BRI vs Global Gateway: Battle for Infrastructure

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China's Belt and Road initiative: can the EU's Global Gateway dethrone the king of infrastructure diplomacy? – MIHAI POSTELNICU

1. Introduction

Global Infrastructure development has become an essential element of diplomacy for several different countries in the 21st century. One such country is the People's Republic of China. The Belt and Road Initiative

(BRI), launched in 2013 by President Xi Jinping, is a Chinese infrastructure finance model that had as its starting aim to link the far East with the European Continent (McBride et al., 2023), recreating the ancient Silk Road route (Casarini, 2024). Since its inception, the initiative has expanded to include South America, Oceania and Africa. Currently, out of 193 United Nations member states, 154 have participated in the BRI so far, totaling 80% of all the members (Tiezzi, 2023). This dominance puts the Belt and Road initiative at the forefront of infrastructure diplomacy.

However, as is with dominance, it is not permanent. The Global Gateway is the European Union's response to the BRI. Launched in 2021, the project aims to raise around €300 billion by 2027, in a bid to create "sustainable and trusted connections" with the EU's global partners (Casarini, 2024, p. 9). One of the newest pawns on the chessboard of infrastructure diplomacy, the task ahead is challenging, if the Global Gateway wants to succeed. As such, the following article will aim to answer the following question:

Can the EU's Global Gateway be used as an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative?

The article aims to explore if the EU's Global Gateway is a viable alternative to the BRI that states can utilize. The BRI's history will be briefly discussed, as well as the Global Gateway's. Furthermore, the security concerns, economic implications, infrastructure and influence in the region that are raised by the BRI will be explored. As such, a contrast between Europe's very own "Global Gateway" and the BRI will be created, with the goal of looking at possibilities for how the Global Gateway can compete against the leading infrastructure diplomacy project.

2. The Belt and Road Initiative: The Silk Road of the 21st century

The Belt and Road Initiative traces its origins back to 2013, when President of the People's Republic of China, Xi Jinping, announced the country's entrance into the world of infrastructure diplomacy. Infrastructure diplomacy will be defined by Al-Rikabi, who states it is diplomacy that "leverages critical technological systems to create durable relationships based on computational interdependence" that goes beyond "traditional or economic diplomacy" (2025, para.2). The BRI is also known as the "One Belt, One Road" Initiative (Karjalainen, 2022, p.4), a nod to the initiative's attempts at recreating the Silk Road, a historic series of trade routes which connected the European continent with the far east regions of China. The Silk Road allowed for valuable goods such as silk to reach Europe, enriching both sides of the route. Similarly to the original Silk Road, the BRI brings with it economic advantages, to both the countries using it and to Beijing, only this time, it consists of infrastructure and construction investments. They include "railways, energy pipelines, highways, and streamlined border

crossings" as well as "industrial areas designed to create jobs", such as Huawei's 5G infrastructure (McBride et al., 2023, para.7). The benefits and results are clear. According to Wang (2025), the first months of 2025 saw the most amount of engagement for a six-month period, with over $66 billion in construction contracts and over $57 billion in investments. Furthermore, since 2013, engagement with the Belt and Road Initiative has reached over $1.3 trillion.

Map of Belt and Road Initiative BRI countries by region. Credit: Green Finance and Development Center. https://greenfdc.org/china-belt-and-road-initiative-bri-investment-report-2025-h1/?cookie-state-change=1760382562937 ***(placeholder for graphic from EPIS)***

3. China: reliable partner or not?

Beijing's venture into infrastructure diplomacy, both from an influence and economic perspective, could be considered a resounding success. Nonetheless, there have been growing concerns regarding the Belt and Road Initiative (Vermorken, 2024). The initiative has been plagued by scandals regarding "corruption, waste, debt distress, and failing projects" (Dezenski, 2024, para.3), concerns further mentioned by Casarini (p.7-9). Notable examples include rail projects in Djibouti and Ethiopia, where billions of dollars in losses were reported, and the Jakarta-Bandung high speed trail line, which will require double the amount of time predicted initially to break even (Dezenski & Birenbaum, 2024). Further projects in Sri Lanka and Kazakhstan were plagued by inefficiency from corruption (Huang, 2023), resulting in a negative image for the BRI.

Another criticism that Beijing has received regarding the Belt and Road Initiative revolves around so-called "debt-trap", a phenomenon particularly associated with the BRI (Himmer & Rod, 2022). Himmer and Rod use Brahma Chellaney's coin-defining definition, who, in summary, defines debt-trap as the situation when a country ("state X") takes out excessive loans from another country (in this case China), resulting in "state X" becoming financially dependent to China, being unable to pay out the initial loans (2022). This, in turn, can "exacerbate economic vulnerabilities". (Vermorken, 2024, para. 38).

Nonetheless, despite the growing concerns regarding China, the Belt and Road Initiative remains an attractive offering, with significant investments across Europe, particularly in the east (Casarini, 2024). One of the beneficiaries has been Viktor Orban's Hungary, which was the first European country to sign a BRI agreement with China in 2013. In 2023, Budapest has attracted investments of around $8 billion from the BRI, a significant percentage from their total direct investment sum of around $14 billion (Xinhua News Agency, 2024). Further notable investments include the biggest Huawei logistics and manufacturing outside of China, the construction of BYD's first EV factory in Europe (Euractiv, 2024)

and the construction of the new Budapest-Belgrade railway (Xinhua News Agency, 2024).

