
ARTICLE

Asian and European Connectivity Initiatives: Intersecting Geopolitical Strategies

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Abstract

Connectivity, although not a new phenomenon, has recently begun to be addressed in International Relations and Area Studies scholarship from a more complicated perspective, including, among others, geopolitical calculations, economic initiatives, and institutional strategies. While the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), the EU, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) have been three fundamental platforms for connectivity to flourish between Asia and Europe, they have also played crucial roles for countries to develop their own initiatives. Considering their economic rise, Asian states like China and India, an already developed economy like Japan, and Asian regional organizations such as ASEAN have been pursuing a more structured way of establishing their connectivity agendas sometimes in collaboration with their European counterparts. Likewise, the EU has its own path for connectivity. These actors have initiated their peculiar connectivity initiatives in the last couple of decades. The selected cases from Asia and Europe examined in this study are the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), and the Partnership on Sustainable Connectivity and Quality Infrastructure between Japan and the European Union. Within this context, this paper aims to shed light on Asian and European connectivity initiatives by addressing the geopolitical landscape within which the initiatives are discussed based on their goals, potential, challenges, and limitations utilizing the document analysis method. The main research question of this study is whether these initiatives create any geopolitical tensions by virtue of their aims, methods, and their ideological and normative discourses. The article concludes that different connectivity initiatives are best understood as geopolitically oriented strategies rather than exclusively technical, infrastructure and/or trade-focused projects.

Keywords

Connectivity, ASEM, EU, ASEAN, geopolitics

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Introduction

Over the last decade, it has become quite popular for states to announce connectivity initiatives aimed at conjugating geographies, either by establishing a trade/economic corridor or by bringing together various infrastructure projects, and sometimes even vaguely defined rather than normative connectivity strategies. There is reciprocal interaction between Asia and Europe, considering this relatively new phenomenon thanks to the rising economic power of Asian countries and, likewise, the increasing economic potential of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) not only within the region but also across the region. Although there is a growing body of literature on connectivity, it is necessary to question whether these strategies really connect. Inspired by this question, I ask how and why connectivity strategies are becoming more vital for countries and organizations, and in what ways they intersect.

The current paper is divided into the following sections: First, a literature review of the concept of connectivity will be provided in order to investigate the main discussions in the current literature. Second, the theoretical framework and methodology section will discuss how connectivity is theoretically understood, and how this paper is designed both theoretically and methodologically. Since my aim is to look at different type of actors' perspectives on connectivity, I have chosen the EU and ASEAN as regional organizations for two reasons. The EU, on the one hand, is one of the best examples in contemporary international affairs of managing successful intra-region connectivity among member states via economic/trade links and also via a visa-free system which has strengthened people-to-people connectivity. Although not the same system as the EU, ASEAN, with a more complex dynamic, has also managed to overcome most of its members' bilateral difficulties and has focused on establishing a regional economic ecosystem. Beyond these two, China has been chosen as a rising power, Japan as a developed and regional power, and India as an emerging

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power. Each of these actors has their own connectivity initiatives which include a variety of issues, mechanisms, and goals. Moreover, China's connectivity enthusiasm is perceived as a challenge to Western economic supremacy and has generated geopolitical discussions. India's relatively new connectivity project has also sparked regional and global competition. Meanwhile, the collaboration between the EU and Japan, as promoters of liberal international order, is impossible to ignore within this connectivity sphere. Since the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), the EU, and ASEAN are the first platforms to try to establish a connectivity definition and strategy from their own perspective, their approach and definitions will be provided as an introduction. Third, I present the fundamental characteristics of the three connectivity strategies between Asia and Europe, namely the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), and the Partnership on Sustainable Connectivity and Quality Infrastructure between Japan and the EU. I also examine the general outlooks of the ASEM and the EU's Connectivity Strategy.

The case selection is based on the following perspectives: 1) BRI: Representing China's evolving perspective on connectivity, which often differs from Western interpretations and normative values; 2) Quality Infrastructure: Reflecting Japan's perspective, which aligns with the liberal international order (LIO) and shares similarities with Western approaches to connectivity; 3) IMEC: As an emerging regional power, India is striving to establish its own understanding of regional dynamics, particularly in the Indo-Pacific and Indian Ocean regions, while also developing its unique approach to connectivity.

