

The Global Gateway Initiative as a New Cooperation Paradigm in Euro-Mediterranean Relations

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The European Union's Global Gateway Initiative marks a significant shift in its approach to international partnerships, particularly in the Euro-Mediterranean region. Announced in December 2021, the Global Gateway aims to mobilize up to €300 billion in investments by 2027 to develop sustainable and high-quality infrastructure globally. This initiative is not just an economic strategy but also a geopolitical tool designed to enhance the EU's influence in the Mediterranean, countering global rivals like China and Russia. However, its real ability to have an impact in relations with the so-called Global South or even a part of it, the Mediterranean region, has been very limited at present.

Mediterranean Centrality

Over the last two decades, the Mediterranean Basin has regained importance and centrality after a long period of decline and marginality. This new centrality has mainly been caused by issues of insecurity such as military crises, proxy wars and emerging threats (from jihadism to migration): thus, far from being a regional return to prominence motivated by the will of regional actors, we have witnessed a kind of involuntary geopolitical importance. In this context, Europe has been progressively marginalized as a partner. The whole series of initiatives that the EU has been able to implement over decades, from the Barcelona Process to the Neighbourhood Policy, up to the Union for the Mediterranean, have turned out to be increasingly ineffective or secondary instru-

ments with respect to the needs of Mediterranean countries. If until a few decades ago the EU and European countries were a natural point of attraction for these countries, this strategic relevance has now greatly diminished. The simultaneous rise of non-Western global and regional actors and the fading of the mantra of globalization and the enlargement of democracy as an inevitable paradigm has meant that the Western system of values and interests has become less and less attractive. Whereas decades ago, the EU was one of the few active partners in the region and its development model was rather coveted, competition has now definitely increased. After Beijing massively expanded its economic footprint in Africa, the West discovered that it also plays an important role in the Mediterranean region. But other actors have also entered the Mediterranean with strategic interests that are much more relevant than in the past. Turkey has progressively extended its reach in a policy that has been described as "neo-Ottoman," the Gulf countries have shown increasing interest in economic and political leadership over the countries on the southern shore, Russia has implemented a policy of military cooperation, first through the presence of the Wagner Group, recently replaced by a more organic military presence that is rather worrying for the EU.

This has made it clear that the US and Europe have lost their grip in the area, as evidenced by the fact that the countries in the region have not sided with the West in the war in Ukraine. In the MENA countries, there is a clear interest in not following the polarizing vision of the international system adopted by the West. This is due on the one hand to its lack of credibility, and on the other hand to the fact that China and other actors offer an attractive model of cooperation for countries, without paternalistic attitudes towards democracy, the rule of law or hu-

man rights – whereas the EU risks being anchored in an old narrative, linked to cooperation systems of the past.

The EU Global Gateway as a New Instrument: Strengths and Weaknesses

The Global Gateway Initiative is seen not only as the EU's response to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), aiming to provide an alternative model of development that emphasizes sustainability, transparency and democratic values, but also as a different kind of paradigm with respect to the past. The initiative seeks to build resilient global supply chains, boost digital and green transformations and foster strong economic links between Europe and its partners. In the Mediterranean, the Global Gateway aims to deepen economic ties and promote regional stability. The region is strategically important due to its proximity to Europe, serving as a critical junction for trade routes and energy supplies. By investing in infrastructure projects, the EU hopes to strengthen its partnerships and ensure that Mediterranean countries remain aligned with European standards and policies. One of the primary focuses of the Global Gateway in the Mediterranean is on digital and green transitions. This includes investments in renewable energy, digital connectivity and sustainable transportation networks. For instance, the initiative supports the development of undersea cables and green energy projects that can provide clean electricity to both Europe and Mediterranean countries, fostering mutual economic growth and energy security.

The initiative also emphasizes creating local value chains and boosting industrial capabilities in partner countries. This approach aims to move beyond mere infrastructure development to include capacity building and technology transfer. By integrating Mediterranean economies more closely with European markets, the EU hopes to create a more balanced and equitable economic partnership.

