

TEPSA EXPERTS' DEBRIEF

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HOW CAN THE GLOBAL GATEWAY REDEFINE THE EU'S EXTERNAL PROFILE?

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Foreword

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In 2021, the European Union (EU) launched the Global Gateway Initiative, a bold attempt to redefine its role in a world increasingly shaped by great-power competition. To discuss its potential, we asked 10 experts from the TEPSA network and beyond:

What is your assessment of the Global Gateway initiative? Is it a useful tool for enhancing the EU's strategic autonomy and competing with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the United States' (U.S.) strategies?

I thank them warmly for sharing their insights.

All contributors agree: the Global Gateway marks a significant shift in Europe's approach to development, economic policy, and geopolitics, with a particular focus on its relations with Africa. They see it as a promising but complex evolution, one that balances the promotion of European interests and the outreach to foreign partners.

The first three contributions focus on the evolution of the Global Gateway and the competition with China:

- [Arditti](#) paints a stark picture of Europe's waning influence in Africa, where its share of trade and investment has declined sharply over the past 30 years. European banks have progressively withdrawn from Africa after the 2008 financial crisis. He sees the Global Gateway as a potential turning point, provided the EU can foster a closer public-private dialogue to improve efficiency and speed.
- [Bilal](#) sees the Global Gateway as a way of counterbalancing the Chinese BRI. He examines the trade-offs between European domestic interests and benefits for partner countries, tracing the shift from a development paradigm to a more geopolitical one. In his view, security, strategic autonomy, and resilience now drive EU external action. But this should not come at the expense of development. He highlights the key role of the private sector in the success of Global Gateway.

- [Brinza](#) explores how the Global Gateway is reshaping Africa's development narrative, offering a values-based alternative to China's BRI. The latter was highly successful in creating its own brand, but it is facing problems like the debt trap and delays in delivery. China's recalibration of the BRI in 2023 suggests that the EU approach is gaining traction. It is vital to build on this, while showing, in the African context, some flexibility on democracy, environmental correction and feasibility studies.

The following three contributions look at the overall issue from a more sectoral perspective: education, health, and digital transformation.

- [Bedasso](#) sees the Global Gateway as a tool for Europe's strategic autonomy, but its real potential is to turn geopolitical anxiety into mutually beneficial investment. Its value lies less in competing with China's BRI or U.S. strategies than in defining a distinctly European approach. The inclusion of education as a core pillar of the Global Gateway reflects a broader vision: Europe's influence cannot rely solely on infrastructure or trade but must also invest in human capital.
- [Bengtsson, Lenz, and Van der Meer](#) highlight the Global Gateway's role in global health, positioning it as both a value-based partnership model and a vehicle for EU geopolitical and economic interests. The current EU Global Health Strategy (EUGHS) connects internal resilience and strategic autonomy with the external dimension of stronger health systems abroad and stresses equitable partnerships. They argue that the EU's credibility will depend on translating its rhetoric of equity into sustained, trust-building action with low and middle-income countries.
- [Tshuma](#) offers a nuanced take: rather than challenging China, Europe's Global Gateway is increasingly entangled with it. He argues that Europe's digital governance model, while distinct, must contend with China's dominance in financing and infrastructure, a reality that complicates any clear-cut rivalry. Europe, the U.S., and China are increasingly bound by overlapping economic stakes. Tshuma advises the EU to focus on its strengths, while not losing sight of its core objective: reducing poverty and inequality.

The final two contributions focus more on the internal challenges for the EU:

- [Di Carlo](#) argues that the EU must find its own path in the global game. The Global Gateway can build on the EU's strengths as a leading source of development finance and investment, but it faces structural weaknesses: a lack of strategic coherence, a cumbersome governance structure, and weak communication. Rather than imitating China's model or framing the Global Gateway as a direct competitor to the BRI, Di Carlo urges the EU to focus on its comparative advantages: high standards, transparency, sustainability, and reliable partnerships.
- [Gomez Arana](#) calls for a serious debate among all the stakeholders in Europe about balancing security and economic interests with a values-based approach.

The Global Gateway, she argues, could become a genuine European venture, one that merges competing interests into a coherent whole. Creating genuine partnerships would help develop a form of trust that the relations of other key actors with the Global South do not enjoy. This will require significant effort, but the payoff, a clear competitive advantage for the EU, is worth it.

As these experts make clear, the Global Gateway's success hinges on the EU's ability to balance its values with its interests, its ambition with its execution, and its rivalry with cooperation. The debate is far from over, but the stakes could not be higher.

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ABBREVIATIONS

BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
EU	European Union
EUGHS	EU Global Health Strategy
LMICs	Low and middle-income countries
MAV+	Manufacturing and Access to Vaccines, Medicines, and Health Technologies in Africa
U.S.	United States

The EU's Global Gateway must emerge as a credible alternative to Chinese and U.S. influence in Africa

Since the beginning of the century, China has consistently deployed an African strategy, which has been intensified through the BRI. Unsurprisingly, this has prompted a strong reaction from the U.S., which has been trying to rebalance its influence in recent years. In contrast, Europe has allowed its presence in Africa to erode gradually without much reaction until recently, when it launched its Global Gateway initiative, a global investment programme in which Africa has a major role – and that could become the European response.