Despite their differing dynamics, motivations, and understandings of connectivity, this paper highlights the similarities and commonalities among these connectivity projects. In the fourth and main part of the paper, I compare and contrast selected connectivity initiatives/strategies, and question whether they foster connectivity/connectedness or produce disconnectedness from a geopolitical perspective by underlining their similarities and commonalities. In the conclusion, I discuss the geopolitical dimension of these connectivity strategies and try to foresee their possible impact on the inter-regional political relations.

The Definition and Evolution of the Concept of Connectivity

For a couple of decades now, connectivity has been one of the buzzwords in the social sciences.¹ Its meaning and the expectations associated with it change depending on the actor using it and yet, it is "still an academically underdeveloped concept."² Hawke and Prakash contend that connectivity has

existed since ancient times as people have communicated and interacted across boundaries for various reasons such as business, government purposes, and social activities.³ But conceptualizing connectivity as such is a recent phenomenon.⁴ Godehardt and Postel-Vinay share a similar perspective as they mention that human interactions and connectivity are as old as each other, yet what is new is the introduction of connectivity into strategy with geopolitical ramifications.⁵ They highlight how the Covid-19 pandemic revealed the fragility of the liberal international order and how the given views of connectedness were fractured in Asia, Europe, and beyond.⁶ Moreover, they argue that the political reactions to the pandemic supported the geopolitical importance of connectivity in global political relations.⁷ The world witnessed various reactions such as lockdowns, travel limitations, restricted access to basic rights, etc. by different types of governments such as liberal democratic or authoritarian, and additionally unusual precautions/performances from great powers and middle powers.⁸ As it was an unexpected health crisis, globalization faced a tough challenge and Godehardt and Postel-Vinay assert that it was demonstrated that globalization can lead to both overt disconnectivity and hyperconnectivity at the same time.⁹

One of the early attempts to reach a definition came from the ASEM Pathfinder Group on Connectivity in June 2017 by emphasizing the requirement for a comprehensive definition of connectivity that encompasses the three pillars of ASEM (economic, security, and people-to-people interactions) in both a functional and geographic sense. “Hard” and “soft” factors should be covered, such as all forms of transportation (air, sea, and land), energy and digital connections, research and higher education, customs, and trade facilitation.¹⁰ Another definition comes from Ries who argues that the term “connectivity” describes all the ways that nations, organizations—commercial or not—and communities are interconnected and interact on a global scale covering information flows as well as the actual flows of people and products. Rather than being a policy, connectivity is a quality (of being connected or interconnected) which includes both “soft” regulatory measures and sociocultural linkages in addition to “hard” infrastructures.¹¹

The declaration of the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity in Ha Noi in 2011 is believed to be the starting point of the popularization of the concept.¹² When the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity is closely examined, there are a couple of points which can be thought to shape the current literature on the concept. To begin with, one of the key emphases of the Master Plan was to formulate itself based on the three types of connectivity pillars: physical connectivity (to connect ASEAN via improved physical infrastructure development), institutional

connectivity (operative institutions, mechanisms, and processes), and people-to-people connectivity (qualified people).¹³ These three pillars are the framework mechanisms that lay the foundations of contemporary connectivity initiatives by different agents or actors from various geographies.

Another attempt to conceptualize connectivity came from the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) when leaders gathered in Bali in 2013 and emphasized their aim to promote connectivity under physical, institutional, and people-to-people themes to accomplish an integrated and connected Asia-Pacific.¹⁴ APEC published its Blueprint and set forth that several APEC work streams would concentrate their efforts within the high-level framework of connectivity, adding that the Blueprint would serve as a strategic road map for ongoing and upcoming projects aimed at deepening economic integration within the APEC area by 2025.¹⁵

When ASEM's and ASEAN Master Plan's three pillars are compared it is seen that the former puts emphasis on the economic, security, and people-to-people interactions, while the latter emphasizes physical, institutional, and people-to-people connectivity. Thus, people-to-people connectivity emerges as the intersectional pillar between the two. The links between the hard (physical) and soft (institutional) supporting infrastructure, easier access to credit, and effective logistical services have all contributed to Asia's growing interconnection and integration. The linking of geographic areas, economic activity, and institutions

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to facilitate the flow of people, ideas, technology, goods, and services might be outlined as connectivity.¹⁶ As extensive academic research has contributed to the existing literature on connectivity issues, this paper aims to provide a general outlook on the relation of connectivity and the geopolitical dimension by focusing on different initiatives together in order to offer a more complete picture.

