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The Global Rivalry over Strategic Connectivity and the Emerging World Order: A View from Türkiye

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Abstract

The 21st century has witnessed the emergence of strategic connectivity as a pivotal domain in global politics, where infrastructure initiatives embody broader geopolitical ambitions. Central to this paradigm shift is China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—an extensive program encompassing a network of transportation routes, energy pipelines, digital infrastructures, and socio-economic engagements. This ambitious project, aiming to create a multifaceted matrix of global interconnectivity across continents and domains, has catalyzed an array of competitive and complementary initiatives from international actors, giving rise to a new era of "competitive connectivity,". This paper examines the concept of strategic connectivity, showing how it qualitatively differs from earlier forms of global interdependence. Through a comparative analysis of major connectivity strategies—such as China's BRI, the EU's Global Gateway, and the G-7's Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment—the study explores their objectives, scope, and strategic priorities. In doing so, it identifies key areas of convergence, such as the emphasis on infrastructure development and digital connectivity, while highlighting divergences, particularly in governance models and geopolitical objectives. The paper contributes to ongoing discussions about the future of global power dynamics, highlighting a shift from traditional geopolitical competition to a new form of geostrategic rivalry centered around connectivity, where great and aspiring powers use their networks to influence the movement of goods, capital, energy, ideas, and people to their advantage.

Keywords

Connectivity, world order, Belt and Road Initiative, Global Gateway, great power competition, multipolarity

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Introduction

The world has been undergoing a profound and long-standing transformation. Scholars and analysts have used various terms such as multipolar,[1] post-liberal,[2] multiplex,[3] post-Western,[4] and post-American,[5] to capture the complex and multifaceted nature of this transformation. A central driver of the transformation, this paper argues, is the competition over strategic connectivity, namely the deliberate and competitive efforts to build, control, and dominate critical infrastructure and networks that enable the flow of goods, energy, information, and people across borders. These connectivity networks include not only traditional physical infrastructures such as transportation routes, energy pipelines, trade corridor, and logistics hubs, but also increasingly digital assets and networks like undersea fiber-optic cables, satellite systems, 5G mobile networks, digital payment systems, and data centers. These networks are vital for the movement of goods, resources, information, and people, making them highly strategic assets. Control over such infrastructure can be transformed into significant political and economic leverage, potentially leading to what Farrell and Newman describe as "weaponized interdependence."[6]

The concept of weaponized interdependence underlines the dual nature of connectivity, signifying a departure from the classical liberal understanding of complex interdependence which underscores the opportunities created by interconnectedness. While complex interdependence increases cooperation, it also creates points of dependence where states can be coerced or sanctioned by other actors who control critical infrastructures or networks. Actors that dominate critical nodes in these interconnected systems (whether in energy, finance, technology, or logistics) can use this dominance as leverage, coercing others by disrupting or manipulating the flows of resources, information, or capital. Russia's use of energy supplies to pressure European states or the U.S. sanctions on Iran and Russia via global financial networks are clear examples of weaponizing global interdependencies for strategic gains. The concept of strategic connectivity thus involves not only competitive efforts to build and control networks to harness the opportunities of interdependence (economic growth, innovation, cooperation), but also incorporates those efforts to minimize the vulnerabilities that these networks can create by diversifying connections, building resilience, and reducing overdependence on any single actor. This dual focus—building influence through connectivity while protecting against its weaponization—reflects the evolving complexity of global power dynamics in an era of intense interdependence.

Recent geopolitical challenges, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, and the intensifying U.S.-China rivalry, have accelerated the global competition over connectivity by dramatically reshaping transnational flows leading to rising concerns over geo-economic fragmentation. Firms and states began exploring strategies like near-shoring (moving production closer to home), friend-shoring (relocating supply chains to allied or friendly nations), and re-shoring (bringing production back domestically) to de-risk weaponization of interdependence. The recent research shows a significant decline in trade and FDI flows between countries from geopolitically distant blocs (e.g., U.S. and China) relative to flows between countries within the same blocs. Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, trade between rival blocs has decreased by around 12%, while FDI flows have dropped by 20%.[7]