Guillaume Arditti

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Since the BRI was established in 2013, China is estimated to have committed over USD 1.3 trillion globally, with Africa becoming the main partner, at over [USD 60 billion](#) engaged (including construction contracts and investments) in 2025 alone. The BRI in Africa is the continuation of a strategy initiated long ago. The preliminary phase began in the early 2000s, when China sought to secure its economy, growth model and technological development: it started focusing on accessing commodities such as oil, gas, copper and cobalt at a time when these metals were not yet considered “critical”, triggering what would become known as the “commodities supercycle”.

This strategy became far more global and integrated with the BRI through the development of increasingly sophisticated infrastructure and corridors projects - including roads, logistics, power plants – that would serve two objectives: developing trade flows and projecting influence.

As China became Africa's leading individual trading partner and its growing global influence became increasingly obvious, this eventually triggered a reaction from the U.S. in the form of its Asian Pivot. Although Africa had not been a priority since the end of the Cold War, it reappeared on the U.S. map in the mid-2010s, when it became urgent to counter Chinese influence. Aid programs were enhanced, until new objectives appeared and made the strategy move on to a second phase, which is currently underway and goes clearly beyond aid: trying to reduce U.S. dependence on China for critical minerals.

Interestingly, the Chinese and U.S. approaches are similar in that neither country has ever separated economics from politics; rather, they are used to strengthen

each other. Although their methods differ, both superpowers use diplomacy to advance their economic projects, mobilising private and public sector resources and prioritising financial firepower. While China provides financial packages for its contractors, the U.S. secures funding through the Development Finance Corporation and enlists the support of private-sector financiers. U.S. involvement in financing the Lobito railway, which links the Democratic Republic of the Congo's copper basin to Angola's Atlantic coast, is quite telling. So too is the fact that J.P. Morgan Chase returned to the continent a year ago by establishing a presence in Nairobi and Abidjan.

By contrast, European banks have, over the past years, withdrawn from the African continent. This process began 10 years ago in the wake of the tightening of prudential regulations following the 2008 financial crisis, which also resulted in their exit from sub-investment-grade markets worldwide. Alongside this loss of private sector financing sources, the European position has steadily deteriorated, resulting in reduced investment (even more evident when excluding oil and gas) and diminished trade - Europe's share of Africa's imports has almost halved in 30 years. But with the current geopolitical turmoil and the urgent need to address EU sovereignty vulnerabilities, the importance of Africa as Europe's immediate neighbour has resurfaced, as has the need to expand the relationship beyond aid.

Hence, the importance of the Global Gateway initiative, which has the potential to become a turning point. It can be the EU's response to the US push and the Chinese BRI. For Africa alone, it has set a target of EUR 150 billion in investments for the period 2021–2027. While these funds are mobilised amounts, not investments, and questions are being raised about how much has been effectively deployed, two elements will be key to the success of the Global Gateway: the capacity to scale up and to deploy swiftly.

With European budgets under pressure and aid being redirected towards defence spending and Ukraine's reconstruction, it is essential to attract private sector investment to compete with China and the U.S., who are already doing so. While the Global Gateway's priorities are green energy, transport corridors, digital infrastructure, health and education, mobilising European private capital will be a crucial element. Using the Global Gateway to attract European private financing sources back to the continent, not only banks, but also pension funds, insurance companies, and asset managers, could be a game-changer. This would have a significant multiplier effect, injecting billions of euros into the system

To this end, a renewed close public–private dialogue is key, taking into account the operational constraints and ground realities faced by the private sector. This would improve implementation efficiency and execution speed, which are often cited as major obstacles compared to competitors. Not only could the Global Gateway unleash the potential of the EU–Africa relationship and provide an alternative to the BRI, it could also be instrumental in reconciling politics and economics and bridging the divide between the private and public sectors.

Europe will be capable of regaining weight and securing its sovereignty only through the coordinated approach of its Member States and the joint efforts of the

public and private sectors: the Global Gateway offers the opportunity to provide a powerful tool to help deliver results on the ground and reshape the relationship with Africa and other parts of the world.

The Global Gateway evolution: Balancing European interests with partners' development

The EU's [Global Gateway initiative](#) represents a significant evolution in how Europe engages with the world. This strategy seeks to harmonise two often-competing aspirations: the promotion of external trade and investments aligned with domestic European interests, and the delivery of meaningful benefits to partner countries. While the European Commission maintains that these two goals are "two sides of the same coin," the reality involves navigating inevitable trade-offs. As the EU faces a more hostile global environment, it has become imperative to define a clear strategic direction that balances development cooperation with the pursuit of European security and competitiveness.



