THE GLOBAL GATEWAY INITIATIVE: A POTENTIAL GAMECHANGER

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In 2021, the European Union (EU) launched the Global Gateway (GG) Initiative in a bold attempt to redefine its role in a world increasingly shaped by great-power competition. This was the theme of our latest TEPSA Experts' Debrief, "How can the Global Gateway redefine the EU's external profile?" It is worth returning to it in view of its key importance to the future of the EU. I also draw on the excellent analysis by Valeria Santi published by the Brussels Institute for Geopolitics and the very comprehensive report adopted in March 2026 by the European Parliament on "Global Gateway - Past impacts, future orientation."

Most experts concur that the GG is a potential gamechanger. It reflects the EU's recognition that in a world of great-power rivalry, economic engagement cannot be separated from strategic interests. It marks a strategic pivot and a step away from the classical official development assistance approach toward a more interest-centred, geopolitical stance. With security and strategic autonomy now driving EU external action, it represents Europe's most ambitious effort yet to assert itself as a global actor capable of competing with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the United States' (U.S.) own economic strategies. The pledge to mobilise EUR 400 billion by the end of 2027 is significant.

The shift is long overdue, and it could not have come at a more critical juncture. Europe's influence in Africa, once a cornerstone of its external relations, has been eroding for decades. Its share of trade and investment has declined sharply, while European banks have progressively withdrawn from the continent following the 2008 fiscal crisis. At the same time, Europe is highly dependent on other countries for key value chains involving rare earth materials, for instance.

China's BRI looms large in the developing world. The EU's historical strengths, normative power, regulatory influence, and development expertise are no longer sufficient in a world where China and the U.S. wield economic statecraft with increasing aggression. The Chinese BRI, with its massive infrastructure investments, has redefined global economic engagement, often at the expense of transparency, sustainability, and local ownership. At the same time, the U.S. has leveraged its Inflation Reduction Act and CHIPS Act to repatriate supply chains to America. Europe, caught between these two giants, risks irrelevance unless it crafts a distinct, competitive offer.

The GG can be that offer. It builds on earlier EU efforts, such as the 2018 Asia Connectivity Strategy, but scales up ambition dramatically, in geographical scope, sectoral focus, financing mechanisms, and private-sector involvement. It does not renege on a values-based narrative, tying investments to democratic principles, climate commitments (Paris Agreement), and sustainable development. But, unlike past EU initiatives, it frames these values not as moral preaching but as partnership conditions, a subtle but critical shift in tone.

The GG was initiated by the European Commission, but it has become a "Team Europe" concept, pooling the resources of both the EU institutions and the Member States, as well as those of the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development.

The initiative's governance is multi-layered, including a Steering Committee and Global Gateway Board to oversee strategic direction; a Business Advisory Group to ensure private-sector input; and a Dialogue Platform for Civil Society and Local Authorities (launched in 2023) to improve inclusivity. This approach is promising but the jury is still out on how it is implemented.

Financially, the GG relies on the European Fund for Sustainable Development+, which deploys blended finance, combining guarantees, loans, and grants, to mobilise capital. This model is designed to leverage limited public funds into large-scale investments, a necessity given the new EUR 400 billion target (the initial target had been EUR 300 billion).

Unlike its predecessors, the GG is not limited to transport or digital infrastructure. It spans energy, research, with a strong focus on climate and digital transitions, but also looks at health and education. It distinguishes itself from BRI by emphasising transparency, sustainability, and mutual benefit. Projects are framed as equal partnerships, not extractive ventures. Yet, as Valeria Santi highlights, this narrative must be matched by practice, something civil society groups are increasingly scrutinising. Geographically, it targets the Global South, with Africa as a priority, a recognition of the continent's strategic importance and Europe's fading influence there. Europe, for understandable reasons, has increasingly focused on the Eastern neighbourhood. But Africa is too important for our future to treat is as secondary.

On paper, the GG is delivering. In October 2025, the Commission announced it had already met the initial EUR 300 billion investment target, two years ahead of schedule. In December 2025, the Council endorsed 256 flagship projects, most of them in climate and energy (often concerning hydrogen), particularly in Africa.

If there is one project that epitomises the challenges and the opportunities, it is the Lobito Corridor: a 1 300 km railway connecting the mineral-rich regions of the Democratic Republic of Congo and Zambia to Angola's Lobito Port. The EU is investing in the project with the GG, but China and the U.S. also have stakes in it. It will be interesting to see how the mix of competition and coordination between the three powers will pan out in the end.

Despite its promise, the GG raises critical points, as shown by a Joint Letter signed by over 50 civil society organisations in March 2025, and the comprehensive report by the European Parliament mentioned above. Such critical points include:

- The risk of a neo-colonial approach with resource extraction triumphing over development aims and insufficient involvement of the partner countries in defining the objectives.
- The fear that partner countries in the Global South will see the GG as a mere tool of great power competition with China and the U.S. and reject it as an element of a new Cold War where they are asked to choose sides.
- The heavy reliance of the GG on loans rather than grants could lead to new burdens of debt for developing nations. China's debt-trap diplomacy is well-documented, but Europe is not immune to similar accusations if projects fail to generate sufficient returns.
- A tendency towards a 'top-down approach' and weak governance, both internally and externally, with insufficient involvement of all the stakeholders.
- A lack of visibility, with the 256 projects scattered across regions and sectors, with no clear overview of their progress, impact, or alignment with the key objectives.

It will be important to bring responses to these critical issues. Maybe the most important thing to start with is a convincing EU narrative on the objectives of the GG. A second objective must be finding the right balance between geopolitical and development considerations. At the same time, the EU, while leveraging its normative power in areas ranging from human and labour rights to climate change, should not impose unrealistic conditions that will deter partner countries. This goes together with ensuring strong local ownership in project selection and implementation. Governance will be key, through transparency in decision-making, clear criteria for how projects are chosen and implemented, and independent monitoring of project impacts, particularly on debt sustainability, environmental standards, and human rights.

The GG is more than a label, but it is not yet a gamechanger. It represents the most ambitious attempt by the EU to assert strategic autonomy in a multipolar world, blending geopolitical ambition with development cooperation. Its success depends on whether Europe can walk the talk and avoid the pitfalls we have described. And while the first EUR 300 billion have already been mobilised and 256 projects endorsed, the real test lies in their implementation.

The EU has a strong foundation to build on: its history of integrated infrastructure (TEN-T, Digital Single Market), its development partnerships (Lomé, Cotonou), and its normative leadership. If the GG can learn from the past while adapting to the present, it may prove to be the gate to strategic autonomy the EU so desperately needs. The beginnings are promising; the gate is half-open.

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