Partnerships in a Geopolitical Era: Time for a New Strategic Conversation

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1. A world in flux

Back in 2021, as supply chains across the world were disrupted, the European Union launched a multi-billion new investment programme focused on all forms of connectivity with partners across the world: the Global Gateway Strategy. Like any bold policy, it faced obstacles and achieved early successes. Today, as world politics and the international trade system take a turn towards more volatility, the geo-economic rationale underlying Global Gateway's creation is stronger than ever.

The renewed Global Gateway Forum, taking place on 9-10 October 2025, opens a strategic conversation in Brussels to discuss the opportunities and constraints of investment partnerships with political leaders as well as business and financiers from all sides. Held nine months into the second Trump presidency, the Forum will be the perfect moment to speak with Europe's partners from around the globe and share views on connectivity today.

This open conversation asks for a clear-eyed perspective on the state of the world. Big players and middle powers from Brazil to Egypt and Indonesia are claiming their place in an increasingly multipolar landscape. While Russia's war in Ukraine causes the most acute security concern for Europe, the more far-reaching shift affecting the world at large concerns the future of the US–China relationship. Today's dynamics of great-power politics, which predates the current US administration, could usher in a new historical epoch following that of post-1989 globalization or even that of post-1945 multilateralism. The shock following the announcement of US tariffs (still generating uncertainty) and the feeling among many of the countries reliant on the US security guarantee that it has become uncertain are already leading to an acceleration of economic diversification strategies and a strengthening of relations among US trade and security partners who feel a need to de-risk.

The outcome of this debate hinges not only on Washington's decisions but equally on the strategic choices of governments and trade blocs across Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Against this background, all public and major private actors around the globe are weighing the opportunities and risks of partnerships. How can they mitigate dependencies while remaining connected and investing in common interests? How can they benefit from the quest for diversified supply chains to strengthen their position in global production and trade networks? What dilemmas and trade-offs do they face? And what new forms of public–private cooperation furthering connectivity within and across continents does this change of era call for?

With the renewed backing for its Global Gateway Strategy by the von der Leyen II Commission, the EU signals to its external partners its strong political will to find constructive answers to these questions. Discussing 'Partnerships in a Geopolitical Era', the 2025 Global Gateway Forum will address the strategic context as well as concrete ways forward.

2. Today's geostrategic playbook

Amid these global shifts, geopolitics and geoeconomics have come to dominate the agendas of nearly all states. Their strategic playbook starts from a sharpened sense of geographic self-awareness: Where do a state's imports originate and where do its exports flow? Where are its friends and its foes located? What lines of communication connect all of them? As rivalry between great powers and others has increased, states have become increasingly aware of their geographic assets and vulnerabilities.

History shows a pendulum movement between periods of trust, when free trade is seen as a way of anchoring states in cooperation and preventing conflict, and periods such as today, marked by suspicion, when economic openness is rather regarded as a risk. This explains why the global economy is increasingly seen through the lens of power. States are prioritising security and intervening in the economy to safeguard their sovereignty, at the cost of some profit and prosperity. China, the US, and other powers are deploying new industrial policies, moving away from a free-trade logic. These policies are aimed at developing, rebuilding, or strengthening production capacity in strategic sectors; they introduce controls on inward and outward trade and investment, while seeking secure access to overseas markets and resources.

In terms of geographic priorities, all powers focus first on their near abroad: the region around them that must be kept stable to ensure their own stability. Some powers offer close partnership to their neighbours, in the political, economic and security spheres, to create mutually beneficial ties that do not prevent these neighbouring states from pursuing close relations with other powers at the same time. Other powers seek to create an exclusive sphere of influence from which they aim to exclude rival players. States enticed or forced into a sphere of influence are at risk of losing their sovereignty.

Indeed, some powers resort to war to put strategic depth between themselves and their rivals and turn neighbours into vassals or even annex part of their territory. Examples abound.

Secondly, looking beyond their near abroad, powers prioritize ties with states further afield that could give them access to markets or natural resources, or that occupy key points on vital lines of communication. These more distant states are usually enticed rather than coerced. Powers offer political, economic and security ties, with the aim of anchoring them in a structural partnership, which does not need to exclude close relations with other powers. A good example of this approach is China rolling out its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), through its own (often state-owned) companies. The risk of the emerging spheres of influence remains, especially if other powers leave the field open to a single dominant actor, or if one power stirs up animosity against others and seeks to recruit a state into an exclusive relationship. Russia, for example, has successfully ensconced itself in several countries in Africa and the Middle East, but unlike the Chinese mostly economic offer, its enticement primarily consists of military protection and regime security. Other players too, such as Türkiye and the Gulf States, have achieved remarkable influence further afield, from Central Asia to the African continent.

Global stability and the organization of the global economy have depended on all states remaining free to interact with all other states, according to their own preferences. If the world were increasingly to be carved into mutually exclusive spheres of influences, it would see reduced prosperity and heightened risk of conflict. Hence the geopolitical and geo-economic importance of a pragmatic connectivity agenda.