Global Gateway 1.0: The initial geostrategic phase

Launched in December 2021, Global Gateway 1.0 was primarily anchored in a development finance paradigm, albeit with a new geostrategic twist. Rather than simply supporting development for its own sake, the initiative was designed as a direct [counteroffer](#) to the Chinese BRI. The goal was to boost the EU's visibility and soft power by moving from a traditional grant narrative to a catalytic narrative. This followed the "[billion to trillion](#)" agenda of the 2015 Addis Ababa Action Agenda, focusing on how public funds could mobilise massive private investment.

Under this [initial phase](#), the EU shifted its communication away from its EUR 79.5 billion aid budget toward a more ambitious target: [mobilising EUR 300 billion in investment](#) between 2021 and 2027 (a milestone reached already by October 2025). The focus was narrowed to strategic sectors: digital connectivity, clean energy, transport, health, and education. However, critics noted that Global Gateway 1.0 often resembled a repackaging exercise. Existing projects, such as the [Nachtigal dam in Cameroon](#), were rebranded as "flagship" projects to generate political momentum, even when their geostrategic value was questioned. To differentiate its offer, the EU introduced the 360-degree approach, combining direct investment with complementary interventions to provide a comprehensive package to partners.

Global Gateway 2.0: Towards economic statecraft

With the onset of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine and rising global fragmentation, the initiative underwent a profound [paradigm shift](#). Under the second von der Leyen Commission — dubbed the "[Investment Commission](#)" —

Global Gateway 2.0 emerged with a sharper geostrategic focus. The narrative transitioned from repackaged development projects to an explicit integration of European interests in all endeavours. In this new phase, security, strategic autonomy, and resilience have become the primary drivers of EU external action.

A central feature of Global Gateway 2.0 is the elevated role of the European private sector. The Commission has actively sought to involve European companies not only through the [Business Advisory Group](#) – a consultative body not linked to projects – but also through the launch of the [Global Gateway Investment Hub](#) in October 2025, which acts as a single point of contact for corporate investment proposals. This shift is further supported by the [Team National](#) approach, where Member States set up public-private frameworks to funnel relevant company proposals to the GGIH. While countries like Finland and Sweden have long-established frameworks, others like Belgium and Germany are only now formalising these processes.

Opportunities and tensions

The evolution of the Global Gateway presents significant opportunities for more coherent EU external action. By integrating [export credit agencies](#) and development finance institutions, the EU can better support its international competitiveness and economic security. The upcoming negotiations for the 2028-2034 Multiannual Financial Framework provide an opening to create stronger financing mechanisms under the Global Europe instrument and the European Competitiveness Fund.

However, this shift also creates substantial tensions, particularly regarding the use of official development assistance. Systemic concerns have been raised about the [tying of aid](#) as involving European companies increasingly becomes a condition for project approval. Using aid principles — originally designed for poverty reduction — to promote economic statecraft and security risks ignoring fundamental [trade-offs](#). For instance, European companies are naturally drawn to emerging growth markets, whereas the greatest development needs often lie in fragile and poorer countries. Furthermore, while the EU has pledged half of its EUR 300 billion target to Africa, a focus on economic statecraft might suggest prioritising the EU's neighbourhood or emerging markets like Brazil, India, or Indonesia, with which the EU has recently concluded trade agreements.

Conclusion

The Global Gateway is at a crossroads between its traditional development roots and its new role as a tool of economic statecraft. For the initiative to become fully relevant, the EU must better articulate what EU interests actually mean beyond a simple sectoral focus. While it is geostrategically sound to combine development tools with national interests, the EU must be careful not to substitute one for the other. Reframing development cooperation so that it is complementary to, rather than a substitute for, the EU's competitiveness, security and statecraft objectives will be essential to maintaining the EU's credibility and effectiveness on the global stage.

From aid to influence: How the Global Gateway is rewriting the African development narrative

In the 2000s, EU development support provided to Africa ranged between [30-45% of the total of the G7 countries](#) and represented the backbone of official development assistance on the continent. Despite this, EU support was not well known, mainly because the EU lacked a catchy narrative that could wrap all that financial assistance in a success story.

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In the 2010s, China reinvented its diplomacy through the BRI, targeting Africa, while the U.S., through a combination of good public relations, soft and economic power, quickly became the most visible aid provider in Africa, [despite pouring less development funds into the continent than the EU](#). The BRI, while becoming a [branding strategy for China's foreign investments and projects](#), succeeded when many other Western development initiatives failed – creating a catchy story that generated very much buzz worldwide.

But the BRI's shine was taken off when the Chinese government decided to apply the BRI brand to all the Chinese projects – showing interest only in quantity, not quality. This is why Xi Jinping, in 2023, during the Belt and Road Forum, tried to recalibrate the BRI towards [“small and beautiful”](#) projects. But the BRI brand also suffered from the debt trap narrative, which was poorly managed by the Chinese government, and by delayed projects and debt restructuring.