Politically, the Global Gateway represents an effort to reinforce the EU's role as a global leader in sustainable development and governance. It aims to

provide a counterbalance to the influence of other major powers in the region, particularly China, whose BRI projects have been criticized for creating debt dependencies and lacking transparency. The EU's focus on sustainable and transparent investments is designed to offer a more attractive partnership model for Mediterranean countries. This is particularly relevant in light of growing concerns about governance and the socioeconomic impacts of foreign investments. By promoting projects that adhere to high environmental and social standards, the EU hopes to support stable and democratic governance structures in the region.

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Despite its ambitious goals, the Global Gateway faces several challenges. One significant issue is the scale of funding compared to the BRI. While €300 billion is substantial, it is spread across multiple regions and sectors, potentially diluting its impact. Only 22 out of 138 flagship priority projects for 2024 are dedicated to the Mediterranean region.¹ The Global Gateway should be much more clearly focused on geographical areas and industrial sectors of intervention. Furthermore, the initiative must navigate complex political landscapes in the Mediterranean, where competing interests and historical tensions can impede cooperation. Critics also point out that many of the projects currently under the Global Gateway were already in the planning stages before the initiative was announced, suggesting that the programme might be more a re-branding of existing efforts than a completely new approach. Ensuring that the initiative brings tangible new investments and projects will be crucial for its success and credibility.

¹ https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/106a1350-4ffa-4dc7-ab0e-2c782010d3e3_en.

The Global Gateway places an emphasis on transparency and governance, aligning with the EU's broader agenda of promoting democratic values and human rights, but seems to soften the strong conditionalities that underpinned previous Euro-Mediterranean cooperation instruments. This alignment can strengthen political ties and build more resilient partnerships, able to withstand external pressures and internal challenges. The Global Gateway, if better implemented in the area, could lead to a change in the perception of European policies by MENA countries.

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Building Strategic Interdependence in the Region

Despite the anti-colonial wave affecting some European powers like France, and the perception of a European double standard on the Israel-Gaza issue, the EU should not give up on working towards a constructive dialogue between Europe and its southern Mediterranean neighbours. This change in the political climate offers an opportunity to revitalize relations through geo-economic agreements that could foster peace and détente in the region. Pragmatism and economic cooperation now appear to be effective strategies for the EU in pursuing mutually beneficial relations with the southern Mediterranean countries. Recognizing the limits of the security-democracy dichotomy, the EU has increasingly prioritized a clear articulation of mutual interests and functional cooperation in various fields. However, energy and migration remain dominant topics on the agenda of the EU and its Member States. It is crucial to establish whether the promotion of EU interests in these sensitive areas can be aligned with the expectations of the southern partners.

The EU's approach should transcend the technocratic framework of the Southern Neighbourhood

Policy, which has often been criticized for its Eurocentric perspective and cultural biases. Unlike the Eastern Neighbourhood countries, the MENA countries have no perspective of joining the EU, and this requires a new approach. The Global Gateway Initiative is suitable for this purpose. It aims to harmonize the interests of Europe and its southern partners in key development areas, such as digital, energy and transport infrastructure.

Furthermore, the Global Gateway contributes to filling some of the gaps in the EU's concept of strategic autonomy, which has been criticized for its defensive and protectionist connotations. Strategic autonomy is often seen as a way for Europe to secure its sovereignty without adequately considering the needs of its partners. In contrast, the Global Gateway promotes a more collaborative and inclusive approach, reflecting the EU's commitment to multilateralism and globalization.

Europe cannot afford to focus solely on its own interests and policies; it must develop new instruments that serve both its Member States and regional partners. The Global Gateway is a political instrument that can reinvigorate Euro-Mediterranean relations on a new basis. As a power shaped by multilateralism and globalization, Europe should aim to build strategic interdependence with its southern neighbours, rather than retreating into a narrow definition of autonomy.

Pragmatism and economic cooperation now appear to be effective strategies for the EU in pursuing mutually beneficial relations with the southern Mediterranean countries

The Global Gateway initiative represents a strategic shift in the EU's approach to international cooperation, offering a comprehensive framework that combines economic, political and developmental goals. While the initiative faces significant challenges, its success could set a new paradigm for Euro-Mediterranean relations, fostering a more sustainable, equitable, and stable regional order.

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