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Karoline Postel Vinay, Nadine Godehardt

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Connectivity and Geopolitics: Beware the "New Wine in Old Bottles" Approach

Nadine Godehardt and Karoline Postel-Vinay

With the Covid-19 pandemic, the fragility and vulnerability of the liberal international order became globally visible in an instant. Aspects of everyday life and especially our taken-for-granted views of connectedness have been disrupted in Asia, Europe, and beyond. The pandemic and, more importantly, the political reactions to it, in many ways again underpin the geopolitical significance of connectivity in world politics. This link between geopolitics and connectivity becomes most obvious in a couple of successive initiatives in East Asia and the EU that illustrate the geopolitical turn of connectivity politics in the last decade. What different actors mean by connectivity matters more than ever; getting to the bottom of those meanings gives insights about what geopolitics contains today.

As rival projects of connectivity development were being deployed within and beyond Asia, the expression "geopolitics of connectivity" started to appear here and there. This expression carries the appeal of mixing the exciting new with the familiar old: the novelty of the latest global buzzword that is "connectivity" and the déjà-vu of a Cold War–type geopolitical confrontation. This classic understanding of geopolitics builds on constant, static, and objective geographical representations that determine political practices — also often referred to as "geo-determinism." Along with the geographic location of a state, the beneficial distribution of power resources is determinative of the global status of a state. One could be tempted to say that the growing competition for connecting the world is a "new wine (connectivity) in old bottles (geopolitics)" situation. But that is clearly misleading. Connectivity is not new. Rather, it covers a range of meanings and uses by various actors that tend to be overlooked or oversimplified. Geopolitics triggered by connectivity in the context of China's rise is not a classic balance-of-power game that is being somehow recycled. What is at stake with the competition for connectivity — because of the very nature of connectedness — is a new type of geopolitics in which the "geo," thus the "political space," has been largely redefined. The new play of connectivity geopolitics brings about an uncertainty that can be disturbing. In that sense, the reference to the "new wine, old bottles" situation might provide a form of cognitive solace. Yet, it entails a risk that is not just



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a conceptual shortcoming but, more to the point, a real political risk, especially in the current tense global context.

Connectivity, Geopolitics, and the Future of International Order

The practice of connectivity itself is as old as human interactions. What is novel is the emergence of connectivity as a strategy with geopolitical implications. Yet, the nature of these geopolitical outcomes needs to be assessed in a context of transition where the liberal international order that predominately shaped global cooperation during the last decades is being increasingly contested. Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, debates about the liberal international order's future were dominated by a growing disorientation in politics, economics, as well as academia, creating a confusion that was displayed by a lack of words, concepts, and ideas to describe the ongoing transformation in world politics. The Covid-19 crisis has amplified the perception that the international order has indubitably entered an "interregnum" whereby, in Antonio Gramsci's words, "the old is dying and the new cannot be born."

The global health crisis has furthermore illuminated paradoxes that had been concealed by some commonly shared assumptions about the liberal international order, globalization, and connectedness. All border controls, travel and mobility restrictions, as well as digital tracing systems were implemented by democratic and non-democratic governments alike; when global trade and supply chains were radically disrupted, it became strikingly clear that international liberalism does not promote unconditional globalization. Rather, it has been shown that globalization can trigger simultaneously hyper-connectivity and outright dis-connectivity. Hence, what governments and organizations with potentially diverging agendas mean by connectivity matters more than ever. Analyzing those various meanings of connectivity is crucial for making sense of the strategies that sustain them and shape the geopolitical dynamics at play in the emerging new world order. The Covid-19 shock has triggered debates about whether we are facing a cycle of rapid de-globalization and how a possible new Cold War between the US and China might affect it. Such speculation is, in our view, misleading. Connectedness is unavoidable. What should be asked, then, is how one defines it — and more importantly, whether one defines it normatively or not, and how exactly it impacts geopolitics. Furthermore, whether one considers connectivity to be a common good or not, these are key questions for the future of international order.

From Random Connections to Meaningful Connectivity

The term connectivity, as we have been using it since the late 20th century, comes from the field of computing. It was at first — and for some still is — a basic notion that simply describes a state or a capacity of being connected. It has progressively encompassed various meanings of connectedness in diverse sectors, such as management, finance, trade, energy, urbanism, and education. Yet, from the meta-perspective of human activity, the idea of connectivity is above all a fundamental condition. So what exactly is new?

