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How does China's Belt and Road Initiative outperform EU's Global Gateway Strategy

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Abstract

The paper compares the European Union's Global Gateway strategy with China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), analyzing their strategic goals, implementation models, and outcomes. It highlights the EU's focus on geopolitical balance, competitiveness, and value-driven diplomacy, aiming to counter China's growing global influence while promoting democratic values. However, the paper argues that the EU's approach is hindered by internal divisions, insufficient resources, and mismatched priorities with developing countries. In contrast, China's BRI demonstrates greater stability, inclusivity, and sustainability. The BRI's cooperative framework, centered on mutual benefits, has led to more significant infrastructural and economic development in partner nations. By prioritizing local needs and fostering long-term collaboration, the BRI surpasses the EU's Global Gateway in terms of tangible impact, highlighting the limitations of a values-driven, top-down approach. This paper concludes that while both initiatives seek to reshape global infrastructure, China's BRI is more effective in addressing the challenges of the Global South.

Keywords

China, EU, Belt and Road Initiative, Global Gateway Strategy, Geopolitics

1. Introduction

The European Union's "Global Gateway" policy is a global infrastructure investment strategy proposed by the European Commission in December 2021. It aims to mobilize 300 billion euros between 2021 and 2027, focusing on infrastructure projects in developing countries across Africa, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and Latin America. The initiative targets five key areas: digitalization, climate and energy, transport, health, and education. Anchored in the core principles of "democratic values, high standards, and transparency," it emphasizes leveraging public funds to catalyze private investment. Financing is channeled through instruments like the European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus (EFSD+) and the European Investment Bank (EIB), utilizing the "Team Europe" approach to coordinate efforts among EU institutions, member states, and financial institutions. Recent progress includes projects like energy transitions in Africa (e.g., the Green Hydrogen Initiative in Namibia), digital infrastructure development in Southeast Asia (e.g., the ASEAN Green Initiative), and undersea cable expansion in Latin America. By early 2024, nearly 100 projects had been launched, with plans to add over 120 new sustainable development projects in 2024.

2. The Political Intensions Behind the EU's Global Gateway

2.1 Geopolitical Balance: Responding to China's Rise and Safeguarding Traditional Spheres of Influence

The primary motivation behind the EU's Global Gateway is to counter China's rapidly expanding global influence through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly in regions traditionally of strategic interest to the EU, such as Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America. Since China proposed the BRI in 2013, it has established an extensive global cooperation network spanning infrastructure, energy, digital connectivity, and other fields. By 2022, China had invested over 155 billion euros in infrastructure projects in Africa, while in Southeast Asia, it deployed key projects such as submarine cables, 5G networks, and fintech under the "Digital Silk Road." This rapid expansion of influence has directly struck a sensitive nerve in the EU, where there is a widespread perception that China is reshaping the geopolitical landscape through economic means, severely eroding the EU's traditional spheres of influence. (Note 1)

The geopolitical design of the Global Gateway policy is explicitly targeted. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen has stated clearly that the plan aims to counterbalance China's growing influence and provide a better alternative to Chinese infrastructure financing. This counterbalance is reflected not only in the comparable scale of investment but also in the deliberate geographic overlap—Africa is explicitly listed as a key investment region for the Global Gateway. Through the "EU-Africa: Global Gateway Investment Package," the EU has pledged 150 billion euros, accounting for half of the initiative's total funding. In Southeast Asia, the EU launched the "ASEAN Green Initiative" in 2022, committing 783 million euros to countries like Laos and Vietnam to promote green transition. Such regional choices are no coincidence; they deliberately target areas where China's BRI projects are concentrated, seeking to weaken China's geo-economic ties by offering alternatives that "better align with Western standards."

Moreover, the Ukraine crisis has further intensified the EU's geopolitical anxieties. The energy security dilemma caused by the crisis has made the EU acutely aware of the urgency of building supply chain "resilience" and "de-Russification." The Global Gateway's focus on energy infrastructure—such as Albania's floating solar power plants and the Balkan Power Corridor—is precisely aimed at establishing new energy routes bypassing Russia. EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell emphasized that the initiative is a "key tool for the EU to demonstrate leadership in an era of geopolitical competition," with the goal of "consolidating relations with Global South countries and preventing them from fully aligning with other major powers." This geopolitical logic reflects the EU's profound concerns about shifts in international power dynamics and its strategic ambition to maintain its role as a global pole through economic means.