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The war in Ukraine has not only disrupted trade and investment flows, but has also showed how control over connectivity flows could be used by political actors as a tool of power and influence.[8] For example, the U.S. and EU have imposed sweeping sanctions on Russia, aimed at severing its access to global financial systems, energy markets, and technological inputs. Türkiye by invoking Article 19 of the Montreux Convention of 1936 has prevented warships, except those of non-belligerent coastal states, from passing through the Turkish Straits demonstrating the strategic leverage countries can exert over key chokepoints. This realignment of connectivity flows underscores that the ability to shape, direct, and control these flows—whether they involve physical goods like food, energy, or weapons, or non-material dimensions such as information, technology, and narratives—has become a key indicator of power and influence in the age of what NATO refers to as "strategic competition."

This argument is substantiated in the following order. First, the concept of strategic connectivity is conceptualized and operationalized by highlighting how it qualitatively differs from previous forms of connectedness. The second section examines various connectivity initiatives by exploring how various global actors, such as China, Japan, the U.S., the EU, and Türkiye, interpret

and implement connectivity differently, reflecting their unique geopolitical objectives. The final section identifies convergences and divergences among competing projects and offers some policy recommendations for Türkiye.

Defining Strategic Connectivity

Although often used interchangeably, connection, connectedness, and connectivity represent distinct concepts in the context of international relations and global networks. While all three relate to the state of being linked or joined, each emphasizes different aspects of these linkages. Connection typically refers to a specific, direct link between two or more entities, such as electronic devices, individuals, or systems. It denotes a tangible relationship or point of contact. Connectedness emphasizes the quality and depth of these relationships. It reflects the experience of being connected, such as a sense of belonging or the strength of social ties within a particular context. In contrast, connectivity is broader and more systemic. It comes from the field of computing and focuses on the capacity or potential for connections, emphasizing the infrastructure, networks, or systems that enable these links. Connectivity, thus, highlights how connections operate within and influence larger structures or processes.

Connectivity is an important concept in several disciplines. In network science, it refers to the degree to which nodes, such as individuals, organizations, or devices, are connected to each other.[9] In neuroscience, it describes functional connections between different regions of the brain.[10] In computer science and information technology, it refers to the ability of devices in a network to exchange data and cooperate in processing information.[11] In sociology, connectivity often serves as a metaphor for social networks, describing interactions and relationships within and between organizations or groups. Kolb argues that attributes such as latent potentiality (the potential for future connections), temporal intermittency (the intermittent nature of connections), actor agency (the ability of entities to act independently), and unknowable pervasiveness (the inherent unpredictability of connections) make connectivity a compelling metaphor for understanding contemporary social relationships.[12]

In international relations, connectivity is often described as all the ways in which states, organizations, and societies are linked and interact globally, including physical and information flows, infrastructures, and sociocultural ties.[13] Parag Khanna, in Connectography, frames connectivity as a transformative force, a new paradigm where global power hinges on how well countries, cities, and regions integrate into vast infrastructure networks, such as roads, railways,

energy grids, and internet cables. He writes, "Connectivity is … how we make the most of our geography" and is "the most important asset class of the twenty-first century."[14]

Strategic connectivity, as a concept, builds on this contemporary understanding of connectivity by emphasizing the intentional and often competitive use of these linkages by political actors to achieve geopolitical and economic objectives. While traditional connectivity might focus on facilitating the free flow of goods, capital, and information, strategic connectivity highlights the power dynamics and strategic considerations underlying these connections as well as the inherent vulnerabilities arising through dependency and exposure to external shocks. Strategic connectivity thus implies that connectivity is no longer a neutral or purely beneficial phenomenon; instead, it is a tool used by states to shape the global order, gain strategic advantages, and project power.