Firstly, and obviously, the intensity, scale, and impact of connectivity in the early 21st century make it qualitatively different from previous states of connectedness. The digital revolution in particular entails a hyper-connectivity that is almost of a different nature. It generates an acceleration of life and an erosion of known boundaries, as the rapidity of high-tech innovation processes constantly tests existing understandings of power structures, sovereignty, and order. Digital connectivity challenges our modes of regulation and governance at all levels, and it radically reshapes the relation between public space and private spheres. In other words, it transforms the conditions in which politics takes place.

Secondly, the way we are connected today has led to what Henry Farrel and Abraham L. Newman call "weaponized interdependence." It describes how actors, mainly states, make strategic use of economic interdependencies and networks over which they have control. They also share the view that — in a world in which everything can become a matter of war — global networks (financial, commercial, infrastructural, digital, etc.), by increasing interdependencies among states, are actually enhancing the risk of security issues. They point in particular at the possibility to use "asymmetric network structures and create the potential for 'weaponized interdependence,' in which some states are able to leverage interdependent relations to coerce others."

The notion of interdependence — very similar to connectivity — is twofold in meaning. Firstly, referring to the actual origin of the term, interdependence was introduced by Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye as a conceptual response to neorealism, in which hard power determines the structure of international relations. Representatives of interdependence, however, underline that more connections also create more security between states. A condition of interdependence is that all involved actors accept the overarching liberal international order. Secondly, in recent years, interdependence has become a political term that policy-makers use to highlight strategic dependences between states. So, it instead emerges as a form of friction. "Weaponized interdependence" is an academic response to that latter tendency, pointing to the strategic control of key linkages and connections by key actors.

What should then be stressed here is that connectivity as strategy is different from connections that are built randomly or opportunistically. The absence of distinction between the two often hinders the debate about why and how connectivity affects international politics.

Connectivity As Such

Connectivity as such is represented through the operative dimensions of relations — the connections — between human communities by making possible the circulation of people and "things" such as goods, diseases, knowledge, ideas, beliefs, practices. That means that connections do not predefine relations between human communities, but they can shape them. Building a bridge over a river is not a priori a recipe for cooperation, or reversely for conflict, between the communities that are connected, but it will have an impact on their relations. Likewise, the Internet does not, as such, create solidarity or violence, but it gives form to solidary or violent relations. The anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing borrows the term "friction" from physics to describe the effects of interconnection whose qualities are not fixed but unstable, unequal, and generally unpredictable. To maintain connections and keep them inclusive, it takes work. Since societies cannot survive without some degree of anticipation and regulation, connections, at some point, encounter policy.

Connectivity Policies

Connectivity policies are almost as old as connections themselves. From urban planning in ancient cities to the infrastructural development of empires, history has shown that organizing and regulating connectivity constitute an intrinsic feature of governing. Ordering connections is therefore a matter of both efficiency and power. Yet, for a long time, connectivity policies were instead seen as being free from politics, and mostly as affirmative. Two examples: First, connectivity policies are clearly linked to any type of infrastructure policy. Debates about infrastructure projects and related standards are usually depoliticized and mostly looked at from technical viewpoints.

This leads to the second example. Undoubtedly, standardization processes en-

tailed in connectivity policies could be defined as mostly politics-free by being determined via technical criteria and motivated by a consensual understanding of progress.

Obviously, this affirmative perspective of connectivity policies has been questioned from time to time, and then clearly politicized — if we just think of the many protest movements related to huge infrastructure projects — but seldom, and only in recent years, are these places of connectivity seen as a crucial matter of geopolitics. Today, the spatial aspects of infrastructure and standards, among other things, are fundamental for understanding the new realities of the current interregnum of world politics. Architect Keller Easterling boils it down to the essence: "[I]nfrastructure *space* becomes a medium of what might be called *extrastatecraft* — a portmanteau describing the often undisclosed activities outside of, in addition to, and sometimes even in partnership with statecraft" (emphasis in original). In other words, this will transform connectedness as a basic feature of human activity into connectivity with purpose or connectivity (geo)politics.