2.2 Reshaping Economic Competitiveness: Ensuring Supply Chain Security and Competing for Standard-Setting Power

The second core driver of the Global Gateway initiative stems from the EU's growing "competitiveness anxiety" in the economic sphere. Following the 2008 financial crisis, the EU economy has been mired in prolonged low growth, with its digital economy lagging particularly behind China and the United States. According to European Commission data, the EU's 5G network coverage stood at just 14% in early 2021, far below levels in China and the U.S. during the same period. This technological disadvantage has fueled concerns within the EU about being marginalized in the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Meanwhile, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed vulnerabilities in global supply chains, with the EU's over-reliance on Asia for critical supplies such as medical equipment and semiconductors further amplifying this sense of crisis. The Global Gateway initiative is thus seen as the EU's systemic strategy to consolidate internal resources, capture emerging markets, and secure supply chains.

At the economic level, the policy is designed around two key objectives: first, boosting EU technology exports through foreign infrastructure investments, and second, competing for global standard-setting power in emerging sectors. In selecting investment areas, the EU has prioritized industries such as digitalization, climate and energy, and smart transportation—fields where no unified global standards have yet been formed. For instance, in digitalization, the plan supports developing countries in deploying digital networks based on the EU's 5G Cybersecurity Toolbox and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), aiming to establish the bloc's data governance rules as global standards. In green energy, the EU promotes the African Single Electricity Market through the "Africa-EU Green Energy Initiative," requiring recipient countries to adopt EU environmental and technical standards. This "standards-first" strategy seeks to create "regulatory dividends" for European companies, positioning them at the forefront of future global market competition.

A defining feature of the Global Gateway, distinguishing it from past EU programs, is its innovative financing mechanism. The plan attempts to pool resources from EU institutions, member states, and financial entities (such as the European Investment Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development) through a "Team Europe" approach, using public funds to leverage private investment. However, this mechanism faces significant challenges. On one hand, EU member states' finances have been severely impacted by the pandemic, with average government debt reaching 90.9% of GDP in 2022—far exceeding the 60% ceiling set by the Stability and Growth Pact. On the other hand, the long-term and high-risk nature of infrastructure investments makes them unattractive to private investors. Germany's Handelsblatt pointedly noted that the initiative still lacks concrete plans for mobilizing private capital. This financing dilemma reflects the inherent limitations of the EU's economic strength and exposes the vast gap between its ambitions and reality.

Notably, the Global Gateway aligns with the EU's internal development strategies. The "twin green and digital transition" strategy proposed by the EU in 2019 extends its external dimension through this initiative, such as linking its domestic "Digital Compass" plan with digital infrastructure projects in the Global South. This internal-external synergy demonstrates the EU's attempt to integrate domestic industrial upgrading with external market expansion. By participating in global infrastructure development, the bloc seeks not only economic benefits but also aims to establish EU-centered global value chains in future industries like artificial intelligence and clean technology. This economic strategy is essentially a form of "rules-based mercantilism," whose outcome will directly impact the EU's position in the future international economic order.

2.3 Exporting Values: Ideological Competition and the Transformation of Normative Power

The third key driver of the Global Gateway lies in the EU's attempt to reinforce its role as a normative power by using infrastructure investments as a new vehicle to propagate Western values and ideologies. Unlike China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which emphasizes "extensive consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits," the EU's plan explicitly ties investments to political conditions such as democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, reflecting its distinct "values-driven diplomacy" logic. This ideologically motivated economic strategy underscores the EU's need to strengthen its identity amid global systemic transformations and its deep-seated wariness of China's growing influence. These principles carry strong political undertones. For instance, the EU claims it will help host countries resist "geopolitically motivated economic coercion" and avoid "debt traps"—rhetoric clearly targeting China, implicitly stigmatizing the BRI as "neo-colonialism". Operationally, the EU requires recipient countries to comply with environmental and social impact assessments, transparent public procurement, and similar conditions, which are embedded in connectivity partnership agreements with nations like Indonesia and Vietnam. Such conditional investments politicize economic cooperation, aiming not only to differentiate the EU from China's "non-interference" principle but also to cultivate pro-EU elites and societal forces in developing countries.