Despite the many different definitions of connectivity, there is an obvious emphasis on the three pillars of connectivity as physical, institutional, and people-to-people in addition to fields such as digital, green transition, transport, etc. One of the most visible challenges for the actors who are part of connectivity strategies or project initiators is to sustain connectivity not

only in the real/physical sphere but also on the normative level. I argue that the main competition between different actors will be reflected within the normative realm since most actors, in one way or another, are pushing their limits to make their projects financially sustainable. At the same time, it is much more fundamental to attract newcomers and persuade them to collaborate in a project at the normative level.

Theoretical Framework: Geopolitical Dimension and Connectivity

Becker et al. argue that in high-level political and diplomatic forums participated by countries from Asia and Europe, strengthening ties between the two continents for peace, stability, economic prosperity, and sustainable and inclusive development has taken center stage.¹⁷ Asia and Europe have firmly committed to working towards Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and have elevated mutual connectivity between people, businesses, and institutions to a top political goal.¹⁸ Although connectivity initiatives might be conceived as purely trade-oriented and resulting in a win-win outcome, there are not politics or ideology free. Each inter-governmental organization of a nation-state declaring and/or participating in a connectivity project must contemplate the possible geopolitical conditions, risks, and opportunities. As Flint and Zhu summarize, the BRI has a total of three aims and strategies: economic integration, regional influence, and global geopolitical competition.¹⁹ Flint and Zhu build their argument on “Glassman’s call to include geopolitical accounts to the discussions of economic intercourse,”²⁰ and take a political economy perspective towards geopolitics, meaning that neither the politics of territory nor economic networks are prioritized.²¹ Moreover, the authors assert that their political economy approach highlights the “single logic” of contest in the capitalist world economy within which states and businesses are linked as the latter aim to maximize profits while the former (1) try to “capture” economic activity within their borders; (2) forge international connections to maximize the benefits of global economic flows for their “domestic” economy; and (3) entangle economic agendas with geopolitical objectives.²² In line with Flint and Zhu’s perspective, Godehardt and Postel-Vinay offer three stages toward the geopoliticization of connectivity: first, to improve regionalization through connectivity policies; second, to define a new international space beyond the region; and third, to emulate competition in politicized connectivity.²³

However, apart from geopolitics, identity politics is also one of the foremost segments of connectivity initiatives. Holzer compares the BRI and EU Connectivity Strategy for Asia by looking at the identity narratives in China and the EU’s economic diplomacy.²⁴ The identity dimension of the issue can also be understood

from the European Commission's joint communiqué "Connecting Europe and Asia – Building Blocks for an EU Strategy" policy paper of 2018 in which it defined its overall perspective as the "European way."²⁵ While the EU has been polishing its strategy with a normative attribute, Asia is placing emphasis elsewhere. Being one of the pioneers of connectivity strategies, ASEAN highlighted "identity" by putting more emphasis on "regional identity" in its master plan.²⁶ Both the identity and the geopolitical dimension of connectivity make it difficult to argue that connectivity is merely about infrastructure and/or trade route projects. Connectivity has much more to offer and it relates not only to goods, people, and services but also to values, identities, ideologies, and political calculations. At

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a certain level, we might even be able to discuss a clash between Western and non-Western values when looking at different connectivity initiatives. At this point, it will be beneficial to formulate ways to interpret geopolitics through connectivity. For this purpose, based on the abovementioned perspectives, I use a three-layered road map to discuss all three connectivity initiatives. On the first layer, I will compare their main policy papers that serve, or at least aim to serve, for an improved regionalization structure. On the second layer, I will compare their efforts to create a new space beyond their regions, and at the

third layer, I will follow each one of these five initiatives' efforts that are taking them step by step into new competition fields. Additionally, a normative layer is also included in the discussion: since the EU is under consideration, it is not possible to ignore norm production and norm diffusion.