One may also ask whether the EU's [Global Gateway initiative](#) played a part in the reconfiguration of the BRI's pathway. The Global Gateway arrived in the global landscape as an updated and more ethical version of the BRI; it puts emphasis on human rights, environmental protection, green energy, feasibility, and small yet high-quality projects. The answer is probably “yes”: the Global Gateway was one of the factors that drove China into recognising the BRI limitations and reshaping the BRI image to be defined by higher-quality projects that abide by high environmental and working standards, aspects that were repeatedly scrutinised during the first years of the BRI.

It is interesting to note that both the European and Chinese leaders used the narrative of cohabitation and complementarity between the BRI and the Global Gateway to maintain a geopolitical balance. However, the competition angle prevails over the partnership one.

The Lobito Corridor, the “key Global Gateway flagship,” is a very good example of competition between the EU and China, as, at some point, it was [in the crosshairs](#)

[of China's infrastructure projects](#). In spite of being a project developed in conjunction with the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment, the Global Gateway succeeded where the BRI failed: to secure the reconstruction of a vital African infrastructure artery and thus revive a project that was important but not prioritised. This decision created a “Global Gateway effect” in Africa, as a result of competition: in November 2025, China finally decided to dust off the TAZARA project, a railway in East Africa connecting Tanzania with Zambia, by giving the green light to [its railway refurbishment](#). TAZARA, together with the Lobito Corridor railway, may connect the Atlantic Ocean with the Pacific, and for many years, has been kept by China on the back burner of its African infrastructure projects portfolio.

By building the Global Gateway as a catchy brand that is easily identified with the EU and its positive impact, the EU managed to create an effective public relations strategy for European development assistance and investment in Africa. It is now vital to nurture it, support it, and use it to enhance European strategic autonomy. The biggest challenge will be choosing between partnering with allies or implementing independent projects. The latest geopolitical developments pleaded in favour of a bolder EU, focused on its strategic autonomy goals. The Global Gateway can become a tool for achieving this objective and increasing the prestige of the EU's foreign policy.

The EU should look to the BRI not only from the angle of a competitor, but also from a learning angle, by extracting the best lessons from the BRI experience in Africa and beyond. This includes the importance of creating a visible and fancy brand and of focusing on quality over quantity (the numbers or the dimension of projects), but also the capacity to adapt to maintain relevance and to counter the risk of losing the geographic focus while extending globally. The EU also needs to adapt to Africa by being more flexible on overly strict requests regarding feasibility studies, democracy or environmental protection, which may exceed the political, legal and social conditions in some countries. An African leader, while having to choose between the BRI and the Global Gateway, will compare the flexibility offered by each of the programmes. The future of the Global Gateway will be dictated by finding the right balance between what the EU wants and what it believes in. It also depends on the way the EU will handle the competition versus collaboration issue with other global development initiatives, like the BRI, the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment, Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific, or India's India–Middle East–Europe Economic Corridor.

If the EU gets its policy on the Global Gateway right, it will make a huge difference in Europe's standing in the world.

Global Gateway and education: Europe's geopolitical bet on the next generation

My assessment is that the Global Gateway is a useful initiative, but its value lies less in competing with China's BRI or U.S. strategies on their own terms than in defining a distinctly European approach. From a global education perspective, its significance is that it recognises that Europe's external partnerships cannot be built on infrastructure and trade alone. The inclusion of education alongside digital, energy, transport and health matters because it reflects a broader understanding of what underpins long-term growth and influence.

Biniam Bedasso

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A historical perspective is useful here, particularly in the context of Europe's relationship with Africa. The current geopolitical dynamic is not entirely new. In earlier periods of European anxiety, especially in the interwar and early post-war years, some thinkers and policy-makers looked to closer integration between Europe and Africa as part of the answer to Europe's changing place in the world. But that earlier moment was shaped by colonial hierarchies and extractive relationships, rather than equal partnership. The point of recalling this history is not to suggest that Global Gateway is at risk of repeating it. Rather, it reminds us that this is not the first time geopolitical pressure has prompted Europe to look outward. The challenge now is to channel that familiar impulse towards closer external partnership in a more constructive, equitable and genuinely mutual way, in Africa and beyond.

In that respect, one strength of the Global Gateway is its explicit realism. It openly integrates foreign policy, economic policy and development policy. China's rise has already shown that many countries in the Global South do not expect international cooperation to be guided by pure altruism. What matters more is whether partnerships are reliable, transparent and supportive of national development priorities. Used well, the Global Gateway could help the EU pursue strategic autonomy precisely because it provides a framework for acting on Europe's interests in a more coherent and self-aware way.

This is also why education should be seen as more than a social add-on: it is integral to the kind of long-term partnership the Global Gateway claims to represent. The European Commission states that more than [10% of the EU's International Partnerships budget for 2021-2027](#), over EUR 6 billion, is allocated to education, signalling that Europe's global offer is not only about hard infrastructure but also about human capital and capability-building. This balance may prove to be one of Europe's strongest advantages over more narrowly infrastructure-led models.