The value orientation of the Global Gateway initiative is manifested in its six core principles: "democratic values and high standards," "good governance and transparency," "equal partnerships," "green and clean," "security," and "mobilizing private investment." These principles have strong political implications. For instance, the EU claims it will help host countries resist "geopolitically motivated economic coercion" and avoid "debt traps"—rhetoric clearly targeting China, implicitly stigmatizing the BRI as "neo-colonialism". Operationally, the EU requires recipient countries to comply with environmental and social impact assessments, transparent public procurement, and similar conditions, which are embedded in connectivity partnership agreements with nations like Indonesia and Vietnam. Such conditional investments politicize economic cooperation, aiming not only to differentiate the EU from China's "non-interference" principle but also to cultivate pro-EU elites and societal forces in developing countries.

However, the EU’s values-driven approach faces acute issues of “incompatibility with local conditions.” Many developing countries have waning interest in Western democratic models and growing resentment toward external interference in domestic affairs under the guise of investment. Former Bolivian President Evo Morales publicly criticized the EU for “attempting to act as masters of natural resources rather than equal partners.” In Latin America, the EU’s investment clauses emphasizing personal data protection and cybersecurity rules are perceived as a new form of “digital colonialism.” This resistance has significantly slowed the implementation of the Global Gateway initiative. As of 2024, beyond a handful of former colonial states, most projects remain confined to political declarations with limited tangible progress. German media has even derided the initiative as potentially becoming a “multi-billion-euro graveyard.” This dilemma reveals the structural contradiction of EU values diplomacy: on the one hand, they hope to expand their ideological influence through economic means, but on the other hand, they cannot escape the arrogance of “Eurocentrism” and find it difficult to truly understand the core demands of developing countries.

From a deeper perspective, the Global Gateway program marks a transformation of the EU’s concept of normative power. Traditionally, the EU has mainly promoted its values through trade agreements and expansion policies; In the era of great power competition, the plan attempts to bundle economic aid, rulemaking, and security demands, forming a more geopolitical value. The High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of the European Union, Borrell, declared: "A stronger Europe means being able to firmly uphold 'European values'... Our vision of connectivity must be based on internationally accepted standards and rules." This statement reshapes economic cooperation as a tool for building ideological camps, reflecting the EU's strategic intention to establish a third force in the face of the China US game. However, this ambition is limited by internal divisions and insufficient resources within the EU, and its actual effect may backfire - excessive politicization will weaken the EU's economic presence in developing countries and further compress its strategic space.

From a deeper perspective, the Global Gateway initiative marks a transformation of the EU’s concept of “normative power”. Traditionally, the EU has promoted its values mainly through trade agreements and enlargement policies. In the era of great power competition, the initiative attempts to bundle economic aid, rule-making and security demands to form a more geopolitical value. Borrell, the EU’s High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, declared that a stronger Europe means being able to firmly uphold European values. Our vision of connectivity must be based on internationally accepted standards and rules. This statement reshapes economic cooperation into a tool for building ideological camps, reflecting the EU’s strategic intention to establish a third force in the face of the Sino-US game. However, this ambition is limited by internal divisions and insufficient resources in the EU, and its actual effect may be counterproductive - excessive politicization will weaken the EU’s economic presence in developing countries and further compress its strategic space.

In summary, the proposal of the EU’s Global Gateway initiative is the result of the combined effect of three driving factors: geopolitical balancing, the reshaping of economic competitiveness, and the export of values. The policy reflects the EU's strategic anxieties and self-repositioning in an era of power shifts, yet the numerous contradictions in its implementation also expose the structural limitations of the EU as a global actor.

3. The Strengths of China's Belt and Road Initiative Compared to EU's Global Gateway

3.1 More Stable

Compared to the EU's Global Gateway strategy, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) demonstrates greater stability, primarily reflected in two aspects: "major-country endorsement" and "major-country experience."