3. Europe's geostrategic awakening and the Global Gateway's three rationales

Now that the great power playbook is ever more clearly discernible in actions and statements by the United States, China and Russia as well as other major actors such as India, Türkiye or Brazil, what about Europe? And where does the Global Gateway Strategy fit in?

Europeans are currently rediscovering and relearning the language of strategy. This may seem puzzling to outside observers, for whom European states and private actors evidently never ceased advancing their economic and security interests across the world. In terms of their worldview and self-understanding, however, Europeans after 1945 came to think of themselves as 'beyond power politics' and favoured a language of rules, economic cooperation and universal values.

This narrative fitted Europe's new reduced global status. Two external great powers (the US and the Soviet Union) dominated the European continent during most of the Cold War, while from the late 1940s onwards Europe's colonial empires in Africa, Asia and the Pacific were dismantled. Within their own continent, European states began fostering very close economic and political ties, laying the groundwork for today's Union. Externally, they championed multilateralism, free trade and development – and did so with even more confidence after the Cold War's end in 1991. Thus, Europe's mindset and institutions have long been geared towards free markets and a rules-based order, thriving as history's pendulum was swinging in that direction. A disenchanted Europe now needs to adjust to a new age of geopolitics. It is both urgent and uncomfortable.

The deployment of a robust economic statecraft by both China and the US has forced European states and institutions to reconsider their own economic and foreign policy doctrines. Although this shift has occurred in an ad hoc and ill-articulated manner, the contours of a new economic statecraft emerge in the EU's renewed attention for industrial and innovation strategies, for energy and critical raw material needs, for public–private investment partnerships as well as for supply chain resilience and strategic autonomy. These trends mark a departure from pre-2016 practice; all have accelerated since the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, the new industrial policy challenges the EU's previous economic doctrine of limited state aid and its lack of experience in pursuing strategic public priorities with domestic private partners. Likewise, the end of frictionless global free trade is particularly uncomfortable for a bloc heavily reliant on imports of energy and other commodities to achieve its industrial, climate and digitalization goals, and pushes Europe to deploy a new foreign economic policy.

Global Gateway, the EU's massive investment programme in global connectivity, is an important expression of this strategic awakening. It can be seen as both the external arm of the EU's new industrial policy and a response to China's Belt and Road Initiative. It embeds the understanding that Europe needs its partners in Africa, Asia or Latin America and must seek mutually beneficial, interest-driven cooperation. At the same time, the Global Gateway remains rooted in the objectives, principles and discourse of the previous era. This ambiguity not only hampers internal prioritization but also leaves (potential) diplomatic or business partners at a loss as to Global Gateway's yardstick of success and its ultimate strategic rationale. For partners to better understand and assess Europe's investment offer, EU actors should be more conscious that Global Gateway tacitly contains three strategic narratives and disentangle them.

First, the Global Gateway Strategy positions itself as a contemporary vehicle of traditional development aid, in line with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals for 2030. This is reflected in its objectives of supporting the international multilateral order, the clean energy transition, global public health and other global public goods. Guiding principles such as democratic values, good governance and transparency similarly all fit with the EU's traditional 'Wilsonian' self-image and conditionality practices. Finally, it is no surprise that one of the Commission Directorates-General responsible for the programme, DG INTPA (International Partnerships), was until 2019 called DG DEVCO (International Cooperation and Development), likewise suggesting some continuity in practice. This narrative, however, has lost steam, not least within Europe itself. It has also lost traction with many partners, who do not see themselves as grateful clients of a benign master in the quest for a greater good – or in the case of (potential) EU candidate countries in its near abroad as pupils whose homework must prove them worthy of accession.

Secondly, the launch of Global Gateway – and its immediate predecessor: the 2018 EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy – was triggered by China's 2013 Belt and Road Initiative. Faced with President Xi's landmark strategy, with its proposed land and maritime corridors to Central Asia, Africa, Latin America and even Europe, the Gateway's initiators sought to propose an alternative and attract partners through local value creation and higher financial, environmental, social and governance standards. The initiative's alignment with American domestic and global infrastructure investment priorities, such as Biden's 2021 'Build Back Better' and the G7's Partnership for Global Infrastructure Investment (with its flagship project IMEC, the India–Middle East–Europe Corridor, launched in 2023) could confirm the impression of a concerted effort by China's strategic rivals. This second narrative, particularly strong during the Biden Administration, seemed to set Global Gateway up for an age of confrontation between democratic and authoritarian states.

Thirdly, as an investment vehicle advancing European geo-economic interests with partners across the globe, Global Gateway marks a dual pragmatic turn. Vis-à-vis partners, it underscores the need for mutually beneficial and interest-driven relationships, overcoming the vestiges of a postcolonial, lecturing stance that has long irritated, and has hampered trade and investment. Vis-à-vis Europe's domestic audiences, where large electoral majorities have become sceptical of (or even outright hostile to) classic, charitable development aid, it emphasises the economic and strategic benefits of partnerships with countries across the globe. As the early decisions of the Trump-2 Administration regarding USAID and the US State Department demonstrate, such public support is ultimately vital to saving routes of diplomatic engagement *as such*. This third narrative for Global Gateway, grounded in enlightened self-interest – and avoiding both the high-minded naivety of a previous era and today's MAGA-inspired isolationist retreat – may well be a good and timely way forward for a highly import-dependent EU.