The current paper relies on comparative area studies. Basedau and Köllner assert that there are three types of comparative area studies: intra-regional comparison, inter-regional comparison, and cross-regional comparison.²⁷ Since the connecting initiatives of Asia and Europe will be comparatively examined, this paper applies the inter-regional comparison methodology while the method chosen for the research is document analysis. For this purpose, each connectivity strategy will be briefly introduced mentioning its aims, perspectives, and mechanisms relying, first, on the official documents of state institutions such as foreign

affairs ministries, finance and trade ministries, etc. In the paper's main analytical section, the aims, tools, and agendas of these initiatives will be examined in addition to their strengths and weaknesses by comparing them on the basis of their reflections at the regional and global level, and normative and institutional constructions. The paper aims to deliver an introduction on the connectivity and geopolitics nexus by concentrating on multiple cases, and, as such, no fieldwork was conducted during the research phase. However, the understanding and analysis of the geopolitical implications of each initiative via having fieldwork would be a valuable contribution to the existing literature.

Asian and European Connectivity Platforms and Initiatives: A Brief Overlook

Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM)

ASEM is a special, unofficial forum for communication and collaboration between Asia and Europe on the major concerns of a rapidly changing world, including connectivity, trade and investment, and climate change, as well as more general security issues like cybercrime, migration, counterterrorism, and maritime security. As the primary multilateral platform connecting Europe and Asia, ASEM unites 53 partners from both regions. With a substantial worldwide impact, its members account for approximately 65% of the world's GDP, 60% of its population, 75% of its tourism, and 68% of its trade.²⁸ Inaugurated in Bangkok, Thailand on March 1-2, 1996, the first ASEM partnership comprised 15 EU member states, seven ASEAN member states, China, Japan, South Korea, and the European Commission. The current membership of ASEM is 51 countries, with the 10 ASEAN countries plus Australia, Bangladesh, China, India, Japan, Kazakhstan, South Korea, Mongolia, New Zealand, Pakistan, and Russia on the Asian side, and the 27 Member States of the EU plus Norway, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom on the European side. ASEM's institutional partners include the EU and the ASEAN Secretariat.²⁹

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the U.S. from the structure. This is the reason that prevents the U.S. to dominate and shape the agenda.³⁰ Another important contribution of ASEM is that it introduces the “sustainability” dimension to the connectivity definition. ASEM Sustainable Connectivity includes two main indexes: the connectivity index, including physical, economic/financial, political, institutional, and people-to-people connectivity, and the sustainability index, including environmental, social, and economic/financial layers.³¹

EU Connectivity Strategy

In September 2018, the EU released the joint communiqué entitled “Connecting Europe and Asia - Building blocks for an EU Strategy.” In the latter, the EU defines the networks that connect people, places, and opportunities as “connectivity” with a focus on digital, human-to-human, energy, and transportation connectivity in particular.³² Since then, this has been widely known as the “EU Connectivity Strategy.”³³ The EU has already a paramount experience within itself as a single market which enables it to put forward an approach to connectivity that is “sustainable, comprehensive and rules-based,”³⁴ formulating a “European Way”³⁵ while focusing on “digital, energy, human dimension and transport.”³⁶

Widmann argues that to realize the “European Way” to connectivity across Asia and beyond in a flourishing way and, moreover, to enfold the associated regulatory norms and standards, would also raise the EU’s geopolitical influence and normative power as compared with China and other actors in the region.³⁷

According to the “European Way,” the EU mainly refers to connectivity being economically, fiscally, environmentally, and socially sustainable in the long term, creating a comprehensive synergy among transport links, digital networks, and energy networks, and promoting open and transparent procurement processes.³⁸ In January 2021, the European Parliament resolution emphasized that a global connectivity strategy for the EU which can “advance its interests, values and positions and strengthen cooperation with its partners in the digital field and the fields of health, security, the green transition, transportation, energy and, in particular, human networks.”³⁹

Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)

In the autumn of 2013, Xi Jinping proposed in Kazakhstan and later in Indonesia the building of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century