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Connectivity, as a strategy, is fundamentally distinct from random or opportunistic connections, and from the earlier era of interdependence where, connections between states were primarily based on physical infrastructure with information flows being secondary to goods and capital. Digitalization has transformed strategic connectivity by amplifying the speed and complexity of global flows, shifting power dynamics to focus on control over intangible assets such as data, intellectual property, platforms, and algorithms, and introducing new vulnerabilities like cybersecurity risks. Nations and corporations now compete over the control of data flows and digital infrastructure, which are increasingly seen as more valuable than physical goods. The rise of platform economies (like Amazon, Google, and Tencent) and of surveillance capitalism reflects this shift from tangible to intangible assets. Unlike the earlier era of interdependence, where cooperation was key, today's connectivity is more about strategic competition—with states and non-state actors vying for control over critical infrastructures and networks, making power more fluid, contested, and decentralized than ever before.

Global Rivalry over Strategic Connectivity

Although the root of connectivity goes back to ancient trade routes, cultural exchanges, and migrations, which laid the groundwork for global interdependence long before modern globalization, the use of connectivity as a deliberate strategy is rather new.[15] Connectivity as a strategy was born in Asia and can be divided into three phases. Initially, connectivity was seen as a means to foster regional economic integration among the ten members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), namely Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. ASEAN's "Connectivity Master Plan" launched in 2010 represents the ideas of classical liberal internationalism, where connectivity is utilized to promote peace, stability, and economic prosperity. Accordingly, it sought to address the gaps in regional infrastructure, reduce transaction costs, and increase economic opportunities for ASEAN member states by promoting the physical development of transportation networks, institutional, and people-to-people connectivity. The "Connectivity Master Plan" prioritized the development of transportation networks, the harmonization of regulatory frameworks, and the simplification of customs to promote trade facilitation.[16] It also focused on enhancing people-to-people exchanges through initiatives in education, culture, and tourism. Programs such as the ASEAN University Network (AUN) and the ASEAN Tourism Strategic Plan were established to foster greater intercultural understanding and collaboration among ASEAN citizens. In 2016, ASEAN updated its connectivity strategy with the "Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025" (MPAC 2025) with a stronger focus on digital connectivity, sustainable infrastructure, and institutional resilience.[17]

MPAC 2025 places a significant emphasis on digital integration, recognizing the critical role of digital technologies in driving economic growth and innovation. It supports the development of regional digital infrastructure, such as high-speed internet and cross-border e-commerce platforms, to facilitate seamless digital trade and connectivity. MPAC 2025 underscores the importance of sustainable infrastructure development, which includes promoting green growth, reducing environmental impacts, and integrating climate resilience into infrastructure planning. Projects under this framework include efforts to enhance energy connectivity through the ASEAN Power Grid and the Trans-ASEAN Gas Pipeline. MPAC 2025 continues to prioritize institutional connectivity by enhancing trade facilitation measures, harmonizing standards, and improving logistics and supply chain connectivity. This includes initiatives like the ASEAN Single Window for faster customs clearance and the development of a region-wide logistics network.

China's Belt and Road Initiative and the Construction of a "Community of Shared Destiny"

The paradigm shift in connectivity strategies was realized with the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) by China in 2013.[18] The BRI represents a more ambitious and expansive vision of connectivity that goes beyond regional integration to create a new global spatial reordering. Referred to as the "Project of the Century," the BRI aims to connect multiple continents via land, sea, space, and cyberspace, positioning China as a central node in global networks.[19] The initiative spans more than 140 countries and is built on five pillars: policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people exchange.

The BRI is, however, not a single, coherent plan, but a loose collection of projects. The Silk Road Economic Belt focuses on reviving the ancient overland trade routes popularly known as the "Silk Road" that connected China with Central Asia, the Middle East, and Europe. It emphasizes infrastructure development, such as railways, highways, pipelines, and logistics hubs, to facilitate the movement of goods and services across the Eurasian continent. The economic belt consists of multiple corridors, including the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor, which includes Türkiye, and the New Eurasian Land Bridge (Northern Corridor), which connect China to European markets. These corridors are designed to reduce transportation costs, enhance supply chain efficiency, and create new economic opportunities for participating countries.