Three Stages toward the Geopoliticization of Connectivity

Stage one: Improving regionalization through connectivity policies

The link between geopolitics and connectivity policies becomes most obvious in a couple of successive initiatives in East Asia that illustrate the geopolitical turn of connectivity practices in the last decade. For example, the "Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity," adopted in 2010 with the aim of constituting a new ASEAN Community by 2015, was inspired both by a decades-old regional vision and more recent issues identified by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in the early 2000s. The 2010 Ha Noi Declaration on the Adoption of the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity presented a common ambition to bring peoples, goods, services, and capital closer together in accordance with the ASEAN Charter. Similar ambition has been shared in other parts of the world and will sound very familiar to anyone aware of the history of regional integration since 1945.

The Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity also acknowledges the need to address issues linked to uncontrolled, expanding connectivity or, on the contrary, to the lack of connectedness, including environmental degradation, transnational crime, and unequal development. Those problems had been discussed in a 2005 joint study of the World Bank, the ADB, and the Japan Bank for International Cooperation entitled "Connecting East Asia: A New Framework for Infrastructure." Taking stock of the aftermath of the late 1990s Asian financial crisis and the effects of growing, unregulated urbanization and flows, the study was recommending enhanced connectivity within the region, not just more but also better connectedness. The ASEAN Connectivity scheme, which aims at improving regional integration, thus represents an example of a "stage one" politicization of connectivity, reflecting a long-standing liberal narrative of progress. Connectivity in this context could still be defined as a classic regional integration program.

Stage two: Defining a new international space beyond the region

The connectivity project "One Belt, One Road" — launched by Chinese president Xi Jinping in 2013 — which, since 2016, is officially translated as the "Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)," appears to pertain to another, new realm of politics with far-reaching global ambitions and an emphasis on multidimensional linkages. There are two very specific features: first, the multidimensional spatialization of China's foreign policy through the BRI framework. This has created a nexus of spatial structures (e.g., economic corridors, physical and digital ecosystems, transportation hubs, and other linkages) and different layers of technologies (e.g., 5G mobile networks, digital payment systems, global energy interconnections, and satellites) that could order the world in a different, Chinese-centric way.

As Peter Ferdinand evaluates: "[I]f it [BRI] is realized in full, it will indeed fundamentally transform the geography of global affairs."

Second, the Chinese government and a multiplicity of other Chinese actors are making these places of connectivity a strategic matter of geopolitics. Their practices open the way for new spatial expressions, frameworks, and purposes for political cooperation and development. This, in turn, creates a potential for connectivity geopolitics. In this context, geopolitics very much entails how spatial representations of the world emerge, change, and become or remain popular.

China's connectivity politics has thus added a spatial, geopolitical meaning to connectivity, which — particularly in times of this interregnum of international order — disrupts the established liberal views of order, norms, standards, as well as development and cooperation.

Stage three: Emulating competition in politicized connectivity

Observers as well as participants in China's connectivity projects have noted that the implementation processes of the said projects reveal a specific pattern of standards- and rules-imposition from Chinese actors such as Chinese state agencies, the Chinese Communist Party, and private actors. The unpredictability, if not the arbitrariness, of those standards and rules has been a source of frustration and concern, not only for stakeholders in Sino-foreign joint projects, but also for external parties fearing a challenge to the global modus operandi for cooperation.

This concern was clearly reflected in the wording of Japan's presentation in May 2015 of its own connectivity policy plan, entitled "Partnership for Quality Infrastructure: Investment for Asia's Future," which stressed the importance of quality as an international standard that guarantees sustainability and well-being for the people. It was likewise expressed in September 2018, and even more explicitly, in the EU's connectivity strategy with Asia, calling for the assertion of a European way that promotes transparency, respect for common rules, a level playing field, as well as comprehensive sustainability. Finally, the launching of an EU-Japan "Partnership on Sustainable Connectivity and Quality Infrastructure" in September 2019 signaled momentum in the convergence of liberal powers pushing for different, values-based types of connectivity policies.

Unsurprisingly, the successive moves of Tokyo and Brussels have been commonly interpreted as strategic reactions to the Chinese initiative. Whether this is a matter of perception or not, it has undoubtedly inaugurated a new venue for international competition.

Competing Connectivity Meanings

The fact that China's connectivity politics has prompted Japan, the EU, and also others to design alternative strategies could initially be interpreted along the lines of classic geopolitics "textbook" considerations: the decades of diverging views between Japan and China on regionalism; competition between Europe and China for economic influence in third countries; and the emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a political moniker, which, in Beijing at least, is regarded as a US-led containment strategy against China, but in academic contexts is also discussed as yet another interregional response to the BRI.

