, 2020). This visible disregard for environmental protection and local economic structures reinforced the image of an opaque, elite-driven project that steamrolled over Kenyan interests, contrasting sharply with the government's promise of mutual benefit and sustainable development. The continuing fiscal non-viability, mandatory freight policy, and visible local displacement ensure that the SGR remains a potent symbol in Kenya of the political and financial risks associated with the BRI's lack of transparency and accountability, anchoring a persistent negative non-elite perception of China's economic engagement.

2.3. Uruguay: Digital Standards and Market Impact

Uruguay presents a contrasting case to Sri Lanka and Kenya, as non-elite perception of China's economic engagement is shaped less by debt distress and visible infrastructure failure, and more by a quiet, geopolitical competition over digital standards and market sovereignty. Uruguay is a regional leader in digital governance, often ranked first in Latin America for e-government, and has a long-standing, state-owned telecommunications company, ANTEL, which has been crucial in rolling out national fibre-optic and digital services (ITA, 2024; World Bank, 2024). China's engagement, which frames its digital infrastructure investments (like those with ANTEL) under the umbrella of the BRI and the push for a bilateral FTA, is focused on integrating into this advanced digital and agricultural market (Shang, 2025). This shift creates a public perception focused not on project viability, but on geopolitical alignment and the preservation of Uruguay's high digital standards against the economic imperative of its largest trading partner.

The non-elite perception challenge in Uruguay is centred on the penetration of Chinese digital technology and the potential consequences of the proposed FTA. Since joining the BRI in 2018, Uruguay has deepened ties, elevating the relationship to a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" in 2023 (MFAPRC, 2023). Crucially, the deployment of 5G technology highlights the public discourse on digital standards. While Uruguay was a pioneer in commercial 5G launch in the region, the state-owned operator

ANTEL has consistently relied on Chinese vendors, particularly Huawei and ZTE, for its 3G and 4G networks, and is now negotiating with the firm for 5G partnership and technology expansion (Bnamericas, 2023; Ellis, 2021). Unlike its US and European counterparts, the Uruguayan government has not implemented restrictions on Chinese technology, prioritising affordable, high-speed infrastructure over geopolitical security concerns (Alvarado, 2024). This acceptance implies a pragmatic trade-off, as experts occasionally voice concern over whether adherence to the Chinese digital ecosystem might bypass or compromise the open standards that underpin Uruguay's highly-regarded e-government framework (Mendez & Estrada, 2025; Núñez, 2025). Furthermore, public discourse, reflected in local media, does not express the acute security fears seen in Western countries; instead, the debate often focuses on the benefits of competitive pricing and the continued expansion of access to high-quality digital services, which are viewed as essential for social equity and national competitiveness (Bartesaghi, 2025; Chacón, 2024; Natalevich, 2022; UyPress, 2024).

However, a more visible and politically charged element of public perception is the Uruguay-China FTA. President Luis Lacalle Pou's push to negotiate a bilateral deal, independently of the Mercosur bloc, ignited a significant political and public debate (Werner, 2022). Local political opponents and regional trade unions have vocally opposed the independent FTA, fearing it would undermine Mercosur's unity and potentially overwhelm domestic industrial and agricultural sectors with cheaper Chinese imports (Goodman, 2023). This fear of market sovereignty loss, rather than sovereign debt loss, resonates with a non-elite public concerned about the impact on local jobs and the country's unique trade structure. For instance, the FTA debate in 2024 highlighted concerns that while the deal would solidify access for commodities like cellulose and meat – where China is already the main buyer – it could expose smaller, local manufacturing and service industries to intense competition, thereby compromising the Uruguayan economic model (Ámbito, 2024; Amodio et al., 2025; Uruguay XXI, 2025). The public debate, though less emotionally charged than the Sri Lankan or Kenyan cases, is framed as a critical choice between regional loyalty versus unilateral economic benefit and the potential sacrifice of long-term market diversity for immediate trade gains. Therefore, China's influence in Uruguay, while largely welcomed by government and trade elites, is viewed by non-elite groups with a pragmatic, often wary, recognition that the deepening relationship brings economic dependency and digital standardisation risks that challenge Uruguay's self-perception as a politically stable, digitally sovereign nation.

3. Connecting the Dots: Bridging the Perception Gap

The comparative analysis of Sri Lanka, Kenya, and Uruguay reveals that while the adverse non-elite perception of China's economic engagement manifests in vastly different regional and economic contexts, it is consistently rooted in a perceived loss of national or local sovereignty and the asymmetric distribution of risks and benefits. Bridging the perception gap – the chasm between the elite-driven narrative of mutual development and the public experience of debt, disruption, or dependency – requires understanding the structural similarities underlying these distinct developmental failures.