Maritime Silk Road, which became known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). At the opening of the Belt and Road Forum in 2017, Xi stated that the BRI aims to contribute to countries' development strategies by weighing their comparative potency and intensifying coordination with initiatives such as Russia's Eurasian Economic Union, the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity, Kazakhstan's Bright Road initiative, Türkiye's Middle Corridor initiative, Mongolia's Development Road initiative, Vietnam's Two Corridors, One Economic Circle initiative, the UK's Northern Powerhouse initiative, and Poland's Amber Road initiative.⁴⁰ When the full speech of Xi is examined, it is seen that he not only highlighted policy connectivity, but also trade, infrastructure, financial, people-to-people, land, maritime, air and cyberspace, and software connectivity, involving telecommunications, customs, and quarantine inspection.⁴¹

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Since its inception, the BRI has been labelled a strategy to strengthen trade and investment connectivity between China and Europe, Central Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia.⁴² The announcement of the BRI opened a new chapter for middle, regional, and great powers to consider connectivity issues as a new form of contemporary strategic calculation. As Holzer argues, the BRI is an "overall umbrella term for China's engagement with the outside world according to its strategic interests."⁴³ Meanwhile, China's engagement through such a massive, hard and soft connectivity strategy has fuelled the discussion on whether it is challenging the current international system and seeking to establish a new order based on its own values, perspective, and interests.

India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC)

Following a meeting on the sidelines of the G20 Summit in New Delhi among the leaders of India, the U.S., Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Italy, France, Germany, and the European Commission, the IMEC was unveiled in September 2023. When India is involved, one usually thinks about China immediately.

The IMEC is an economic corridor and not just a pathway for the traffic of goods. A safe and fast data pipeline has also been suggested in light of the growing importance of cybersecurity, as it may help India export its IT services

to West Asia and Europe.⁴⁴

As Raza argues, the U.S. is eager to join this initiative, not only to demonstrate to China that a counter-initiative to President Xi's ambitious BRI is finally taking shape, but also because of the tremendous potential of this trade corridor between India, the Gulf region, and the EU.⁴⁵ He adds that this was something that was long overdue, especially to counter China's vast ambitions as demonstrated by the BRI, launched ten years before with the aim of exploiting the global markets, especially in Central Asia and Africa, with the vast inventories of manufactured goods that are accumulating in Chinese factories.⁴⁶

Monroe asserts that the IMEC differs from earlier Western trade initiatives in the region in two respects. First, regarding the actors involved, with India a leading proponent and keeping an eye on both north-south and south-south trade. Second, due to its focus on infrastructure, similar to China's BRI.⁴⁷ However, Monroe adds that the IMEC still faces political handicaps on how to achieve success, such as the harmonization of international regulations and trade policies that necessitate the standardization of policies on paper and in practice.⁴⁸

It is not a surprise that some argue that the IMEC is a reaction to China's BRI.⁴⁹ Considering the rise of China in the international system, there is a growing discussion that the geopolitical competition is back in international politics, which is also one of the main arguments of this paper. As major powers in the Indo-Pacific region have used connectivity projects to assert influence and counter China,⁵⁰ the BRI and the EU Connectivity Strategy also reflect broader geopolitical competition rather than purely economic collaboration between Asia and Europe. Although there is an ongoing emphasis on the cooperation dimension at the heart of the connectivity projects, there are many obvious signs that geopolitical competition is growing.

The Partnership on Sustainable Connectivity and Quality Infrastructure between Japan and the European Union

"The Partnership on Sustainable Connectivity and Quality Infrastructure between Japan and the EU" was signed in Brussels on September 27, 2019, by Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission on behalf of the EU, and Shinzo Abe, then Prime Minister of Japan. The EU and Japan asserted their commitment to establishing a connectivity partnership based on sustainability as a shared value, quality infrastructure, and their belief in the benefits of a level playing field by hearkening back to the statements of the

ASEM of October 18-19, 2018; the EU-Japan Summit of April 25, 2019; and the G20 Osaka Summit of June 28-29, 2019.⁵¹ Both sides intend to advance free, open, rule-based, fair, non-discriminatory, and predictable regional and international trade and investment, and transparent procurement practices, securing debt sustainability and high standards of economic, fiscal, financial, social, and environmental sustainability.⁵² It can be clearly seen that in the initiatives where the EU is a partner, there is an emphasis on the normative characteristic of the connectivity strategy as free, rule-based, transparent, and so forth.