As the world's largest emerging economy, China has a vast domestic market, a comprehensive industrial chain system, and a solid economic foundation. Despite the complex international environment, China's economy continues to maintain medium-to-high growth, demonstrating robust vitality. Its strong risk resilience and development potential provide solid backing for the effective implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). In the autumn of 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed the major initiatives of building the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. Over the past decade, the BRI has achieved remarkable results, becoming the world's broadest and largest platform for international cooperation. In the field of economy and trade, the total import and export volume between China and the co-building countries has reached 19.1 trillion US dollars, with an average annual growth rate of 6.4%. The two-way investment exceeds 380 billion US dollars, covering 240 billion US dollars of China's outward direct investment and 140 billion US dollars of co-building countries' investment in China, forming a mutually beneficial and win-win pattern. In contrast, the EU's Global Gateway strategy, launched in 2021, pledged to invest 300 billion euros in infrastructure development for developing countries by 2027. However, it has faced numerous challenges from the outset, exhibiting significant instability. Economically, the EU itself is struggling with weak economic conditions. Financial crises, the European debt crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the energy crisis triggered by the Russia-Ukraine conflict have left the EU with sluggish long-term growth. Eurozone countries have high government debt-to-GDP ratios and tight fiscal conditions, making it difficult to allocate sufficient public budgets to support the strategy. Mobilizing market and private capital has also proven challenging. For example, in some African projects, a lack of private-sector investment has left large amounts of funding idle. Internally, the EU faces significant disparities in socio-economic development among its member states, leading to conflicts and disagreements. Different regions have varying infrastructure needs, and fiscally constrained Southern European countries show little interest for the Global Gateway strategy. The EU's complex decision-making mechanisms further hinder policy implementation, resulting in inefficient project planning and execution. In short, the EU's internal instability makes its Global Gateway strategy far less reliable in practice than China's Belt and Road Initiative.

As the world's largest developing country, China's economic development model offers valuable experience for the vast number of developing nations. Chinese modernization has broken through the traditional Western model characterized by capital expansion and colonial plunder. By grounding its approach in national conditions and systematic planning, China has accelerated industrialization while protecting the ecological environment, participated in global division of labor while safeguarding economic sovereignty, and maintained rapid economic growth while achieving social equity. Ghanaian scholar Frimpong points out that Chinese modernization has shattered the myth that modernization equals Westernization, providing a tangible development model for Global South countries. Although all member states of the European Union are developed countries, their economic development models are not replicable for most developing nations. The two follow different historical development paths. Europe underwent a prolonged capitalist development process, accumulating vast wealth and technology through colonial expansion and the Industrial Revolution, which laid its economic foundation. In contrast, most developing countries were once colonies or semi-colonies, facing challenges such as weak economic foundations and imbalanced industrial structures after gaining independence. There are also differences in economic structures. Europe's economy is dominated by high-end manufacturing, modern services, and high-tech industries, with agriculture also achieving a high level of modernization. The economic structures of developing countries, however, are more complex. Many have weak industrial foundations, agriculture still accounts for a significant proportion of their economies, service sectors remain underdeveloped, and they face the daunting task of industrial upgrading and optimization. As a result, they cannot directly copy Europe's high-end industry-led development model.

In summary, while the EU's Global Gateway strategy claims to assist developing countries in promoting infrastructure construction and upgrading, China clearly holds the advantage of "direct experience" when it comes to addressing the economic development challenges of these nations.

3.2 More Inclusive

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) demonstrates greater inclusivity compared to the EU's Global Gateway strategy. This is primarily reflected in BRI's long-standing adherence to the "Three Principles" (extensive consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits) and the "Five Connectivity" framework (policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds).

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) adheres to the principles of extensive consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits, providing a broad platform for cooperation between China and other developing countries. "Extensive consultation" emphasizes equal dialogue to align interests and ensure projects meet participants' actual needs. For instance, through sustained high-level dialogues, China and ASEAN substantively concluded negotiations on the upgraded China-ASEAN Free Trade Area (FTA 3.0) in 2023, expanding cooperation from traditional trade to emerging sectors like the digital and green economies. This process exemplifies "pooling wisdom", balancing diverse concerns via multilateral consultations to create an institutional framework integrating regional development needs and international rules. The full implementation of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a multilateral agreement initiated by ASEAN with China's deep involvement, further strengthens regional industrial chain synergy, serving as a model of institutional cooperation under this principle.