The main challenge, however, is balance within the education pillar itself. There will be a strong temptation, for both European actors and partner governments, to focus on skills, employability, technical and vocational training, and higher education because these align most directly with priorities such as digital transformation, green transition and competitiveness. That emphasis is understandable and, in part, justified. But there is a risk that the education offer becomes too narrowly tied to labour-market needs and Europe's external economic interests. At a time when other donors are already drifting away from foundational learning, that would be a mistake. [UNESCO](#) warns that aid to education is projected to fall substantially by 2027. In that context, a strategy that reinforces the tilt towards post-basic education without protecting support for foundational learning would weaken both development outcomes and the long-term logic of Europe's partnership strategy.

Africa is one especially important case in point, even if the broader argument applies globally. Demographic change alone makes the case for investing early in broad-based human capital in Africa. [United Nations projections](#) show that sub-Saharan Africa is expected to account for more than half of global population growth to 2050. If Europe seeks stable, productive and resilient partnerships over the coming decades, then funding foundational education can be considered a strategic investment in the capabilities on which later skills, innovation and economic cooperation depend.

Overall, the Global Gateway is useful to the extent that it enables the EU to act externally in a more coordinated, self-directed and credible way. Its added value lies less in competing head-to-head with China or the U.S. than in enabling Europe to pursue a more coherent vision of its own interests and partnerships. In doing so, the EU can draw on important advantages, including longstanding historical, institutional and linguistic ties with many regions of the Global South. Those ties do not guarantee influence, but they provide a stronger foundation for credible, lasting and mutually beneficial partnerships. From an education perspective, that means investing in foundational human capabilities as well as infrastructure.

When health meets geopolitics: The EU's Global Gateway in a changing global health order



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The EU's role in global health is evolving in a context marked by conflict, fiscal retrenchment, and weaker support for multilateral institutions. The EU first adopted a comprehensive [global health strategy in 2010](#), setting a framework for its external health action. This was [updated in 2022](#) after COVID-19 exposed weaknesses in global and European health systems. Both strategies stress the EU's ambition to strengthen its position in global health: in 2010, the focus was mainly on development cooperation, while in 2022, the ambition was more strategic, geopolitical and cross-sectoral, with health becoming part of "high politics" as a component of the Global Gateway and the EU's strategic autonomy. This trend was further reinforced politically, including through the announcement of the [Global Health Resilience Initiative](#) in the 2025 State of the Union address.

The current EUGHS connects internal resilience and strategic autonomy with the external dimension of stronger health systems abroad. Priorities reflect the growing strategic role of African and Asian partner countries, stressing equitable partnerships, health sovereignty, stronger health systems, as well as local capacity for research and medical countermeasures. Within this framework, the Global Gateway and its related Team Europe initiatives are central in implementing the EUGHS through strategic streamlining of EU and Member State financing, regulatory support, and related partnerships in key sectors.

Global Gateway and global health

The Global Gateway is the EU's flagship international partnership strategy. It is the Union's attempt to offer a "values-based alternative" to China's BRI, focusing on energy, transport, digital transformation, health, and education as its main pillars. Simultaneously, the Global Gateway reflects a turn towards advancing EU strategic and economic interests, including those of the private sector.

As a key instrument in the EU's global health engagement, the Global Gateway

aims to strengthen health systems, expand access to essential services, and support local manufacturing and innovation. A flagship example is the Team Europe initiative on [Manufacturing and Access to Vaccines, Medicines, and Health Technologies in Africa \(MAV+\)](#), which supports African pharmaceutical systems and manufacturing and aligns European and African priorities while attracting political support on both continents.

The Global Gateway uses a “360-degree approach”, combining hard and soft infrastructure to address supply and demand challenges, creating an enabling environment for business, employment, and human development. While [China](#) remains a preferred infrastructure partner for many low and middle-income countries (LMICs), its comparative strength is weaker in social sectors such as health and education, where countries may favour other partners, including European actors.

Balancing self-interest and global public goods

The Global Gateway links development cooperation with EU strategic interests when it comes to trade, investment, research, and innovation. Yet, this dual purpose can create tension and raise questions. Support for health systems and values underpinning traditional development cooperation does not always align with EU priorities centred on competitiveness and strategic autonomy.

Global health is fundamentally about equity and access to quality care. Under international law, health is a human right concerning access to quality health services and addressing underlying determinants of health, including safe water, sanitation, food, and other needs. This depends on treating health as a global public good, rather than a commodity for those with sufficient resources or influence. Thus, health cooperation and investment under the Global Gateway is different from sectors like transport or digital infrastructure, where commercial returns are clearer, and private finance is easier to mobilise.