Clashing or Contributing Strategies

ASEM, the EU, and ASEAN have been putting forward their strategies concerning connectivity for almost two decades. Each platform prioritizes its own geopolitical concerns when designing its strategies. To reiterate ASEM's and ASEAN's differentiated focuses, the former uses economic, security, and people-to-people interactions, while the latter uses physical, institutional, and people-to-people keywords in its definitions. The EU, on the other hand, has been integrating relatively new dimensions which it prioritizes such as digital connectivity, green and sustainable connectivity, etc. Moreover, China's declaration of its megaproject, the BRI, in 2013 has brought a new breath to this picture. Not only did it attract the attention of developing countries through its loans and infrastructure investments, but China also created discomfort since it fueled the fear that it might challenge the current international order via its assertive project. As mostly perceived a response, it came from India by its announcement of IMEC. Monroe argues that the "recent eruption of violence between Hamas and Israel" serves as a somber reminder of the political obstacles in including Israel in economic/trade endeavors.⁵³ Putting aside the obstacles in realizing the IMEC, it might have a serious potential when realized.

The primary goal of the EU is to ensure future prosperity by promoting an open and international trade system. For the EU, the most important question is how much China can become an ally.

After providing introductory information for the selected actors' strategies on connectivity, it is time to look at them from a broader perspective. Below, the paper analyzes these strategies and initiatives

from a geopolitical perspective, under three subheadings: connectivity at the regional dimension, connectivity at a beyond-regions dimension, and the role of connectivity as a catalyzer in the political competition.

Connectivity and Its Regional Dimension

This section discusses the selected cases' contribution to regionalization or their potential risk to diminish regionalization efforts. Holzer summarizes the situation considering the EU and China as follows: from a strategic perspective, China views multilateralism as a means of advancing toward a multipolar global order in which it would serve as one of the poles of power and a check on U.S. hegemony. Conversely, the EU has been a reluctant political force that continues to demonstrate a great reliance on an international alliance headed by the U.S., both politically and economically. The central tenet of the EU Connectivity Strategy is the promotion of rule-based, all-encompassing, and sustainable collaboration under a framework of competitive neutrality. The primary goal of the EU is to ensure future prosperity by promoting an open and international trade system. For the EU, the most important question is how much China can become an ally.⁵⁴ Yet, this is a question which is quite difficult to answer immediately. Although Holzer has pointed to the EU's open and international trade system, the current developments have cast a shadow on this. Xinhua reported that the European Commission announced punitive tariffs on Chinese battery electric vehicles (EVs); the measure was criticized by many European nations and car industries regarding the possible danger that it could negatively impact the EU's competitiveness.⁵⁵

It is argued that, on the one hand, the BRI offers some opportunities for Europe such as connecting Trans-European Transport Networks (TENTs) to networks in Asia, but, on the other, it creates puzzling calculations for Europe.⁵⁶ Gaens has argued that there are three underlying challenges: (1) the non-existence of an equal playing field referring to the fact that China-financed projects are frequently operated by Chinese companies which are usually more closed to local or international companies, and mostly have less transparent proposal procedures; (2) the growing economic presence of China within Europe—particularly in Central and Eastern Europe—is fueling the fear that it might cause intra-European fractures; and (3) China's sparky stance in the multilateral forums exposes a severe contrast to Europe's wait-and-see perspective.⁵⁷ When these three challenges are carefully considered, it is possible to argue that these risks can be interpreted in line with the layers mentioned in the theoretical framework section of the paper. If three layers are remembered, connectivity has a regional dimension, a beyond-

region dimension, and a catalyzer dimension that is escalating the geopolitical competition.

Both China's BRI and EU's Connectivity Strategy produce policies for a better regionalization of their own sphere. To exemplify, the State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China issued a document titled "The Belt and Road Initiative: A Key Pillar of the Global Community of Shared Future" in October 2023.⁵⁸ In this document, various issues are emphasized by the Chinese government among which the extensive and in-depth policy coordination. The document states that the foundation of BRI cooperation is policy coordination and adds that China has established a multilevel policy coordination and communication structure for the purpose of harmonizing development strategies, economic and technology policies, and administrative regulations and standards with other participating nations and international organizations. Moreover, the BRI is said to be a crucial collaborative framework for international exchanges because it allows plans and measures for regional cooperation to be developed through collaborative efforts to facilitate and expedite collaboration.⁵⁹ China heralded that APEC Connectivity Blueprint, the ASEAN Community Vision 2025, the Asia-Europe Meeting and its group on pathfinders of connectivity. The EU-China Connectivity Platform, the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025, and the Trans-European Transport Networks are among many other connectivity initiatives that China sees as potential cooperation partners in realizing connectivity and sustainable development.⁶⁰

