

Opinion – How Europe's Global Gateway Competes With China's BRI

Written by Stefan Messingschlager

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STEFAN MESSINGSCHLAGER, SEP 22 2025

For a decade, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has set the cadence of global infrastructure finance: fast, centralised, often opaque. Europe's answer, the Global Gateway, will never match Beijing's firepower – and it doesn't need to. The European Union's advantage is governance and delivery: de-risking that crowds in private capital, standards that protect people and balance sheets, and assets that work and are maintained. The test is whether communities can point to functioning grids, ports and data links and say: this improved our lives. For years, the EU was dismissed as a payer more than a player. That view faded as the BRI expanded from logistics hubs to critical raw materials and corridor finance. In 2021, Brussels launched the Global Gateway to mobilise up to €300 billion by 2027, delivered via a "Team Europe" architecture that combines EU institutions, member states and development finance arms. The intent is explicit: offer a trusted, high-standards alternative that aligns with partner priorities without opaque terms or unsustainable debt, while serving Europe's own resilience in supply chains, energy and secure connectivity.

Two years on, the initiative is no longer just a press release. Brussels hosted the first Global Gateway Forum in 2023; roughly ninety flagship projects were announced, with more added since. Africa is the centre of gravity, anchored by an Africa-Europe package of €150 billion – half of the overall target. The shift is toward bankable pipelines ready for financial close. Concrete partnerships show how Europe can compete by building better rather than bigger. Namibia is a clear example of a double-dividend approach: sustainable raw materials and renewable hydrogen. The EU-Namibia partnership is not a simple offtake dressed up in climate language; it connects port and logistics upgrades, electrolyser capacity, industrial standards and training so that value is added locally. For Namibia, it promises jobs, revenue stability and a place in green value chains rather than the periphery of commodity cycles. Optics matter, but operations matter more: if contracts are transparent, local procurement is meaningful and early-years O&M is ring-fenced, the project will be remembered for performance, not ceremony.

Digital connectivity is another arena where Europe can trade on trust. The MEDUSA submarine cable, supported through the Global Gateway, connects North Africa with European research and education networks on an open-access basis. Lower latency and greater redundancy enable local platforms and anchor norms on interoperability, data security and open access. A de-risked backbone can catalyse private build-out at the edge; standards should enable scale rather than restrain it – this is where Europe's comparative advantage in trusted connectivity is felt by users and firms.

Corridor thinking completes the picture. The Lobito Corridor – linking the copper-cobalt belt of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Zambia to Angola's Atlantic port – has become a flagship for coordinated investments in rail, ports, power and logistics. It aims to cut transit times, reduce spoilage and crowd-in processing along the route. If governance and last-mile logistics are handled well, Lobito can do more than move ore; it can catalyse supplier ecosystems and skills across three economies long trapped in commodity cycles. Partners will care less about declarations than about whether time to market falls, reliability improves and local firms find contracts they can win.

Finance is where principle meets stress. Unlike China's state-directed credit lines, Europe mobilises rather than commands. That is a strength if it crowds in sustainable investment; it becomes a weakness when risk remains

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unpriced and private actors stay on the sidelines. A corrective is the African Local Currency Bond (ACLB) Guarantee: by backstopping a specialised fund that invests in local-currency bonds, public resources tackle the FX mismatch that shifts currency risk onto fragile balance sheets. Reducing that exposure is often the difference between bankability and abandonment. Paired with callable political-risk cover and construction-phase insurance – and deployed at larger tickets with standardised term sheets – such instruments can tilt risk-return profiles enough to bring in credible sponsors and local lenders without hollowing out safeguards.

The competitive terrain is not static. The Belt and Road now spans cooperation with more than 150 countries. Speed and cohesion remain Beijing's core advantages: state banks, state-owned enterprises and central ministries can align quickly and accept sequencing risks that Western consortia prefer to mitigate. Yet after debt distress and restructurings, Beijing has pivoted toward what it calls "high-quality" BRI: greener portfolios, tighter risk management and greater selectivity. Europe should assume the contest is no longer "build versus standards," but "whose standards – and whose delivery".

Partners are not choosing sides. The same year Brussels hosted the Gateway Forum, Beijing marked the BRI's decennial summit – and leaders from Egypt, Kenya, Serbia, Vietnam and others appeared at both. They will take a Chinese-built highway if it arrives on time and an EU-backed renewable or cable project if it delivers reliable electrons and data. What they will not accept is a values premium that fails to generate local jobs, technology transfer and durable maintenance budgets. Europe should embrace this pluralism and compete by adding value to partner economies, not by demanding exclusivity.

How, then, does Europe win on delivery rather than dollars? Start with prioritisation. A proliferating catalogue of flagships is not a strategy. Publish a short, corridor-based shortlist of transformational investments with visible public-good spillovers – interconnectors and grid reinforcement, open-access rail and port rehabilitation, backbone fibre and neutral internet exchange points – and sequence them so that enabling works and offtake arrangements are locked in early. Explain why proposals did not make the cut.

Next, fix the risk stack. Guarantees should target the layers that routinely kill deals rather than paper over fundamentals: currency exposure where revenues are local, offtake uncertainty where tariff politics are fragile and political force majeure where governance is brittle. Pre-negotiated term sheets and a one-stop guarantee window for projects above a threshold would cut friction costs and shorten the path to financial close. Where public money is used, additionality must be demonstrated, not asserted: crowd in credible private partners on terms that survive electoral cycles, and report mobilisation by sector and instrument to keep the portfolio honest.

Delivery speed is the third test. Standards need not mean sclerosis. Time-bound diligence windows, parallel – not sequential – environmental and social reviews and framework agreements with pre-qualified EPC consortia can shave months without sacrificing safeguards. Europe will not – and should not – replicate a centralised state-led model, but it can close the distance by making its own processes predictable.

Measurement is the fourth piece. Replace input vanity metrics with outcome indicators people can feel: megawatts added and minutes of grid reliability; transit times cut and logistics costs lowered; broadband latency and affordability; trainees certified and retained; and operations-and-maintenance budgets funded. Commission independent audits as a design feature rather than a post-hoc gloss. If Europe truly believes its model is superior, transparency is an edge, not a vulnerability.

Alignment with allies is the final multiplier. The G7's infrastructure partnership creates an umbrella under which European, American and Japanese finance can cohere into corridor-scale packages. But an umbrella is not a strategy. Without designated leads by corridor and sector, interoperable de-risking instruments and a shared communications backbone, like-minded efforts risk duplication and brand inflation. The Global Gateway should function as Europe's backbone within this architecture: coordinating offers, co-funding guarantees and ensuring that when a partner hears "G7 corridor," they see one timetable, one document set and one scoreboard.

There is a geopolitical dividend to getting this right. Done well, the Global Gateway becomes the external face of

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Europe's economic-security strategy: de-risking supply chains for critical minerals, clean-energy components and data while offering partners a fair bargain – high-quality public goods and predictable finance in exchange for open standards and trust. Done poorly, it cannibalises traditional development envelopes without creating credible alternatives and cements a reputation for process over progress. The best reply is not a new slogan; it is timely commissioning and reliable operations that survive cabinet reshuffles and election cycles.

A final word on expectations. The BRI's scale is the product of China's political economy and will not be replicated by Europe. But scale without service life is not development; it is stranded assets. If, five years from now, communities can point to solar fields at promised capacity, open-access rail and affordable, secure networks – and if local firms can claim them – the Global Gateway will have raised the floor. Europe need not outspend Beijing; it must out-deliver where it chooses to compete – and prove it.

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