Partnerships: Trust, values, and dynamics

The importance of meaningful partnerships is reflected in the language of the EUGHS and the narrative around its broader diplomatic engagements. In global health diplomacy, trust is essential. The EU’s comparative strength depends on its ability to build credible partnerships that are co-developed and co-owned, not only on paper. This differs from more transactional approaches to cooperation, including recent negotiations involving LMICs and the U.S..

The Global Gateway is presented as a means to build “partnerships of equals based on joint responsibility.” The 2022 EUGHS reinforces this rhetoric, elevating notions of equity, co-ownership, and mutual accountability. Yet, tensions and polarisation, due to colonial pasts and grievances concerning inequitable access to COVID-19 vaccines, remain between LMICs and European actors.

Cooperation between the EU and partner countries, grounded in trust and mutual

respect, will be essential to developing a more sustainable model of engagement, while also offering an alternative to the approaches pursued by China and the U.S. As the EU and its Member States pursue their wider geopolitical aims, including greater soft power and visibility, they should be careful to preserve their distinct value proposition and adherence to true local ownership by partner countries. Positioned between strategic concerns and global health values, the Global Gateway thus operates in a complex environment that enables and tests equitable partnerships in practice.

To conclude, partnership equity for the EU and the Global Gateway must move beyond rhetoric. It requires visible and sustained action. The EU can build on successful cooperation, such as the ongoing partnership with Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, while expanding engagement in other regions, including Latin America. Successful initiatives such as MAV+ can serve as role models when it comes to local ownership and a path towards health sovereignty supported by the EU but defined by its partners.

In Africa, Europe's Global Gateway is not challenging Beijing — it is entangled with it

Since assuming office, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has consistently framed the EU's economic foreign policy through partnerships, noting [“the third strand of our economic foreign policy is partnerships, and investing together in our interests and our partners through Global Gateway; our initiative to invest](#)

Darlington Tshuma

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[in infrastructure projects worldwide.”](#) Von der Leyen's framing reflects a dominant perspective within the EU leadership that positions the Global Gateway as a central pillar of its geoeconomic and geopolitical strategy – intended both to compete with China and assert greater strategic autonomy *vis-à-vis* Washington. Across Africa, a prevailing view is that the Global Gateway is Europe's attempt at regaining some of the influence that the bloc has unwittingly yielded to China.

Global Gateway aims to mobilise EUR 300 billion in infrastructure investments worldwide between 2021 and 2027, half of which is allocated to Africa. Since the strategy's launch in 2021, Global Gateway flagship projects have grown in both scope and ambition. In Africa alone, Global Gateway projects nearly doubled: increasing from [44 in 2023 to over 72 in 2024](#). Digital transformation constitutes one of the key pillars and areas of cooperation and investment under the Global Gateway strategy and comprised 13% total share value of all Global Gateway initiatives in 2023/2024. Digital projects under the Global Gateway span physical infrastructure (fibre optic cables, 5G connectivity and data centres) and soft infrastructure (regulatory reform, skills development and training, technological transfer and digital governance frameworks). [The Digital Connectivity Masterplan](#) of the Global Gateway, largely leveraged through bilateral partnerships and digital diplomacy, reflects the EU's growing ambition to strengthen its role as a global digital actor and to promote the EU's model of digital governance worldwide. This is evident in the Masterplan's implementation model, which appears to prioritise geopolitical leverage on one hand, and the economic and commercial interests of European corporations and private firms on the other.

With a financial envelope of over EUR 150 billion for Africa alone, the EU is increasingly aligning development assistance, private capital, technological aid and research and development to shape Africa's digital transformation. By investing in digital infrastructure, skills, and governance frameworks, the EU hopes to expand business opportunities for European firms looking to expand their operations and enter new markets. Similarly, while U.S.-based technology companies dominate digital services and platforms, China is investing billions of dollars in building digital

infrastructure networks across Africa, leveraging Beijing's [Digital Silk Road Initiative](#). To date, [more than a dozen African countries have concluded cooperation agreements with Beijing under its Digital Silk Road](#). While the EU continues to invest billions of euros in infrastructure projects in Africa, a key constraint is that China already [dominates the financing and infrastructure landscape](#). China is now Africa's largest infrastructure financier, financing one out of five projects and constructing one out of three mega infrastructure projects. Both the Global Gateway and China's BRI aim to build new partnerships and expand geopolitical influence through global infrastructure development. This is where commercial interests converge. On one side, Europe and the U.S.; on the other, Europe and China are increasingly bound by overlapping economic stakes.