This has led to concerns from Hungary's partners, particularly around security. The Biden Administration has labeled the Chinese EVs as national security threats (Kiszelly, 2025), while others believe that the European Market will suffer due to Chinese manipulations, as a result of product dumping through the Hungarian Market (Dezenski, 2024).

4. Europe's Global Gateway: The EU strikes back

All things considered, the Belt and Road Initiative has not gone unnoticed. As a result of growing Chinese influence across the globe, both through the BRI and through other mechanisms, the European Union has acknowledged the need for a solution that would compete against the BRI. As such, in 2022, Ursula von der Leyen announced the Global Gateway, a "connectivity strategy" aimed at creating "links and not dependencies" (Grieger, 2021, p.9). The goal of the program is to raise over €300 billion that would be invested in digitalization, energy and transport, with an emphasis on sustainability (Garcia-Herrero, 2024). The above-mentioned goal was recently fulfilled, as announced by Ursula von der Leyen at the most recent Global Gateway Forum in October 2025 (European Commission, 2025a).

While the EU has promoted the Global Gateway as an alternative to the BRI, it has not escaped criticism itself. It has been criticized for lacking "explicit funding and has so far fallen short of bundling European external investment, infrastructure projects, private investment and financial instruments into a coherent platform" (Gehrke, 2020, p.242). Furthermore, confusion as to the Gateway's objectives and implementation strategies remain (Garcia-Herrero, 2024). Karjalainen (2022) further mentions that the programme has not generated credibility as a challenger to the BRI, an essential element if the EU wants the Global Gateway to dethrone the king of infrastructure diplomacy.

5. What the Global Gateway must achieve

The Global Gateway is not the first infrastructure diplomacy project that aims to compete against the Belt and Road Initiative, with notable examples including Japan's Partnership for Quality Infrastructure (Nishitateno & Todo, 2025) and the USA's Build Back Better World (Karjalainen, 2022). In comparison, so far, the Global Gateway has not generated the same level of interest and engagement as the Belt and Road Initiative (Garcia-Herrero, 2024). This can be attributed partly to a lack of promotion from the EU itself, which has very few publications about the project online (Portal, 2023b). This has resulted in a lack of knowledge in areas where the Global Gateway is intended to be used, such as Africa, according to Emmanuel Matambo (Portal, 2023b). **If the Global Gateway wants to compete**

against the BRI, it must promote itself more efficiently, especially in areas where it wants to compete with Beijing.

Secondly, the Global Gateway must differentiate itself from the BRI in the elements the BRI has had controversies. What the EU has done well is comparing the Global Gateway with the BRI, with the European Commission labeling the investments as "sustainable and high quality" with "lasting benefits" for local economies (2023b). Furthermore, the six core values the EU presents for the Global Gateway, such as "democratic values", "good governance" and "security" can be seen as opposites of what China's BRI is typically associated with. In addition, over "half of the project suggestions are in sub-Saharan Africa", an area targeted by the BRI as well (Portal, 2023a, para.6). All of this is in response to the controversies surrounding the BRI and is aimed at presenting the Global Gateway as a suitable alternative in comparison. A focus on the "debt-trap" issues would also help the Global Gateway, particularly to differentiate the two in regard to their functioning. The BRI functions primarily on loans, whereas the Global Gateway will also provide direct investments and grants (Karjalainen, 2022), an element that can significantly attract potential partners for the Gateway.

Thirdly, the EU must resolve its internal struggles with Hungary if it wants to succeed in promoting the Global Gateway. The image of an EU member-state using the BRI in such a significant way is certainly not flattering, and this could result in a deterioration of the EU's aptitude to leading an investment project, since countries such as Hungary are opting to look further east instead of west. While Hungary is not the only EU member-state to use the BRI, it is the one that has leaned into it the most. This will prove to be a difficult task to solve, at least until the next elections in the country, as Viktor Orban seems committed to China as a partner for the foreseeable future.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Global Gateway holds significant promise as a strategic counterweight to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a sentiment widely shared by specialized analysts. However, its effectiveness is currently hampered by critical deficiencies that must be addressed to ensure its long-term viability and competitive edge. The (silk) road ahead is challenging, requiring immediate, focused improvements in three key areas:

1. Promotion and clarity regarding the Global Gateway
2. Better positioning regarding the BRI with a focus on key difference areas
3. Solving internal investment problems for the EU regarding countries such as Hungary.

The Global Gateway has potential, and competitiveness with China is possible, but the Belt and Road Initiative has had an 8-year head-start. In the current environment, the above-mentioned points may act as introduc-

tory points that the Global Gateway can improve upon to better ensure their effectiveness at competing with the BRI. Nonetheless, the global diplomatic landscape is shifting constantly and with it come newer challenges, both for the Global Gateway and for the Belt and Road Initiative.

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