In addition to the connectivity initiatives' policy pillar, their economic pillar is also an indispensable component; China has been designing the latter from the very beginning. In the "Guiding Principles on Financing the Development of the Belt and Road," China offers assurance that it endorses "a transparent, friendly, non-discriminatory and predictable financing environment."⁶¹ However, the country is not exempt from criticism concerning its financial policies both within the framework of the BRI and beyond it, namely delineated as "debt-traps." Chellaney introduced the concept of "debt-trap diplomacy" in 2017.⁶² Yet before that, then-U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton urged against a "new colonialism" enhancing with the enlargement of China-Africa relations,⁶³ and Singh argued that a discourse of "debt-trap diplomacy" has risen to define

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Chinese international lending behavior towards developing countries mostly in the last few years.⁶⁴ On the other hand, there is a counterargument against the assertion that China is instrumentalizing its loans to acquire control or influence over the countries where it has been investing. Singh claims that the charges of debt-trap diplomacy against China are baseless, in addition to exhibiting a lack of understanding and rigor.⁶⁵ To address these accusations, in 2019, China put forward a “Debt Sustainability Framework for Participating Countries of the Belt and Road Initiative” (hereafter BRI-DSF).⁶⁶ There are three crucial points in the BRI-DSF: (1) China’s positive and constructive attitude towards the debt sustainability issue; (2) China’s concern for the real conditions and development needs of low-income countries partaking in the BRI; and (3) assisting both creditors and debtors in handling investment risks better.⁶⁷ It is clearly seen that China is not leaving the criticism toward the BRI unanswered and demonstrating its will to reply through policies on the related issues. Similar to China’s BRI, ASEM is also pushing forward for a better structured framework for connectivity and regionalization. As mentioned above, ASEM added the sustainability dimension to the connectivity competition by which I argue ASEM desired to reflect the EU experience within the Europe-Asia connectivity projects.

Connectivity and Its Beyond-Regions Dimension

As mentioned in the previous sections, connectivity can be roughly divided into two groups, namely hard and soft connectivity. In the first group, we focus more on infrastructure, transportation, and economic corridors, while in the second group, we see more digitalization and mobile networks, clean energy pioneering, environmental issues, data, artificial intelligence, etc. As mentioned previously, the BRI also has a digital dimension. China is operative in strengthening digital infrastructure connectivity and has magnified work on digital corridors by penning agreements with 17 countries on the construction of the Digital Silk Road, 30 nations on e-commerce cooperation, and 18 nations and regions on greater investment cooperation in the digital economy. Among other initiatives, China suggested and worked to launch the China+Central Asia Data Security Cooperation Initiative, the ASEAN-China Partnership on Digital Economy Cooperation, the Global Initiative on Data Security, the BRI Digital Economy International Cooperation Initiative, the initiative to build the ASEAN-China Partnership on Digital Economy Cooperation, and the BRICS Digital Economy Partnership Framework.⁶⁸ These initiatives might be taken both as an incorporation of a non-traditional asset into connectivity and as a contribution to connecting regions via digital mechanisms, which eventually

will result in a higher sense of regionalization. Besides China, we have another assertive actor within the digital connectivity world: India. Suri et al. have stated that digital connectivity is a vital element of corridors. When completed, digital connectivity offers a fast and secure flow of data, which is essential for regional integration and economic progress. The three possible building components for the IMEC's digital connectivity are an underwater data cable, a telecom network, and digital payment ecosystems. India has the potential to make a major contribution to these digital endeavors due to its extensive technological footprint.⁶⁹ I argue that India's ambition regarding the digital connectivity of its new corridor has two revealing extents. The first is the reflection of its digital experience on the connectivity project, and the second is the message that it is giving to the world that it is also a significant actor within the connectivity competition. One concrete example in the financial digital connectivity sphere is India's growing assertiveness in spreading its Unified Payment Interface (UPI). Recently, a cooperation emerged among the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), the Bank for International Settlements (BIS), and the central banks of four ASEAN countries to collaborate on Project Nexus, a multilateral international initiative to enable retail cross-border payments.⁷⁰

The rise of China and its mega-scale BRI has definitely intensified the competition among connectivity initiatives. In addition to China, the EU, and India, another important player of the game is Japan.