This intertwining of business interests and geopolitical ambitions blurs the lines of influence, making it difficult to clearly distinguish between Western and Chinese roles despite the prevailing rhetoric of strategic rivalry. For example, across much of Africa, Chinese contractors and technology firms such as Huawei are building digital infrastructure, including projects directly linked to the Global Gateway. They provide the digital infrastructure backbone that enables U.S. and European technology service providers to operate. An [Africa AI Barometer survey](#) highlights this interdependence, finding that the majority of African businesses and start-ups rely on U.S.-developed AI tools, such as ChatGPT and Microsoft Co-Pilot, rather than Chinese alternatives like DeepSeek. This is despite Chinese firms building much of the underlying infrastructure. For Europe, digital infrastructure, connectivity and digital governance frameworks provide significant economic and geopolitical power, including through data access and data mining. For example, the [European Strategy for Data](#) sees data access as an essential resource not just for economic growth but also as an engine for global competitiveness and innovation. The strategy aims to leverage European data regulatory and policy frameworks to attract data storage and processing globally. However, the strategy faces criticism for pursuing an extractivist model, which does not compensate countries for data mining and, at times, prevents poor countries from developing their own technologies.

While Europe is unlikely to match the scale of investments mobilised by Beijing, its strategic advantage lies in its established reputation and credibility. It should build on this while strategically leveraging its global partnerships and geoeconomic influence to better align geopolitical priorities, including digital infrastructure, policy and governance frameworks and investment flows with its core objectives of reducing poverty and inequality and advancing sustainable development in the Global South.

This contribution is drawn from insights contained in the following publication:

- Tshuma, D & Lunardini, M. (2026): *EU-Africa digital partnership: strategic pathways through the Mattei Plan and Global Gateway*, New Culture Edition, Rome, Italy.

Global Gateway: EU's geopolitical promise needs to find its own path

The EU launched its Global Gateway strategy with a bold ambition: to position itself as a credible geopolitical actor in the global infrastructure and connectivity game. This move came at a time when several major powers were rapidly rolling out their own connectivity strategies with clear geopolitical aims. In many ways, the Global Gateway builds on existing strengths given the EU's role as one of the

world's largest sources of development finance and investment in emerging economies, with the Union already enjoying significant financial heft. Some years on, however, the initiative has simultaneously exposed both significant economic firepower potential and persistent structural weaknesses that continue to limit its overall impact.

At its core, the Global Gateway serves mainly two geopolitical mandates. It aims to provide partner countries with a viable alternative to other offers, such as the BRI, while addressing the EU's own vulnerabilities by reducing strategic dependencies in critical sectors, such as energy, raw materials, and digital infrastructure. This aligns seamlessly with the broader pursuit of the so-called EU strategic autonomy, the idea that the EU must cultivate an independent capacity to act in a more fragmented and unpredictable world order.

Translating the vision of the Global Gateway into reality, however, has proven far more challenging than rhetoric suggests. The initiative's success hinges on confronting entrenched EU weaknesses, starting with the absence of a coherent strategic direction grounded in clearly defined European interests and priorities. Too often, projects feel disjointed, selected more for bureaucratic feasibility than for their alignment with overarching geopolitical aims. Besides, the Global Gateway is tied to a multilayered governance structure that reflects the complexity of EU foreign policy and internal decision-making processes. While this architecture is difficult to change, it slows delivery, reduces flexibility, and complicates implementation. Projects are often financed over long-time horizons and tend to avoid high-risk environments, even though a geopolitical actor must be able to operate in precisely those contexts. In contrast, more agile actors like China are more willing to shoulder risks in unstable regions, delivering projects that generate immediate visibility.

Nowhere is this tension more evident than in Asia, where the Global Gateway is making inroads despite Africa absorbing the lion's share of funds to date. In Southeast Asia, for example, the EU, through the Global Gateway, is increasingly

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active in supporting regional priorities, such as the green transition and sustainable connectivity.

However, the impact in the region remains uneven. The EU continues to struggle to turn political ambition into concrete investments, lagging behind in speed and scale compared to other major players. The EU's emphasis on transparency, sustainability, and standards may strengthen its long-term credibility, but it can also make its offer less attractive in the short term. Damaging as well is the initiative's lingering reactive posture, depicted frequently as a response or a counterweight to the BRI. The EU's tendency to look at its engagements through the "China lens" has sometimes alienated support from countries in the region and beyond, who prize strategic neutrality over great power rivalry. Even worse, this framing is self-defeating. It caters primarily to domestic European and - more broadly - Western audiences rather than local partners. [Regional surveys](#) show the EU remains among the most trusted players, but more tailored and nuanced policies are demanded. By extension, the Global Gateway does not need to — and cannot — mirror the BRI's playbook. China's model thrives on [narrative unity](#), opportunistic timing, and a dose of good risk tolerance, all traits that do not necessarily belong to the EU. Instead, the initiative should lean into Brussels' comparative edge. The EU is unlikely to replicate those conditions, nor would that necessarily suit its model. Instead, the Global Gateway should focus on what the EU does best: high standards, transparency, sustainability, and predictable partnerships. Its role is not to substitute for China's offer, but to broaden choices. Eventually, Brussels has to offer others what it also wants for itself: diversification.

