



The BRI and Global Gateway: searching for complementarity in competing narratives and economies

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Introduction

The high-level dinner debate, organised by Friends of Europe, convened a diverse group of stakeholders to discuss critical perspectives on infrastructure development, focusing on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Global Gateway initiative. The participants, representing various sectors, including government, private industry and civil society, engaged in an honest conversation to examine the implications, challenges and opportunities associated with these ambitious global development projects.

Key recommendations

- **Shift narratives and foster meaningful local involvement:** Encourage a shift away from traditional donor-recipient narratives, promoting renewed partnerships and exploring ways to develop local value chains, especially in vulnerable regions, to enhance value creation and sustainability.
- **Strengthen private sector engagement:** Facilitate mechanisms to accelerate private sector involvement, exploring diverse models like blended finance and philanthropies, to ensure the speed, scale and impact of infrastructure development projects.
- **Explore collaboration and partnerships:** Examine potential stronger collaboration between the BRI and Global Gateway initiatives, encouraging open dialogue and joint efforts to address shared global challenges.
- **Promote good governance and transparency:** Emphasise the importance of good governance and transparency in infrastructure projects, addressing issues related to corruption and poor governance that could hinder the effective implementation of initiatives.
- **Clarify communication and awareness:** Improve communication strategies for emerging initiatives such as the Global Gateway, ensuring a clear and comprehensive understanding among the public, private and civil society sectors.

The event began with a broad overview of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), an initiative launched ten years ago. Its impressive scale and profound impact on poverty reduction globally were highlighted by participants. Representatives from the Chinese Mission to the EU pointed out that it had created around 420,000 jobs for local communities and lifted nearly 40mn people out of poverty. On the emerging Global Gateway initiative, an EU Commission representative highlighted the ambition to leverage investments up to €300bn euros by the end of 2027. However, key stakeholders also recognised the relative youth of the Global Gateway initiative compared to the BRI and underscored the need for clearer communication and awareness. Early on, all participants acknowledged the importance of having open, bold conversations surrounding BRI and Global Gateway and of keeping diplomatic channels open.

“ A diplomat has two vocations: to defend the interests of their institution and to build bridges. We need to engage in healthy criticism constructively and build bridges to navigate differences.

A recurring theme of the conversation was the critical role of the private sector in infrastructure development. Participants stressed the urgency of accelerating private sector involvement, which would necessitate the exploration of various models such as blended finance and philanthropy. The importance of aligning global initiatives with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was a constant thread throughout the discussion as well, with an emphasis on translating ambitious investment plans into tangible impacts on local communities. Participants insisted on the importance of ensuring that these global projects contribute effectively to the well-being and sustainable development of the communities directly affected by them. The focus should be on turning high-level goals into practical actions that bring positive changes to the lives of people on the ground, aligning with the broader global agenda for sustainable development set by the United Nations.

The participants acknowledged the divergent perspectives on the BRI and the Global Gateway, raising concerns about potential competition and geopolitical considerations. Diplomatic efforts were underscored as essential in navigating these complexities, with an emphasis on open channels of communication to understand and adapt to the evolving global landscape.

“ Geopolitics are very much a part of this discussion. The question is how do you deal with this? The only way is through discussion and trust.

Geopolitics emerged as a multifaceted theme throughout the discussion, with varying perspectives on its role in global initiatives like the BRI and the nascent Global Gateway. Some participants stressed the inescapable connection between geopolitics and these economic endeavours, recognising that the geopolitical landscape influences the success and challenges of such projects. One participant from the European Commission noted that discussing geopolitics is essential since it forms an inherent part of these expansive global collaborations. On the contrary, some Chinese voices advocated for a separation between geopolitics and economic cooperation. They argued that it is crucial to de-politicise economic and trade matters and focus on mutual benefits rather than geopolitical tensions. This divergence in opinion underscored the complex interplay between global politics and economic initiatives, reflecting the ongoing debate on how to navigate these dynamics for effective and cooperative outcomes.

Additionally, governance and corruption emerged as significant concerns, prompting discussion on the imperative to address these issues to ensure the success and sustainability of infrastructure projects. The conversation also delved into the narrative surrounding global initiatives, calling for a shift away from traditional aid-oriented perspectives and towards a renewed and sincere partnership approach. Encouraging local value chains, particularly in regions such as Africa, was proposed as a means to foster sustainable development and economic growth.

“ The Global Gateway aims to strengthen the strategic autonomy of our partners and increase the autonomy of Europe. We need to de-risk supply chains strategically to promote economic resilience.

A representative from the European Commission emphasised that the Global Gateway is designed not only to elevate the autonomy of partner nations but also to fortify the strategic independence of Europe itself. By investing strategically in partner countries and addressing their development needs, the Global Gateway seeks to empower these nations, making them more self-reliant and less dependent on external influences. Simultaneously, the initiative is viewed as a means to enhance Europe’s strategic autonomy by fostering robust and mutually beneficial partnerships. Participants emphasised the interconnectedness of these goals, highlighting that strengthened collaboration can contribute to the overall autonomy of both partnering nations and Europe, positioning the Global Gateway as a pivotal driver in this geopolitical and economic landscape. A former high-level representative of NATO stressed the importance of constructive criticism and suggested a deconfliction mechanism for overlapping projects.

“ A deconfliction mechanism would be useful if both initiatives go into the same area. It’s essential to navigating overlapping projects, ensuring coordination and identifying areas for collaboration.

Deconfliction mechanisms will be imperative for the sustainability and long-term success of both the BRI and Global Gateway initiatives. Participants suggested the need for a system to manage situations in which the two initiatives support overlapping or interfering projects. This is crucial for avoiding conflicts and ensuring that the projects can work together smoothly. The idea is to coordinate and collaborate, making sure that the efforts of these initiatives complement each other instead of causing confusion or competition. It will require creating a roadmap to navigate these large projects so they can achieve their respective goals without inhibiting one another.



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