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President Xi Jinping's keynote speech at the Third Belt and Road Forum in 2023 emphasized the development of China-Europe transport routes and the Trans-Caspian International Transport Corridor, or simply the Middle Corridor, highlighting China's rising focus on Eurasian connectivity. The China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan (CKU) railway project, which has been on hold for decades, was finally approved in June 2023. After years of negotiations, China has agreed to fund more than half of the project's total cost. In addition to the CKU railway, China has invested heavily in other key infrastructure projects across Central Asia. For example, Beijing has financed the expansion of the Central Asia-China Gas Pipeline, which runs from Turkmenistan through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan to China. This pipeline is part of China's strategy to secure energy resources

and diversify its energy supply routes. In Kazakhstan, China has invested in modernizing road and rail networks that connect to the BRI's overland routes. Chinese firms have also been involved in developing the Khorgos Gateway, a major dry port on the Kazakh-Chinese border, which is expected to become a critical hub for trans-Eurasian freight traffic.

In addition to land corridors, the BRI includes maritime corridors. The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road seeks to establish a network of ports, shipping routes, and maritime infrastructure that links China with Southeast Asia, South Asia, Africa, and Europe via the Indian Ocean and South China Sea. Key projects under this framework include the development of strategic ports such as Gwadar in Pakistan, Colombo in Sri Lanka, and Piraeus in Greece. These ports serve as critical nodes for maritime trade, enabling China to secure its sea lanes, reduce dependence on traditional chokepoints like the Malacca Strait, and establish new trade routes. Critics argue that China's large and unsustainable loans for infrastructure projects put the receiving countries under high debt, creating an opportunity for China to exert political and economic influence or even gain control over critical infrastructure, as in the case of Sri Lanka's Hambantota International Port.[20] Others label China's "debt-trap diplomacy" a myth and argue that such a narrative ignores the complex political, economic, and strategic factors that influence both Sri Lanka's decision-making and China's financing.[21] They add that the Hambantota experience has led China to become more cautious in its overseas investments.

The Digital Silk Road (DSR), a more recent component of the BRI, was formally announced in 2015 during the Second World Internet Conference in Wuzhen, China. It was introduced to expand digital infrastructure, such as fiber-optic cables, satellite networks, 5G infrastructure, and to promote e-commerce, smart cities, and other technology collaborations among countries participating in the BRI. Chinese tech giants like Huawei, ZTE, Alibaba, and Tencent are central to the DSR and despite facing U.S. sanctions and restrictions, they continue to thrive globally, particularly in Africa and the Indo-Pacific.[22] The DSR poses a challenge to U.S. and Western technological dominance, especially with the concern that China's digital infrastructure projects may be used for surveillance, data collection, and potential cyber espionage.

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is also about connecting cultures, ideas, and civilizations. China seeks to revive and expand the historical "Silk Roads" as a means to construct a global identity as a benevolent leader committed to fostering development and cooperation. This narrative aligns well with its civilizational state discourse, which positions China as a harmonious power that integrates diverse cultures and economies into a "Community of Shared Destiny" through a win-win approach.[23] By promoting a narrative of connectivity as a pathway to shared development and prosperity, China challenges competing narratives, particularly those that emphasize conflict or competition, such as the "Clash of Civilizations" thesis or NATO's narrative of strategic competition between democracies and autocracies. Strategic connectivity, thus, becomes a vehicle for China to redefine the terms of global engagement, positioning itself as an alternative to the West's competition logic. By promoting the concept of a "harmonious world" and "peaceful development," China seeks to establish a moral and cultural leadership that transcends mere economic power. This is strategically significant as it provides a counternarrative that appeals to non-Western countries, particularly in the Global South, where China frames itself as a leader of a more inclusive and multipolar world order.