Communication stands out as the Global Gateway's Achilles' heel, especially since communication is not only about messaging but also about political presence. The absence of high-level representation at key summits (e.g., ASEAN-EU Ministerial Meeting, EU-Indo-Pacific Ministerial Forum) sends the wrong signal. Effective storytelling demands tangible milestones, not just press releases. If the initiative is to matter politically, it must be embedded in sustained dialogue with partner countries, not limited to isolated announcements or project launches. A more systemic approach is required, one that links infrastructure investment to long-term political engagement.

In addition, the Global Gateway as a geopolitical initiative does not operate in a vacuum, and it has to face the ups and downs of the EU's position in its foreign policies and the consequent reputational damage. In many regions, perceptions of EU foreign policy on issues such as the Middle East influence how its initiatives are judged. The Global Gateway depends on the credibility of the EU's wider external action. Member States compound the problem: their bilateral aid and deals frequently eclipse EU-level branding, fragmenting Europe's message. Tighter joint visibility and coordination are imperative for a cohesive offer.

Ultimately, the initiative's limits reflect the limits of EU foreign policy itself: internal divisions, complex governance, and a gap between rhetoric and delivery. Still, the EU has an opportunity to turn the Global Gateway into a more effective foreign policy tool. That will require moving from fragmented efforts to a more coordinated European approach by linking the domestic needs with foreign policy priorities.

Without that shift, the initiative risks remaining a good opportunity for the European public and private sector, but still constrained by the system that created it.

Global Gateway and strategic autonomy: Normatively navigating the EU's future in the international arena?

The European Global Gateway initiative, launched in December 2021 by the European Commission and Josep Borrell, then EU High Representative, aims at creating a new tool for organising cooperation with the Global South in an evolving geopolitical context. It has a much more explicitly strategic component than former

programmes like the Generalised Scheme of Preferences (1971) or the Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus. In terms of budget, there is a significant increase in relation to these previous programmes, with EUR 45 billion in investment allocated to Latin America and the Caribbean out of the entire EUR 300 billion budget.

It is interesting to look at its governance structure. The creation of a [Business Advisory Group on Global Gateway](#) that includes well-known companies in key industries and the energy sector highlights the business angle and the importance attached to the public/private partnership. But there is also a [Civil Society and Local Authorities Advisory Platform](#) that looks at the Global Gateway from an altogether different perspective. It is about a normative component through the connection with [key principles](#) such as “Democratic values and high standards”, “Good Governance and Transparency”, “Equal partnerships” and a clear emphasis on [green energy](#) among other ideals. The respective weight and influence of the two components are as yet unclear.

In the current international environment, it is not easy to search for strategic autonomy while holding the flag of principles and to please all sides and stakeholders. Here are some instances of criticism on a perceived imbalance in the overall approach, to the detriment of basic values and principles:

- A [Solidar report](#) signed by many organisations, where questions were raised before the November 2025 EU-Latin America and the Caribbean Summit in Colombia.
- A [joint letter](#) from March 2026 signed by dozens of stakeholders raising critical questions.
- A [press release](#) from the European Parliament at the end of March 2026, voicing criticism of a lack of transparency and accountability, among other complaints, demanding an investigation into the involvement of Chinese companies, as the Global Gateway was meant to counterbalance the BRI, and a “need for shift

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from overly-centralised to demand-driven approach”, providing more room for manoeuvre to third countries.

Another issue that is raised by some, notably the European Parliament, concerns the relationship of the Global Gateway with other EU external relations projects. Is there a long-term plan ensuring overall coherence? This question arises with respect to the recently launched [clean trade and investment partnerships](#). Can the funds provided through the structure of the Global Gateway be used together with these partnerships? If yes, how can governance issues like the involvement of the EP be catered for? The partnership with [South Africa](#), launched in November 2025, with a clear strategic component related to critical raw materials, could be a good test case here.

On substance, one major question requires clarification. It is about the continuation or not of 'extractivist' measures as opposed to a true partnership helping to industrialise the countries that own critical raw materials. If the EU pursues the latter road, it can actually develop a particular type of trust that may not exist in the relations of other international actors with the Global South. This could both give added value to cooperation with the EU in the Global South and help satisfy the conflicting expectations of the stakeholders within the EU.

This all shows that rather than rush to establish a short-term competition with the U.S. and China in the quest for critical raw materials, the EU should strive to develop an ambitious and coherent approach, integrating a clear respect for principles and transparency. The Global Gateway originated before the current energy crises started and before the invasion of Ukraine. The recent events only exacerbate the need for strategic autonomy, for the diversification of supplies and the development of autonomous production, including renewable energy sources. All of this takes time to develop cooperatively. It also requires an open debate within Europe on where the project is headed.

To this end, the various stakeholders should be encouraged to discuss among themselves and to establish a functioning ideological consensus. This would transform the Global Gateway into a genuine European venture which could enhance the EU's stance at home and abroad. It could eventually give to the EU a clear competitive advantage compared to its competitors. The question there is not to pit the various interests and visions against each other but to merge them into a coherent and workable whole. This will require a lot of work and energy, but it is worth the effort.

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