The core similarity across all three cases is the opacity of the BRI financing and implementation model. In Sri Lanka, this opacity translated directly into a classic sovereign debt trap, where non-concessional loans for the Hambantota Port led to a visible, physical loss of control over a strategic asset – a political sovereignty crisis. In Kenya, opacity manifested as fiscal non-viability and socio-economic displacement. The general public saw the SGR, a massive state-owned enterprise, fail to generate revenue, compelling the government to enact anti-competitive policies (mandatory freight) that destroyed locally-owned logistics businesses. The perception here is not just of debt, but of China and the local elite using opaque financial deals to sacrifice local livelihoods for a non-performing project. In both Sri Lanka and Kenya, the challenges were material: either a port was leased away, or thousands of jobs were lost.

However, the nature of the perceived threat and the justification for the negative perception diverge significantly based on the local context's level of institutional development and strategic priority.

Figure 1 – A Case Study Comparison			
	Sri Lanka	Kenya	Uruguay
Challenges	Sovereign Debt and Asset Loss	Fiscal Non-Viability and Anti-competitive policies	Regional Integration and Digital Standards Risks
Sovereignty Issues	Territorial Autonomy	Economic Livelihood	Internal Market Sovereignty
Perception Drivers	Visible seizure of national assets and national economic crisis	Job losses and environmental concerns	Awareness of digital security compromise and trade dependency
Source: Authors			

The differences in perception reflect the shift in China's engagement strategy, adapted to the specific geopolitical and economic realities of each country. For instance, in Sri Lanka and Kenya, two countries that lacked infrastructure development, projects were large and traditional "hard infrastructure" was financed through non-concessional loans, leading to the archetypal fear of a debt trap among non-elite groups and potential land/asset loss.

Conversely, in the Uruguayan case, the country was already more developed in terms of hard infrastructure and, therefore, the Chinese approach was based under "soft infrastructure" and trade-focused competition, demonstrating a more sophisticated, modern strategic approach. Because Uruguay is a stable, high-institutional environment with sound fiscal management, the non-elite concerns are not about default, but about market integration standards. Here, China's influence is viewed with a pragmatic wariness: the short-term benefits of competitive pricing for 5G and access to the massive Chinese market for agricultural exports are acknowledged, but they are critically weighed against the long-term risk of digital standardization that compromises Uruguay's established e-governance principles and the potential for an FTA to overwhelm local industries and undermine the Mercosur trading bloc. The perception gap in Uruguay is not a crisis of governance, but a strategic geopolitical calculation by the public about balancing national prosperity with regional alignment and data standards.

Despite the varied outcomes, the unifying justification for these varied perception gaps is that non-elite publics equate transparency, competitive local integration, and sustainability with sovereignty. Negative perception arises when:

- Risk is Asymmetric: When the host country bears all the financial, environmental, and social risk, while a foreign entity controls the project execution (as seen in the high-interest loans in Sri Lanka and the mandatory freight policy in Kenya).
- Benefits are Centralised: When project benefits accrue only to a small political elite or are limited to the primary export sector (such as Uruguayan commodities) without corresponding local job creation or industrial protection.
- National Assets are Compromised: When opaque financing leads to the visible surrender of strategic, symbolic, or digital assets (Hambantota Port lease and the risk to open digital standards in Uruguay).

Ultimately, the perception gap is a function of the failure to achieve shared prosperity. While the form of failure changes – from debt in Asia to job destruction in Africa to standards compromise in Latin America – the cause remains the same: a lack of transparency and local accountability in the BRI's top-down, elite-driven implementation model.

4. Strategic Implications: A New Policy Blueprint for the Global Gateway

The consistent structural issues of the BRI – manifested variously as sovereign debt loss, socio-economic inequalities, and digital standard compromise – offer a clear policy blueprint for the EU's GG strategy. The GG's overarching goal must be to systematically bridge the perception gap created by the BRI by ensuring that its investments demonstrably enhance, rather than erode, national and local sovereignty. This requires moving beyond a simple counter-financing model to adopting a new paradigm centred on transparency, local accountability, and competitive standardisation.

The GG's strategic approach is centred on local and fiscal sovereignty enhancement. The BRI's opacity led to the sovereign debt crisis in Sri Lanka; conversely, the GG's policy blueprint prioritises concessional and high-transparency financing. This move away from high-interest, non-concessional sovereign loans is facilitated by leveraging mechanisms like the European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus (EFSD+) to offer blended finance and guarantees that substantially reduce the host country's risk exposure. For instance, in an analogue to the Hambantota Port's lack of debt sustainability, GG-supported financing should be conditioned on public, third-party feasibility studies and open, competitive tendering. This structural mechanism ensures commercial viability and prevents political elites from securing unviable loans. This strategic transparency is essential to prevent local communities from associating development with corruption practices.

Furthermore, the GG's policy design explicitly addresses the BRI's failure in local socio-economic decline. The decline of Kenya's trucking sector, caused by the SGR's mandatory freight policies and reliance on Chinese operational management, highlights the need for a "Local-First" employment and skills mandate. For instance, GG investments can introduce contractual requirements demanding a minimum percentage of local content, enforceable local hiring quotas for technical and managerial roles, and certified vocational training programmes run by European partners. For example, rather than simply financing a railway, a GG investment can fund the rail corridor plus an

associated local SME fund to modernise the local logistics industry (like trucking and warehousing). This ensures the new infrastructure is an input for local economic growth rather than a replacement for it, directly addressing the local community's fear of value transfer and job destruction that defined the Kenyan experience.