Connectivity Initiatives Led by G7

China's massive connectivity project has not only raised criticisms and concerns such as accusations of debt-trap diplomacy, lack of transparency, environmental harm, and geopolitical expansion, but has also catalyzed several competing or complementary initiatives by states, regional organizations, and informal groupings setting the state for global rivalry over connectivity.[24] The G-7 and its regional allies converged on a narrative advocating for a high-quality, sustainable, and rules-based connectivity. Japan's 2015 "Partnership for Quality Infrastructure" promoting high-quality and sustainable infrastructure development has laid the ground for this competitive dynamic.[25] Japan's "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy," originally launched in 2016 and then revised in 2023, promotes rules-based order, free and open maritime routes, multilayered connectivity, and high-quality infrastructure. Since 2017, Japan has partnered with India to promote the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, and in 2019, it signed the "Partnership on Sustainable Connectivity and Quality Infrastructure" with the EU.[26]

Japan's promotion of quality infrastructure principles in international forums, such as the G7 and the OECD, eventually pushed for the adoption of the G20 Principles for Quality Infrastructure Investment at the G20 Osaka Summit in June 2019.[27] These principles serve as a guideline for high-quality infrastructure investment, focusing on economic efficiency, sustainability, resilience, inclusivity,

and good governance.[28] The OECD hosts the Blue Dot Network (BDN), which will serve as a "seal of approval" for those infrastructure projects aligning with the G20 Principles. The BDN was announced at the Indo-Pacific Business Forum in Bangkok by the U.S., Japan, and Australia in November 2019. It will serve as an independent entity overseen by the initiative's member governments: Australia, Japan, Spain, Switzerland, Türkiye, the UK, and the U.S. It announced a call for projects for the first round of certifications in April 2024. The BDN will serve as a mechanism to attract private sector investment by certifying those projects that maximize the positive economic, social, environmental, and development impact of infrastructure.[29]

The Build Back Better World (B3W) initiative, launched by the G7 in June 2021, is another competing initiative to China's BRI. This "values-driven, high-standard, and transparent infrastructure partnership" led by the U.S. and the UK seeks to address the significant infrastructure gap in the developing world by investing US$40 trillion by 2035.[30] The initiative was revised and expanded globally by the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII, 2022). The PGII focuses on four key areas: climate and energy security, digital connectivity, gender equity and equality, and health systems. Under the PGII, G7 countries have committed to mobilizing US$600 billion in global infrastructure investment by 2027. One of the most notable projects put forward by this initiative so far is the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), signed during the G20 summit in New Delhi in September 2023 by the EU, the U.S., India, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The corridor aims to enhance economic integration and connectivity between India, the Middle East, and Europe by developing a comprehensive network of railways, ports, and digital infrastructure. The Israel-Hamas war, however, has halted progress on the IMEC, as have attacks on vessels in the Red Sea by Houthi rebels. Due to these attacks, trade along the Suez Canal dropped by 50% in 2024 compared to a year earlier, disrupting supply chains and distorting key macroeconomic indicators.[31]

EU-Led Connectivity Initiatives

The EU has its own connectivity initiatives, such as the EU Strategy on Connecting Europe and Asia and the Global Gateway, to enhance connectivity

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in a rules-based and sustainable manner (smart, green, and sustainable) by means of infrastructure upgrading. Reflecting a values-based approach to global infrastructure development, these initiatives are often framed as alternatives to China's BRI. For example, one of the slogans emphasized by the Asia connectivity strategy is "Creating Connections, Not Dependencies."[32] The EU's Global Gateway is presented as a crucial tool for strengthening Europe's geopolitical stance, particularly in Africa, which is the key regional priority, and for fostering economic partnerships that align with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Global Gateway has five priority areas for investment in projects in developing countries: digital technologies, climate change and energy, transportation, health, education, and research. The project's budget is €300 billion, with half allocated to Africa and the other half to other regions. Global Gateway is supported by major European donors, including the European Commission, development agencies such as French Development Agency (AFD) and German International Cooperation Society (GIZ), and financial institutions such as the European Investment Bank (EIB), the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), and other European Development Finance Institutions (EDFI).[33]