"Joint contribution" leverages complementary resources to advance projects. For example, China and Vietnam integrated China's technological expertise with local resources to co-plan cross-border railway networks, significantly boosting regional logistics efficiency. In ASEAN, China's investments in ports and highways have improved local transport networks while spurring industrial park development, forming a virtuous cycle of "connectivity-driven industrial clustering." Data shows China-ASEAN trade grew by 9.4% year-on-year in the first three quarters of 2024, reflecting efficient resource allocation through joint efforts.

"Shared benefits" ensures equitable distribution of outcomes to promote sustainable development. Under China ASEAN cooperation, the trade structure is gradually upgrading from primary products to high value-added products. Malaysia's digital infrastructure construction and Vietnam's manufacturing upgrading have both benefited from the technology spillover effects of cooperation projects. Clean energy projects in Indonesia and the Philippines have optimized local energy mixes, while medical aid and training programs enhanced public services—tangible proof of the "community with a shared future for mankind" vision.

In contrast, the EU's Global Gateway strategy, while touting principles liken "good governance," "green transition," and "private-sector mobilization," prioritizes its own interests and geopolitical competition. The European Union invests in green energy and mineral development in Africa through its "Global Gateway Initiative," aiming to reduce dependence on Russian fossil fuels and secure resources for Europe's green transition. However, it pays less attention to the comprehensive needs of the relevant countries' own energy industry development and the potential impact on the regional energy landscape. The European Union embeds environmental, labor, and digital standards (such as the General Data Protection Regulation, GDPR) into its trade agreements, disregarding the historical and social realities of partner countries and pressuring them to adopt European rules. In essence, this serves to eliminate non-tariff barriers for EU businesses and consolidate their technological dominance and market control. In Africa and the Indo-Pacific, the EU positions itself as an "alternative" to China's Belt and Road Initiative. For instance, while the EU criticizes China for creating "debt traps," it offers investments under its Global Gateway with attached political conditions, aiming to pull developing countries into a pro-European camp.

The "Five Connectivities" – policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds – constitute the core philosophy of building the "Silk Road Economic Belt." Policy Coordination emphasizes the alignment of development strategies and the harmonization of institutional rules among nations. Through high-level dialogues, multilateral agreements, and joint planning, countries eliminate cooperation barriers at the top-level design stage. For instance, China and Pakistan established a long-term cooperation mechanism via the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor Long-Term Plan, facilitating the implementation of energy, transportation, and other infrastructure projects. This has significantly enhanced Pakistan's power supply capacity and created tens of thousands of jobs. Such cooperation models improve policy transparency and reduce political risks in cross-border projects.

Infrastructure Connectivity focuses on linking transportation, energy, and communication networks. A prime example is the China-Laos Railway, which transformed Laos from a "landlocked" to a "land-linked" country, reducing freight costs by 40% and boosting agricultural and tourism revenues along the route by approximately 20%. Additionally, the Lower Kafue Gorge Hydroelectric Power Station in Zambia, constructed by Chinese enterprises with a total installed capacity of 750 megawatts, has effectively alleviated local power shortages, providing stable electricity for industrial production and daily life.

Unimpeded Trade promotes cross-border commerce through tariff reductions, streamlined customs procedures, and unified standards. After the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area Upgrade Agreement took effect, bilateral trade surged nearly threefold over a decade, with Vietnam's agricultural exports to China growing at an annual rate of 12%. The China-Europe Railway Express, operating on a "door-to-door" model, has turned inland cities like Chongqing into global electronics manufacturing hubs while upgrading logistics industries in transit countries such as Kazakhstan and attracting foreign investment for regional distribution centers.

Trade Facilitation promotes cross-border commerce by reducing tariffs, streamlining customs procedures, and harmonizing standards. Since the upgraded China-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement took effect, bilateral trade volume has nearly tripled over a decade, with Vietnam's agricultural exports to China growing at an average annual rate of 12%. Meanwhile, the China-Europe Railway Express, with its "door-to-door" transport model, has turned inland cities like Chongqing into global hubs for electronics manufacturing. It has also spurred logistics industry upgrades in transit countries such as Kazakhstan and attracted foreign investment to establish regional distribution centers.

People-to-People Bonds foster social cohesion through education, healthcare, and cultural exchanges. By 2025, the "Silk Road" Scholarship had supported over 100,000 students from partner countries to study in China, with Mandarin centers in Uzbekistan and elsewhere reaching 80% of major cities. Under the China-Africa Paired Hospital Cooperation Mechanism, Ethiopia's cardiac specialty hospital quadrupled its annual patient capacity while maternal mortality dropped by 30%. Such livelihood initiatives improve quality of life, strengthen public support for cooperation, and lay a social foundation for long-term collaboration.