Crucially, a differentiated GG policy is critical in high-institutional, advanced economies, aligning with the EU's strengths in standardisation and digital governance. The non-elite wariness in Uruguay, centred on the risk of opening digital standards and market exposure via the FTA, offers a specific opportunity for the GG to lead. The GG should not just compete on price (where China often wins), but on the superior quality of its digital governance model.

The strategic implications for the GG in these contexts are clear, providing both an overall goal and specific approaches:

Figure 2 – Strategic Recommendations		
Local Perception Case	Strategic Policy Blueprint for the GG	Key Operational Example
Sovereign Debt and Asset Surrender	Fiscal & Transparency Sovereignty: Prioritise concessional financing, transparent contracting, and debt sustainability	Condition financing on public, open-tender processes and provide debt-for-nature/equity swaps to enhance sustainability
Socio-Economic Decline	Local Sovereignty & Value Retention: Mandate enforceable local content, job quotas, and protect competitive local economies	Fund a "rail corridor + SME support fund" to modernise local logistics and prevent the destruction of domestic trucking livelihoods
Digital Standards and Market Compromise	Digital Sovereignty & Standards Integrity: Compete on the quality of governance models (open standards, data protection, interoperability)	Offer a GG-supported 5G network package conditioned on adherence to GDPR-compliant data protection and open-source architecture
Source: Authors		

In summary, the GG must offer a sustainable alternative that is defined by transparent financing, rigorous social and environmental safeguards, and a commitment to

competitive excellence through open standards and market respect. Where the BRI generated a perception gap through elite-driven corruption and non-accountability, the GG's policy blueprint is designed to deliver shared prosperity and sovereignty enhancement at the local level.

5. Conclusion

This article addressed the critical question: How do localised, non-elite perceptions of sovereignty loss and asymmetric risk in BRI projects provide a competitive policy blueprint for the EU's Global Gateway strategy? By adopting a Perception-First Strategy, we analysed how non-elite sentiment shapes the success or failure of China's global infrastructure ambitions. The overall gap that defined this research is the widespread disconnect between the elite-driven narrative of mutual development and the tangible, lived experiences of local communities, which ultimately erodes the long-term sustainability and political acceptance of major strategic initiatives of the BRI.

The major findings derived from the comparative case studies of Sri Lanka, Kenya, and Uruguay reveal that the BRI's core strategic vulnerability is the asymmetric distribution of risks and benefits facilitated by its top-down, opaque implementation model. We found that the perception of sovereignty loss is the unifying element across diverse contexts, although the form of that loss varied significantly based on the host country's institutional strength, overall development, and geopolitical importance to China. In structurally vulnerable states like Sri Lanka and Kenya, the challenges were material and fundamental, manifesting as sovereign debt traps leading to asset surrender (Hambantota Port) and fiscal non-viability resulting in the destruction of local livelihoods (Kenya's SGR). Conversely, in the high-institutional, fiscally stable context of Uruguay, the concern shifted from debt to digital and market sovereignty, framed as a strategic calculation regarding the compromise of open digital standards and the economic dependency created by an opaque FTA. The strategic implication of these findings, detailed in the policy blueprint, is that a "trusted alternative" like the GG must systematically provide solutions that are transparent, locally integrated, and standards-compliant, directly countering the flaws of the BRI implementation model.

The future outlook for the global infrastructure competition suggests that the challenge of connectivity will increasingly pivot from the deployment of traditional hard infrastructure (ports and railways) to the establishment of digital and standards-based platforms. As China moves into more sophisticated, fiscally stable markets, such as the

EU battery and EV markets in Slovakia and Hungary, the competition will shift away from predatory lending towards a contest over regulatory influence, data governance, and industrial market penetration. Consequently, the success of major strategic projects will be inextricably linked to the perception of data security and open-market integrity, mirroring the concerns seen in Uruguay.

To deepen this critical area of study, several research recommendations are warranted. First, future studies should focus on expanding the Perception-First Strategy to systematically analyse media coverage and civil society narratives in recipient countries after the completion of projects, continuing to measure long-term public trust. Second, there is a need for a dedicated quantitative analysis comparing the long-term local employment and GDP contribution of BRI projects versus GG or other multilateral initiatives, using a methodology that controls for sector-specific Chinese labour utilisation and technology transfer. Finally, researchers should conduct a comparative legal analysis of the contractual standards used in Chinese sovereign financing versus those used by the EU's development institutions, specifically focusing on clauses related to arbitration, loan-to-equity conversion, and intellectual property/data governance, to quantify the actual sovereign risks perceived by host nations. These efforts will ensure that policy is continually informed by local realities, maximising the geopolitical efficacy of strategic alternatives.

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