The EU-Central Asia Connectivity Strategy, launched in 2019, has also been revitalized with a focus on supporting digital transformation, enhancing transport links, and fostering energy security through sustainable development.[34] The EU signed a new energy deal with Azerbaijan in July 2022 to double gas imports to Europe by 2027. The EU also signed an "Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement" with Uzbekistan in the same month and with the Kyrgyz Republic in June 2024. In November 2022, Kazakhstan and the EU signed a memorandum of understanding on strategic partnership to create sustainable value chains in raw materials, batteries, and green hydrogen. The EU-Central Asia International Conference on Connectivity held in November 2022 in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, called for diversifying transport corridors to strengthen the Europe-Central Asia-Asia axis. This emphasis was echoed at the Second EU-Central Asia Economic Forum held in Berlin in May 2023, where European Commission Executive Vice-President Valdis Dombrovskis emphasized the need for investment to alleviate transportation bottlenecks and develop infrastructure, underscoring the EU's commitment to enhancing regional connectivity.[35] This focus on transport corridors was further reinforced by the 2020-2030 economic roadmap signed by Uzbekistan and France, and echoed in a joint statement with German leadership and their Central Asian counterparts. The EU-Central Asia Ministerial Meeting in October 2023[36]

ended with the adoption of the "Joint Roadmap for Deepening Ties between the EU and Central Asia (2023)" focusing on enhancing intergovernmental, economic, infrastructural, security, and people-to-people connectivity.[37]

Connectivity Initiatives Promoted by Türkiye

Türkiye gives high importance to connectivity. The Middle Corridor initiative, which received significant backing from Ankara, has gained importance particularly after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. The invasion and the subsequent heavy sanctions on Russia and Belarus have disrupted land and rail freight transportation between Europe and China along the Northern Corridor. The Northern Corridor or the New Eurasian Land Bridge (China, Kazakhstan, Russia, Belarus, Poland, Germany), considered the greatest success of China's BRI, has seen a substantial reduction in China-EU shipments since the Russian invasion. These disruptions have increased the appeal of the Middle Corridor.[38]

The Middle Corridor, also known as the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor, redirects China's Southern Corridor from heavily sanctioned Iran to the Caspian Sea, the South Caucasus, and Türkiye. It is the shortest route between China and Europe, 2,000 kilometers shorter than the northern route, and reduces travel time by 15 days compared to the maritime route. Although the initiative dates back to 2009, well before the BRI was announced in 2013, no significant steps had been taken until recently due to a lack of interest from both the EU and the former Soviet republics. Russia's war in Ukraine and its efforts to intimidate other countries in the region have shifted regional dynamics in favor of the Middle Corridor and greater cooperation among the Turkic states. The war, impacting on the EU's energy and supply chain networks, has also brought Central Asia to the center of the EU's connectivity agenda, as described above. The World Bank report published in 2023 confirms that the Middle Corridor could contribute to regional economic integration and triple trade flows along the route by 2030, halving travel times, provided the right policies are implemented.[39]

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2009 Nakhichevan agreement. The OTS has increased its efforts to integrate the member and observer countries along the corridor into regional and global supply and value chains by improving transportation, digital, and energy connectivity. The OTS's "2022-2026 Strategy," adopted at the Samarkand Summit, gives priority to improving transport connectivity and customs cooperation in order to eradicate obstacles to efficient, stable, and seamless transport across the Middle Corridor. In this regard, the OTS members adopted agreements on "International Combined Freight Transport" and the "Establishment of a Simplified Customs Corridor," while the work on digitalization of transport and transit procedures is ongoing.

The Middle Corridor is also important for energy connectivity given that Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan have significant hydrocarbon reserves, and they increasingly seek to diversify their energy partnerships. For instance, facing severe pressure from the Kremlin, Kazakhstan has recently made a deal with Azerbaijan to re-route its oil away from Russia towards the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline. Türkiye, on the other hand, is positioning itself as a hub for delivering energy resources from Russia and the Caucasus to Europe. Current pipelines passing through Türkiye, such as the Trans-Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP), Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP), and TurkStream, are vital, but are predominantly fossil fuel based. To improve its energy connectivity, Türkiye must accelerate its efforts towards a sustainable energy transition and expand its role in renewable energy corridors. Exploring infrastructure options to transport green hydrogen to Europe through the Middle Corridor can be beneficial. The 2022 revision of the TEN-E Regulation has made it possible for the EU to co-finance cross-border infrastructure projects with third countries under "Connecting Europe Facility–Energy (CEF-E)," identifying these initiatives as "Projects of Mutual Interest." This could pave the way for co-funding feasibility studies related to hydrogen transport through the Middle Corridor. Additionally, green projects have received substantial financial backing, with more than €1 billion allocated through the European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus (EFSD+) and the EBRD. However, to accelerate private sector investment and infrastructure development along the Middle Corridor, Türkiye and the EU could explore the creation of a dedicated program focused on this objective.[40]