In contrast, the European Union's "Global Gateway" initiative clearly carries hidden motives, attempting to propagate the EU's value model under the guise of economic cooperation. It imposes political standards like so-called "democracy" and "human rights" as prerequisites for collaboration with developing nations. For instance, in the "EU-Africa: Global Gateway Investment Package," democratic reforms are made a condition for African countries to access funding. Josep Borrell, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, openly stated that this approach aims to demonstrate "the certainty that democratic values bring" through infrastructure cooperation. When selecting investment targets and projects, the EU prioritizes countries with political systems and governance models like its own, or those willing to undertake political reforms according to EU standards. For example, in negotiations with certain African and Eastern European nations, the EU explicitly requires adjustments to electoral systems, government transparency, and citizen political participation—pushing them to align with the EU's "democratic" model in an attempt to impose Western political systems and ideologies.

Moreover, the policy disproportionately emphasizes "high-end agendas" like green transition and digital infrastructure, while neglecting basic livelihood projects such as roads and bridges urgently needed in Sub-Saharan Africa. Notably, the EU's infrastructure investments in Africa amount to merely one-third of China's, with funds predominantly channeled to "model countries" with high governance ratings, leaving high-demand nations like the Democratic Republic of Congo and Nigeria underserved.

In summary, compared to the Belt and Road policy, the EU's Global Gateway initiative lacks inclusiveness—a fundamental flaw rooted in its value-driven exclusivity. It fundamentally fails to address the development challenges of developing nations, nor can it ensure that policy implementation genuinely improves the livelihood of people in these countries.

3.3 More Sustainable

The Belt and Road Initiative delivers more sustainable benefits compared to the Global Gateway strategy, primarily manifested through the CEC development dynamics model and the re-optimization of four key developmental elements advocated by Belt and Road Development Studies.

As the core theoretical framework of Belt and Road Development Studies, the CEC Development Dynamics Model addresses two critical challenges in global development - insufficient growth momentum and persistent developmental imbalances.

"Connectivity" activates the flow of production factors. Currently, there is a severe "maturity mismatch" in the global infrastructure investment market, with infrastructure development and connectivity lagging in developing countries. "Connectivity" has unlocked access to rivers and seas for many "landlocked" regions, expanded international markets for developing countries, and facilitated the free flow of economic factors worldwide. The China-Laos Railway has created a new, efficient land transport corridor connecting China with Laos, Thailand, Cambodia, and other Indo-China Peninsula countries. It has significantly reduced inland freight time, enabling goods to reach major cities like Bangkok, Thailand, in just one day through rail-rail and rail-road intermodal transport.

"Enablement" Reshapes Comparative Advantages. After World War II, numerous developing nations liberated themselves from colonial and semi-colonial status and pursued their own industrialization and modernization. However, some have long been trapped in the “resource curse,” relying solely on exporting raw materials and low-value goods to sustain sluggish economic growth. “Enablement,” primarily through industrial cooperation, helps developing countries restructure their factor endowments and comparative advantages, enabling them to better integrate into global supply chains while optimizing and reshaping global production and value chains. For instance, the Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Rail (HSR) project in Indonesia not only introduced China’s HSR technology but also trained over 2,000 local technicians through joint programs, upgrading Indonesia’s rail industry standards. Once operational, the HSR cut travel time between Jakarta and Bandung by 75% and indirectly boosted tourism along the route by 23%.

“Coordination” Enhances Collaborative Efficiency. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) promotes a multi-tiered cooperation mechanism encompassing policy dialogue, regulatory alignment, and benefit-sharing frameworks. This approach balances market mechanisms with social welfare while ensuring goal consistency and complementary actions among all parties. As the highest-level platform for policy dialogue, the BRI International Forum has been held three times and established itself as a regularized mechanism. Through its combination of main forums and thematic sub-forums, the Forum facilitates policy coordination in infrastructure, the digital economy, green development, and other key areas. For instance, the third Forum in 2023 produced 89 multilateral outcomes, including the establishment of the BRI Green Development International Alliance and the signing of the Digital Economy Partnership Initiative by over 40 countries. These achievements demonstrate the growing consensus among nations on low-carbon transition and digital governance.