Connectivity as a Catalyzer in the Political Competition

From an optimistic point of view, connectivity is serving to achieve a much more integrated world which carries various opportunities for states and societies. However, there is another side of the coin as countries aim to acquire more interests from connectivity, taking us to a kind of competition. The rise of China and its mega-scale BRI has definitely intensified the competition among connectivity initiatives. In addition to China, the EU, and India, another important player of the game is Japan. Japan is rescaling itself in the connectivity framework through a partnership with the EU. It is argued that there are many reasons for the beginning of the EU-Japan partnership. The first is associated with the geopolitical concerns over China's rise with the EU-Japan partnership seen as a response to it.⁷¹ There is a fear about the

non-transparency of Chinese contributions to infrastructure expenditures.⁷² Moreover, Söderberg argues that the EU and Japan “share a mutual goal of promoting a liberal world order built on values such as transparency, sustainability, democracy and human rights.”⁷³ The inclusion of the liberal world order automatically brings the issue to a certain level that no one is able to avoid as China has been heavily criticized as challenging the liberal world order and U.S. supremacy. However, there are more optimistic views on this competitive atmosphere as well. Anthony et al. assert that notwithstanding these conflicts, their study demonstrated that positive developments by the EU-China connection for the world are still achievable, both inside and outside of the connectivity domains.⁷⁴ At this point, the inclusion of Japan and India in the connectivity competition is noteworthy. The EU and Japan put emphasis on the “high quality” infrastructure in their common connectivity initiative which has a subtext implying that the Chinese infrastructure investments are not on par with European and Japanese standards. Actually, Japan is not a newcomer. Gaens and Sinkkonen argue that Japan has indisputably been a “connectivity superpower” way before connectivity turned into a conceptual framework and much before the BRI was announced.⁷⁵ However, because China’s BRI is such a megaproject, it has created an environment where almost every step by its neighboring powers is assumed to be a response to it. A similar case is also applicable for India. As Samaan asserts, the IMEC is more about today’s politics than it is about tomorrow’s economics.⁷⁶ He adds that the U.S. was expecting its Middle East allies to refuse to cooperate with Beijing on the BRI, yet this did not happen, while the IMEC can be a new alternative for that to be realized.

Conclusion

The intensified volume of bilateral and multilateral relations has paved the way for a more connected world today. However, it has also showed us how fragile this connectedness is particularly during the pandemic period. To minimize the risks stemming from the dependency on one source in trade and economic relations, the capable actors began researching for precautions and solutions. One such remedy is believed to be to generate new routes and connections not only in terms of hard connectivity mechanisms but also soft connectivity mechanisms. When one considers the density between Asia and Europe, it is not surprising that these efforts have been consolidated within this inter-regional axis.

The EU, ASEAN, China, Japan, and India have all been contributing to the connectivity issue through different strategies. Although the concept has a positive and commendable resonance, it carries with it risks and tension mostly manifesting in the form of geopolitical competition. This has been the focal point of this paper which aims to provide an overall assessment of how the above actors' connectivity strategies and initiatives contribute to regional and beyond-regional geopolitics.

In summary, it is possible to conclude that the actors and their initiatives do not operate solely on economic motives but also embrace political incentives. Considering the ongoing geopolitical tensions within Europe, Asia, and Eurasia, connectivity projects carry both opportunities and challenges. On the one hand, intensification of such initiatives reveals new economic and political chances for the initiators and beneficiaries. On the other, the geopolitical crises have an impact on the continuation of the projects. Moreover, as the current connectivity initiatives are already provoking mutual geopolitical tensions, they are also pushing other actors to declare or create their own type of connectivity strategies. This reproduces the geopolitical tensions in a vicious circle, meaning that new initiatives come with their own political tensions. To conclude, since the cases this paper covers are all of a magnificent size, each of the initiatives necessitates further research and should be examined both within a single and multiple frameworks in a more detailed way.

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