These alternative strategies could further be understood, especially from a European or Western point of view, as the expression of a pervasive dread of the actual impact of China's "rise," and consequently of what the future world order might look like. Although it looks highly unlikely that the reach of the BRI will encompass Europe all the way to the Atlantic, its materialization through a few projects with some eastern and southern European countries is politically significant. It concurs with a growing euro-skepticism, doubts about the robustness of democracy, and distrust about what the EU actually or supposedly represents, and the subsequent opportunistic search for

alternatives. The complex dynamics of fear vs. attraction for the "Chinese way" — and distrust vs. faith in the European project and its underlying norms — is similar to a hall of mirrors where one tends to lose sight of the issues at stake.

First and foremost, it is important to remember that all governments and regional organizations that have been rethinking connectivity policies since the beginning of the millennium share one basic view: Connectedness, whether national, regional, or global, needs to be improved in order to address the general problem of growing inequalities. Building infrastructure has, for decades, been considered a central feature of national as well as global development policies. But it has not resulted in equal development, and there is a greater discrepancy now between those who are connected and those who are not. The expression "the left-behinds of globalization" is the realization that, in developed and developing countries alike, connectedness has not been evenly distributed.

Beyond the shared understanding of the socio-economic purpose of improved connectivity as an instrument for better inclusiveness, the point of divergence between China and Japan — and more generally between China and liberal powers such as the EU and it political allies — is the matter of implementation. This, in turn, reflects a difference in international projection, and eventually the meaning of connectivity. This difference is twofold: the space of action, and the normative significance of the action.

Space of Action

As shown in the three stages of the (geo-) politicization of connectivity, both the EU and Japan, along with ASEAN, have used connectivity development as an instrument of integration that is focused on the regional level, but not beyond. Strikingly, whereas the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) dialogue has been established for some time now — as was the ASEM Pathfinder Group on Connectivity in 2018, which has focused on four "Tangible Areas of Cooperation in the Field of Connectivity," including connectivity policies, sustainable connectivity, trade and investment connectivity, and future and digital connectivity — there has been very little done in terms of actual connections between the two regions. More generally, the EU's foreign policy thinking tends to be region-to-region, as the many interregional partnerships illustrate, and as is clearly shown in the wording of the EU strategy on "Connecting Europe with Asia." Meanwhile, the BRI has been deconstructing the regional framework by creating a new space for cooperation that is neither sub-global nor global in the classic abstract sense of the term, but, as described above, multidimensional in a very concrete way. This spatial reinvention constitutes a substantial challenge for international actors accustomed to cooperation within a framework of neatly defined areas, as in the World Bank's or the UN's nomenclature, delineating as many territories for cooperation and influence as possible, thus forming a global whole. The control over the global scene hence becomes even more contested.

Normative Significance of Action

Along with its geopoliticization, China has transformed connectivity into a synonym for people's material empowerment. In that sense, connectivity with Chinese characteristics becomes a socio-economic path for equal prosperity as well as global inclusiveness, mostly in contrast to the exclusive globalization attributed to the US. By contrast, the push by the EU and Japan to build values-based connectivity strategies goes beyond the material realm and addresses ethical issues of transparency, rule of law, and a level playing field.

That the competition of connectivity strategies would express itself normatively was somewhat predictable. China, particularly under the leadership of Xi, has made its problems with Western ideas about constitutional democracy, the universal values of human rights, and civil society very clear from the start. Domestically, this development has been expressed in a number of new security-related laws and the expan-

sion of digital control mechanisms. Externally, the Chinese strategy is embedded in an international discourse system *(guoji huayutixi)* that builds on creating an inclusive, prosperous, and stable global community of common destiny *(renlei mingyun gongtongti)*.

What is to be noted then is the discrepancy between China and the liberal powers when it comes to framing connectivity politically. China presents connectivity as a "value" in itself in a way that echoes the promotion by illiberal Asian nations (including China) of "Asian values" that stress harmony and prosperity, and stay clear of individual rights. The EU and Japan have not yet provided a political framing in which connectivity can be equated with liberal values. So the EU and Japan have clearly acknowledged the value of connectivity for development that can be more or less shaped normatively, but still fall short of considering, and therefore defending, connectivity as a political value in its own right. This is an important difference at a time when unequal access to connectedness — and consequently connectivity and dis-connectivity — is increasingly manifesting itself as the positive and negative outcomes of globalization. In that respect, China has given itself a head start, both in practical terms and from a narrative perspective, in the global fight against inequalities and the search for inclusiveness.