In contrast to China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the EU’s Global Gateway program demonstrates significant gaps between its proclaimed objectives and actual implementation across the three key dimensions of “Connectivity,” “Enablement,” and “Coordination.” Regarding Connectivity, while claiming to enhance global infrastructure interconnections, the program exhibits markedly fragmented characteristics in both funding allocation and project execution. A case in point is Kenya's infrastructure project in Africa, where the EU provided merely 30 million euros for a specific highway section to upgrade - a stark contrast to its promised “systematic infrastructure upgrade.” Furthermore, its projects are excessively scattered across over ten regions including Europe, Africa and Asia, lacking strategic focus on key markets, which has resulted in limited actual improvements in logistics efficiency. By comparison, China’s BRI has successfully connected landlocked Central Asian countries to global maritime networks through cross-border transport systems like the China-Europe Railway Express. The Global Gateway, however, has yet to establish land-sea intermodal corridors of comparable scale.

In the realm of “Enablement”, the EU’s incorporation of stringent political conditionalities and anti-corruption review mechanisms in project approval has significantly delayed collaborative progress. Taking the digital sector as an example, African nations widely report that their digital economy projects face an 18 to 24 months cycle from proposal to implementation - far exceeding developing countries' needs for technological iteration speed. Meanwhile, China's "Digital Silk Road" has established over 20 data centers and fiber-optic backbone networks across Africa, with its efficient project execution model better aligning with local development priorities. These procedural barriers not only diminish the Global Gateway's appeal but also reveal the EU's misalignment with developing nations' actual needs.

At the "Coordination" level, significant divergences in interests among EU member states have severely constrained their capacity for coordinated action. During the inaugural 2023 Global Gateway Forum, Italy was conspicuously absent, while Germany sent only low-level representation—reflecting a lack of strategic prioritization among core member states. Furthermore, the EU's inclusion of Portugal's EDP Group, partially owned by Chinese investors, in its Business Advisory Committee exposed internal inconsistencies in regulatory coordination. Such contradictions between political commitments and commercial practices have further eroded developing countries' confidence in the EU's collaborative governance capabilities. The root of these issues lies in the EU's attempt to strike a balance between "values-driven conditionality" (e.g., democratic norms screening) and "market efficiency," yet excessive political prerequisites have diverted resource allocation away from economic rationality. Unlike the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which rapidly consolidates resources through multilateral cooperation frameworks, the Global Gateway remains mired in inter-member bargaining and bureaucratic procedures, struggling to establish a sustainable model of synergistic development.

The Development Studies of the Belt and Road Initiative posits that the re-optimization of the four key development elements—government, capital, society, and ecology—facilitates the effective operation of the CEC dynamic development model. Active government coordination is particularly crucial for developing countries where market-based resource allocation mechanisms remain incomplete. A proactive government provides reliable guarantees for infrastructure development, industrial policy formulation, social equity enhancement, and international cooperation alignment.

The Kyrgyzstan National Fertilizer Plant project (contracted in 2023 and operational in 2024) exemplifies the re-optimization of governmental functions. Through a policy dialogue mechanism, the Chinese and Kyrgyz governments signed a cooperative framework agreement, incorporated the project into the outcomes list of the China-Central Asia Summit, and coordinated the removal of policy barriers such as customs and taxation to ensure rapid equipment clearance. Government-led institutional synergy not only unlocked investment channels but also optimized Kyrgyzstan's ecological standards for fertilizer production by introducing China's clean energy technology standards, achieving a two-way empowerment of policies and regulations.