Türkiye's interest in connectivity projects is also underscored by its strong support of the Zangezur Corridor aiming to connect mainland Azerbaijan with its exclave Nakhichevan, and of Iraq's "Development Road Initiative," also

known as the "Iraqi Silk Road," which is a transport corridor connecting the Iraq's Al-Faw Grand Port in Basra to Southern Türkiye. Offering a faster, more efficient alternative to maritime routes like the Suez Canal, the 1,200 km route reduces travel time and offers fewer bureaucratic and logistics hurdles compare to the IMEC.[41] This multi-billion-dollar project could benefit from seeking BDN support, which would enhance investor confidence in the project's transparency and sustainability.

Conclusion

The various connectivity initiatives outlined above indicate the geo-politicization of connectivity and provide significant insight into how major great and aspiring powers seek to position themselves within the global networks. The review of the competing connectivity projects reflects both convergences and divergences in their goals and implementation. First, all these initiatives aim to enhance global and regional connectivity to boost trade and economic growth. Second, there is a shared recognition that infrastructure development is central to achieving economic growth, regional integration, and global influence. Third, digital connectivity emerges as central to both economic competitiveness and geopolitical strategy in all initiatives. Fourth, there is a growing emphasis on environmentally sustainable development and green growth across all initiatives. A good example of this is China's reshaping of the BRI after a decade, giving more emphasis to the digital, energy, and sustainability dimensions of the initiative and bringing it closer to Western conceptual content. Fifth, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has had profound implications for Central Eurasian connectivity as the EU, China, and Türkiye have put the development of the Middle Corridor at the center of their connectivity agenda. Finally, all these initiatives are ultimately dependent on the principles of economic liberalism for global trade and growth. Despite ideological differences, all the connectivity actors benefit from the liberal economic order, making outright conflict unlikely.

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While these initiatives converge in their goals of improving physical, digital and energy connectivity, they slightly diverge in terms of scope and focus, funding models, governance and standards, and project implementation. The

EU seeks innovative types of connectivity by combining efforts in the three key sectors, namely digital, energy, and transport, with a strong emphasis on green transitions. The G7 favors sustainable infrastructure, health systems, digital connectivity, green connectivity, and gender equity. China's connectivity strategy focuses on physical or digital infrastructure. The second key difference lies in the conditionality attached to these projects. China's BRI follows a "no strings attached" policy, focusing on infrastructure development without imposing political conditions. In contrast, the EU's Global Gateway promotes rule-based development, emphasizing good governance, human rights, and sustainability . Yet, the research indicates a decoupling between the official rhetoric of both initiatives and how they are implemented.[42] The BRI, while claiming openness and mutual benefit, often introduces conditionalities through the backdoor, such as requiring the use of Chinese contractors, materials, and labor. Similarly, the EU's Global Gateway faces challenges in enforcing its liberal values during implementation, often prioritizing strategic interests over developmental goals.

Another important difference is the source of funding. The BRI primarily uses state-backed loans often provided by Chinese banks, like the China Development Bank and the Export-Import Bank of China (Exim Bank), leading to concerns about debt sustainability in participating countries. In various U.S. and G7 initiatives, infrastructure development is largely driven by market forces, with government and international development finance playing a supportive role to steer, but not replace, these market dynamics. The EU's Global Gateway combines EU grants, loans, and guarantees with investments from European financial institutions and the private sector. Yet, while China's BRI has already deployed significant funds surpassing US$1 trillion, the G7's B3W and PGII as well as the EU's Global Gateway are in earlier stages, with the latter aiming for substantial investments by 2027. The effectiveness and impact of these Western initiatives in matching or countering the scale of China's BRI, thus, remain to be fully realized.

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