The competition of meanings and approaches to connectivity politics often seems to take the shape of a war of narratives. Here again, China is ahead of its liberal competitors by making use of what, in Party-speak and scholarly publications, is referred to as discourse power *(huayuquan)*. The application of this sort of power that — in contrast to the Western concept of soft power — refers to playing a proactive, constructive, and vociferous role on the global stage with the long-term goal of gradually reshaping the language and structure of world politics, is central to China's connectivity strategy.

This is all the more remarkable, and somewhat paradoxical, considering the fact that, in practice, both the EU and Japan have far-ranging experience over a longer period with "connecting" — Europe itself is the most connected region in the world — but neither has drawn much narrative power from it. Beyond the capacity for storytelling, the deepest challenge for the liberal powers is the actual content of the story put forward by China: a new space for action, and more specifically for the promotion of connectedness as a "value," but a value that is barren of the moral attributes of international liberalism.

Conclusion

The geopolitics of connectivity is taking place in an international scene that is notably different from both the Cold War and post—Cold War periods.

Whereas those periods were characterized by either bipolarization or an optimistic "End of History" brand of globalization, the present period is marked by a lasting uncertainty, leading not to "a lack of order but rather a semi-ordered system." The latter defines our current interregnum, which, in turn, has become the primary condition of international politics. Hence, the competition of connectivity strategies does not place us, again, in a "new wine in old bottles" situation. Although connectedness is fundamental to human interaction, we somehow have not, in the West, formulated connectivity in political terms. In that sense, the Chinese politicization of connectivity is an important challenge, all the more so because it is unfolding in a global space that the interregnum has rendered remarkably malleable.

This challenge takes further salience in the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, which underpins the need for universal access to today's means of connectedness, and therefore a much more inclusive connectivity on a multiplicity of scales. Achieving such inclusiveness entails a reformulation of connectivity as a political value. Liberal powers, and the EU in particular, have a decisive role to play here.

The EU has entered rather recently the new geopolitical scene of competing connectivity strategies by making a normative pledge that distinguishes it from the Chinese approach and that of China's partners. The content of this pledge is drawn from a well-established repertoire that has informed European development strategies and foreign policy thus far. Breaking with its traditional soft — and not always vocal — approach to normative power, the EU is now making its values and rules-based stance explicit. This move bespeaks several challenges pertaining to Europe's place in the world — and, beyond, to the way globalization is articulated with international order. Although the connectivity strategy is not yet equipped with the appropriate financial resources — for instance, it is not said how (and if) the strategy will be integrated in the next Multiannual Financial Framework (2021—2027) — it represents a much needed European rules- and values-based perspective of connectivity. Besides the question of financing, the success of the EU connectivity strategy lies in its ability to proactively shape a new, productive understanding of the "liberal" in the liberal international order. Shaping connectivity as a political value of Europe — similar to freedom, democracy, solidarity, rule of law, and minority rights — is thus a necessary first step.

However, this needs a place of exchange where various European perspectives on connectivity can be discussed, an understanding of connectivity as a political value can be formed, and concrete steps for implementation are decided. The installation of an Ambassador at Large for Connectivity in the European External Action Service is more of a representative gesture than a clear resource-rich commitment. At this point, two agencies need to be created: firstly, a decision-making body with a solid financial basis that is embedded in the EU bureaucratic framework, similar to a "Council for Connectivity Affairs"; secondly, a professional and permanent advisory body such as a "Virtual Hub on Connectivity Politics" that brings together scholars, think tanks, entrepreneurs, workers, industry associations, and political bureaucrats from various European countries. The Virtual Hub would entail at least two layers: one permanent expert platform and a broader network of advisors in which existing EU-financed networks of expertise can be integrated (e.g., the EU's Asia-Pacific Research and Advice Network).

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Dr. Nadine Godehardt is Deputy Head of the Asia Division at SWP.
Dr. Karoline Postel-Vinay is Research Professor at the Centre de recherches internationales (CERI) at Sciences Po Paris.

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SWP
Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik
German Institute for International and Security Affairs

Ludwigkirchplatz 3—4
10719 Berlin
Telephone +49 30 880 07-0
Fax +49 30 880 07-100
www.swp-berlin.org
swp@swp-berlin.org

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