



USE CONNECTIVITY TO STRENGTHEN MULTILATERAL COOPERATION IN THE EU'S NEIGHBOURHOOD



By Sven Biscop (<https://www.egmontinstitute.be/expert-author/sven-biscop/>) (15 September 2020)
In Commentaries (https://www.egmontinstitute.be/publication_parent/commentaries/)

Asia-Pacific (<https://www.egmontinstitute.be/core/asia-pacific/>),

EU and strategic partners (<https://www.egmontinstitute.be/core/eu-and-strategic-partners/>),

EU strategy and foreign policy (<https://www.egmontinstitute.be/core/eu-strategy-and-foreign-policy/>),
acceptez notre utilisation de cookies conformément à notre [politique des Cookies \(/cookies-policy/\)](#) et à notre [politique de confidentialité \(/privacy-policy/\)](#).
European defence / NATO (<https://www.egmontinstitute.be/core/european-defence-nato/>)

To strengthen multilateralism in their own neighbourhood, Germany and the EU should

pursue connectivity strategies with their Eastern and Southern neighbours. These could create the links between the EU's neighbours that previous partnership agreements have failed to establish. They should include political and security dimensions for states to feel connected to the EU in a political sense.

This commentary was also published in PeaceLab Blog (<https://peacelab.blog/2020/09/use-connectivity-to-strengthen-multilateral-cooperation-in-the-eus-neighbourhood>)

(Photo credit: European Council, © European Union 2019)

USE CONNECTIVITY TO STRENGTHEN MULTILATERAL COOPERATION IN THE EU'S NEIGHBOURHOOD

To strengthen multilateralism in their own neighbourhood, Germany and the EU should pursue connectivity strategies with their Eastern and Southern neighbours. These could create the links between the EU's neighbours that previous partnership agreements have failed to establish. They should include political and security dimensions for states to feel connected to the EU in a political sense.

The EU has a habit of imposing its own frames on its neighbours. Seen from Brussels or Berlin, our neighbours do indeed constitute regions, and so we group them into the Union for the Mediterranean and the Eastern Partnership. But to the neighbouring states themselves, these Brussels-created multilateral groupings do not feel natural. They cut across the geopolitics and the strategic history of the neighbours as they live them. They do sign up, but only to foster their bilateral relations with the EU, without really committing to the multilateral platforms. If Germany and the EU want to foster multilateral cooperation with and between our neighbours, a different, more organic approach is required. Connectivity could be the key.

The Pandemic Has Demonstrated the Importance of Connectivity

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the importance and vulnerability of connectivity, even in its most classic form of road and rail, including within the EU. If EU member states had been unable to keep up supplies of food and other essentials and the shelves in the

Nous utilisons des cookies pour une meilleure expérience utilisateur ; certains ne peuvent être désactivés. En utilisant ce site, vous acceptez notre utilisation de cookies conformément à notre [politique des Cookies \(/cookies-policy/\)](#) et à notre [politique de confidentialité \(/privacy-policy/\)](#). Si vous n'êtes pas d'accord, merci de ne pas poursuivre sur ce site.

supermarket had gone empty, the public would not have been so docile in obeying the rules of the “lockdown”; a serious threat to public order might have arisen. The pandemic has also accelerated the existing trend to reorganise globalisation – to a certain extent. All too fragmented supply chains will likely be rationalised, and in certain sectors, such as medical supplies, states will in the future seek to have an autonomous capacity for production. At heart, all states will remain deeply economically interdependent, though, and so connectivity will be crucial.

Great powers have always tried to create what we now call connectivity. In its basic economic form, connectivity is about lines of communication and lines of supply: access to as well as the development of markets and resources. Once established, lines of communication have to be protected and access to allies assured, hence connectivity inherently includes a security component. More comprehensive connectivity adds a political dimension: the aim of creating permanent connectivity through partnerships and alliances – or by conquest. In the past, this led to competitive connectivity: great powers aimed to conquer a target state and make it into a colony or a protectorate, and tried to fence off exclusive spheres of influence. Today, connectivity more often is consensual: the consent of the target state is required before a power can invest, since no state seeks to be dominated by a great power (but pressure to give consent can be high). The question is whether connectivity can also be created in a consensus between the great powers themselves, if they adopt connectivity schemes that are not mutually exclusive, and thus do not force other states to choose between one or the other.

Connectivity Could Create Meaningful Links Between the EU’s Neighbours

The EU certainly has opted to promote “connectivity with consent”, as the basis of the EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy (https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/50699/connecting-europe-asia-eu-strategy_en) (September 2018) and a connectivity partnership with Japan (<https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000521432.pdf>) (September 2019), with a focus on the Eurasian continent. Like all good strategies, the basic idea is simple: if the EU feels that China, through its Belt and Road Initiative (or in some places Russia, through the Eurasian Economic Union), is gaining too much influence in a country where the European interest is at stake, Europe has to put a better offer on the table. Thus, the EU seeks to convince states that it is in their interest to create a level and transparent economic playing field and engage with various powers simultaneously rather than putting all their eggs in a Chinese or Russian basket.