4. What is in it for the partners?

Three strategic rationales is a lot, even if having a multiplicity of objectives does not per se hamper a policy's effectiveness. In this case, however, as the European Union aims to scale up Global Gateway, potential public and private partners are entitled to get a better sense of what they are partnering with. What is in it for them?

Just like the EU, many partners across the globe are moving towards the geo-economic rationale. Certainly, as a vehicle using official development assistance (ODA), Global Gateway still serves partners' needs. Such assistance can soften the financing of key investments through grants and low interest rates, not least since the EU and its member states – working as 'Team Europe' – together remain the world's main provider of international development finance. It also makes it possible to maintain focus on what partners want on their side of the bargain: local benefits. This being said, the politics of solidarity and the aim of furthering global public goods are not defined by geo-economic interests. The EU contributes to Global Funds and remains mobilized via traditional development interventions to fight poverty and hunger, or to strengthen health and education systems in fragile countries. Bringing these efforts under the Global Gateway banner risks diluting clarity for all parties concerned. The current global context requires Europe to show agency on both footings, both as a pragmatic geo-economic actor and as an engaged solidarity-driven partner.

Against the backdrop of a new great power rivalry, most countries in the world are reluctant to choose sides, as they had to during the Cold War. Framing Global Gateway (according to the second rationale) as being in competition with China is therefore not particularly constructive. Many potential partners prefer cooperating with multiple state investors – sometimes even within the context of a single large project, such as the Lobito corridor connecting Angola and DRC – in order to avoid over-dependencies on either side. Consequently, many of these countries share a geo-economic and de-risking agenda with Europe when it comes to their strategic investments. Global Gateway's third, geo-economic rationale – with its promise to support global connectivity and boost economic resilience for both European and partner countries – offers the most promising and widely shared basis for cooperation.

In today's geopolitical era, partner countries have different options to choose from, with competing offers of investment packages. Europe can no longer take for granted that it will be the default investment partner, with complaints about the collateral external damage of Green Deal policies (e.g. deforestation) hampering its business case and accusations of double standards regarding the wars in Ukraine and Gaza challenging its normative stance. Third countries will coolheadedly compare the offers.

To date, the Global Gateway promise has been to offer more transparent and predictable financial packages, along with more local value production than other investors bring. Europe could underscore how it privileges non-exclusive partnerships; by practising an open-door policy vis-à-vis partners, it offers them not only geo-economic benefits but also geopolitical '*marge de manoeuvre.'*

As Europe deploys a new economic foreign policy to secure its geo-economic interests, it will need to work harder to identify the space where its interests and those of partner countries overlap. It also needs to equip itself with the tools required in more challenging geographic jurisdictions. Traditionally it has focused its main investment efforts on its near abroad, as part of a broader stabilization strategy. This remains important but is no longer sufficient: a truly *Global* Gateway is indispensable – one that connects suppliers, markets and partners across the world's regions.

Just like partnering states and public actors, Global Gateway's private investors and entrepreneurs also want to know what's in it for them. Their involvement has been one of the Achilles heels of Global Gateway in practice, considered as occurring too late in the process and being too bureaucratic. This is not uncommonly to their disappointment, as they perceive major investment opportunities in projects, corridors, or specific value chains. The challenge here is to bring companies and export credit agencies around the table at an earlier stage, to draw up an inventory of strategic investment projects, and to provide clarity upfront regarding eligibility and selection criteria – followed by a go-/no-go decision within a short timeframe. Global Gateway's added value is that it structures the deal with key stakeholders: political stakeholders in both Brussels and EU capitals (where more policy integration between the various actors must be ensured), political and other stakeholders in partner countries as well as industrial and financial stakeholders on both sides (the companies, export financing agencies and grant funders involved).

5. The Forum: an open invitation to a strategic conversation

To fulfil the promise of Global Gateway as a vehicle to serve the geo-economic interests of Europe and its partners, a regular strategic conversation is necessary with the right stakeholders around the table.

The October 2025 Global Gateway Forum, opening this annual conversation, aims to serve exactly that purpose. So, this year's edition proposes first a strategic exchange on the State of the World, followed by thematic debates on connectivity in a de-risking age, before finally zooming in on the scaling up of concrete investment projects with all actors.

Bringing together political leaders, policymakers and leading thinkers, as well as financiers and other private actors from European and global partner countries, it allows all participants to learn more about each other's geo-economic interests, and the trade-offs and investment opportunities they encounter. This spirit of open exchange will ideally mobilize the trust and appetite to get to work at sector and project level, with all the stakeholders involved.