In the international investment community, private capital tends to favor short-term projects with a focus on immediate returns. In contrast, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has innovated investment and financing models that emphasize shared benefits and risk-sharing, effectively mobilizing funds from multilateral development banks, institutional investors, and private investors to create a massive "capital aggregation pool." This approach addresses the "financing difficulties" faced by developing countries in their economic development. The 485MW Hussein Combined Cycle Gas Power Plant Project in Jordan, constructed by SEPCOIII (a subsidiary of Power China) under an EPC contract, received joint financing support from financial institutions such as ICBC and multilateral agencies (including MIGA and IFC). Upon completion, the project effectively alleviated Jordan's power shortages, providing stable and sustainable electricity to support the country's industrial upgrading, economic growth, and livelihood improvements. The Development Studies of the Belt and Road Initiative views the vast populations of developing countries as the driving force behind modernization efforts.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) adopts the philosophy of "teaching a man to fish rather than giving him a fish" by enhancing vocational education to effectively improve employment opportunities for local impoverished populations. Qingdao Electronic School established a branch in Nepal, pioneering a "2+1" training model (two years of local study plus one year of practical training in China) and co-authoring a bilingual Chinese-Nepali textbook Electronic Technology Practical Training. This system equips Nepalese youth with skills in circuit design, photovoltaic power generation, and other technologies, supporting the country's infrastructure development and electronics industry growth.

A healthy ecological environment is the foundation for developing countries to achieve sustainable economic growth. In the context of global carbon reduction, only by maintaining ecological balance, driving industrial transformation, and mitigating climate risks can nations build resilience for long-term economic growth, safeguard public health and social stability, and unlock high-quality development potential. Under the BRI framework, China promotes synergistic development between economic growth and ecological conservation in partner countries through cooperation in green infrastructure, clean energy, and low-carbon technologies.

China's investments in Pakistan—including the Karot Hydropower Station, Sachal Wind Farm, and Punjab Solar Park—form the largest clean energy cluster in South Asia. These projects not only reduce CO_2 emissions by approximately 2 million tons annually but also enhance local energy self-sufficiency through technology transfer. Cumulatively, they have created over 12,000 jobs and shifted Pakistan's power supply structure toward renewable energy by more than 35%.

Compared to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the EU's Global Gateway strategy has inadequately addressed the practical realities of developing countries across the four key development elements: government, capital, society, and ecology. First, the Global Gateway's excessive dependence on market mechanisms and existing funding frameworks has led to misalignment with partner countries' development strategies. For instance, in Kenya, the EU repackaged an old highway project under the Global Gateway label but allocated only 30 million euros—far below actual needs—and failed to integrate it with Kenya's National Integrated Transport Plan. Complex EU internal approval processes and an overemphasis on private capital participation have delayed projects, leaving them fragmented and unable to systematically support local priorities like digitalization and clean energy. The Global Gateway aims to mobilize 300 billion euros through public funds to catalyze private investment.

However, the EU's budgetary leverage is constrained. For example, the European Sustainable Development Fund Plus (EFSD+) offers only 39.7 billion euros in guarantees to target 135 billion euros in investments. Post-pandemic fiscal deficits have further strained public resources: EU government debt reached 90.9% of GDP in Q2 2021. Even flagship projects like Botswana's solar plants and Ghana's wind turbines face funding shortfalls. In South Africa, only 88 million euros of a 280 million euros grant came from the EU budget, with the rest reliant on slow-moving member-state contributions. The Global Gateway's focus on urban and elite-oriented projects risks widening social divides. In Latin America, investments in digital infrastructure (e.g., submarine cables) primarily serve multinational corporations and urban middle classes, while rural areas lack basic healthcare and education. Similarly, Africa's "vaccine localization" initiatives restrict technology transfer to select partners, limiting affordable medicine access for the public. Such selective investments may fuel grassroots discontent by deepening urban-rural disparities. The Global Gateway mandates strict EU environmental standards (e.g., carbon emissions, biodiversity protection), often disregarding developing countries' capacities. The EU Deforestation Regulation, which requires small-scale African cocoa and coffee farmers to provide geolocation proof of sustainable land use, imposes high technical and cost barriers. This may push farmers toward illegal land clearance, ironically worsening deforestation. Additionally, large-scale solar farms in the Sahara could alter surface albedo and local hydrology, potentially disrupting arid ecosystems. In short, the Global Gateway's top-down approach—prioritizing EU standards and market logic over local contexts—contrasts with the BRI's emphasis on strategic alignment and adaptability. These structural flaws hinder its effectiveness in addressing the systemic needs of developing nations.

In summary, guided by the principles of Belt and Road Development Studies, countries along the Belt and Road and other developing nations have continuously optimized their development paths based on their actual conditions, driving sustainable economic prosperity.

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Note

Note 1. Heldt, E. C. (2023). Europe's global gateway: A new instrument of geopolitics. Politics and Governance, 11(4), 223-234.