The overall strategic aim of “connectivity with consent”, in addition to the immediate connectivity-related aims as such, could thus be understood as, first, helping states maintain their sovereignty and avoid the emergence of exclusive spheres of influence. The full confidentiality (privacy-policy/). Si vous n'êtes pas d'accord, merci de ne pas poursuivre sur ce site. **Non-Dominating** **Heredit** obviously, does not seek to dominate any country, but it must avoid the other great powers from dominating other countries. A second overall aim would be to organically create the

Nous utilisons des cookies pour une meilleure expérience utilisateur ; certains ne peuvent être désactivés. En utilisant ce site, vous acceptez l'utilisation de cookies. Pour en savoir plus, consultez notre politique des cookies (cookies policy) et notre politique de confidentialité (privacy-policy/). Si vous n'êtes pas d'accord, merci de ne pas poursuivre sur ce site.

links between our neighbours that the Eastern Partnership and the Union for the Mediterranean have failed to establish. The core of the EU's connectivity strategy is the bilateral relationship with each neighbour. But links among the neighbours themselves will emerge as well, since connectivity is inherently multilateral: routes will link neighbours with the EU directly, but also indirectly, via the territory of other neighbours.

The EU Should Broaden Its Offer to Its Neighbours to Include a Political and Security Dimension

Mobilising sufficient public and private means and generate viable investment projects to convince the target countries to work with the EU will be a huge challenge, however, certainly as the need to fund Europe's own recovery after the pandemic will affect the means for external action. China's means will be affected too, however, as will those of the target countries. That might create a window of opportunity to coordinate different connectivity schemes. In order to make the most effective use of the remaining resources, both the external funders and the target states may have an interest in cooperating on key projects rather than working in parallel on separate projects that may no longer be viable in the post-COVID-19 economy. Without sufficient means, the connectivity strategy will come to nothing, of course, but the EU does have an interesting offer to make to the target states: it is chance for them to diversify their relations with the great powers; the EU seeks partners, not clients; there is a promise of links to the EU's huge domestic markets and to innovative strategies such as the Green Deal. But perhaps the EU ought to broaden its offer, and think about the political and security dimension. Shared foreign policy objectives, military exchanges, combined military exercises, etc. could give more depth to the connectivity strategy. It is not just about *being* connected – states must also *feel* connected to the EU, in a political sense.

Use Connectivity to Design a More Positive, Cooperative Agenda With Africa

While the focus on Eurasia is an important new departure for the EU, Brussels has also announced that it will revisit its strategy for its neighbouring continent to the south, Africa. In recent years, the Mediterranean has come to be seen as a border to be secured, against the threats and challenges from Africa and the Middle East. Such a defensive approach is no longer sufficient to safeguard EU interests. In fact, threats and challenges on the African continent will most likely increase, as a consequence of the corona crisis. Loss of oil and gas revenues, declining subsidies from foreign supporters that are themselves hit by the virus, internal unrest, failing states: these factors could combine to cause major crises. The first victims will be the people of Africa and the Middle East themselves. But the indirect consequences will hit the EU much more than any other of the great powers. Indeed, the US, although it maintains large permanent bases in the region, has started to withdraw its troops from a positive cooperation in North Africa and the Middle East; inevitably, Europeans will have to

Nous utilisons des cookies pour une meilleure expérience utilisateur : certains ne peuvent être désactivés. En utilisant ce site, vous acceptez notre utilisation de cookies conformément à notre politique des cookies (Les cookies de ce site sont utilisés pour améliorer votre expérience de navigation, analyser l'utilisation de notre site et nous aider à améliorer nos services. Pour en savoir plus sur notre politique de confidentialité (/privacy-policy/). Si vous n'êtes pas d'accord, merci de ne pas poursuivre sur ce site.

step in if the security situation demands military action. The EU will simultaneously have to think about its security objectives, in particular in North Africa and the Middle East, therefore, and design a more positive, cooperative strategy to work with the African and Middle Eastern states to create peace and stability. This is exactly what a connectivity-based approach could bring, for the African continent as a whole.

Both to the east and the south, connectivity would be a positive approach to reinvigorate the EU's relations, with its immediate neighbours, with the "neighbours of the neighbours" in Central Asia and the Sahel, and, ultimately, with the entire Eurasian and African continent. It will be an investment – but it will be worth it.

Prof. Dr. Sven Biscop (<https://www.ugent.be/ps/politiekewetenschappen/giis/en/team/professors/svenbiscop.htm>) is the director of the *Europe in the World* programme at the *Egmont – Royal Institute for International Relations* (<https://www.egmontinstitute.be/>) in Brussels and a professor at the *Ghent Institute for International Studies* (<https://www.ugent.be/ps/politiekewetenschappen/giis/en>) at *Ghent University*.

EGMONT

Royal Institute for International Relations
Rue des Petits Carmes 24A
1000 Brussels - BELGIUM

POSTAL ADDRESS

Rue des Petits Carmes 15
1000 Brussels - BELGIUM

CONTACT

+32 (0)2 223 41 14

 Nous utilisons des cookies pour une meilleure expérience utilisateur : certains ne peuvent être désactivés. En utilisant ce site, vous acceptez notre utilisation de cookies conformément à notre [politique des Cookies \(/cookies-policy/\)](#) et à notre [politique de confidentialité \(/privacy-policy/\)](#). Si vous n'êtes pas d'accord, merci de ne pas poursuivre sur ce site.

[Plus d'information](#)