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Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on Global battle of offers — from the Chinese Belt and Road initiative to the EU Global Gateway: the vision of European organised civil society

(own-initiative opinion)

(C/2024/1574)

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1. Conclusions and recommendations

1.1. The European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) welcomes the EU's decision to promote the principle of the open strategic autonomy of the Union, which seeks to invest in the dissemination of democratic values, high standards, good governance and transparency through successful infrastructure projects. To this end, the EESC welcomes the launch of the Global Gateway initiative at the end of 2021.

1.2. The EESC recognises that certain parties — mainly China and the United States — have moved more quickly than the European Union (EU), which is partly paying for weak coordination at central level and the subsequent difficulty in promoting a unified and competitive investment policy.

1.3. The EESC argues that the Global Gateway will strengthen economic and political ties with the EU's partner countries, ensuring respect for its democratic and social principles while enabling the EU to compete effectively on a global level in the provision of infrastructure.

1.4. The EESC stresses how important it is that the Global Gateway investment programmes must be based on an impact assessment. This assessment should not only take into account aspects of strategic geopolitical relevance, but also ensure democratic participation in development initiatives in partner countries and ensure the economic, social and environmental sustainability of projects.

1.5. The EESC notes that the inclusive nature of the Global Gateway would allow EU Member States to promote infrastructure and investment initiatives in other, non-EU countries — covered by the Global Gateway — without having to be subject to an impact assessment and directly supervised by the European institutions if no EU funds have been requested. In this context, the EESC is highly concerned that projects that do not meet high quality standards, such as those set out in EU documents regulating the procedures for assessing social and environmental impacts, could be included in the Global Gateway.

1.6. The EESC emphasises the need for the relevant European bodies to ensure detailed information and full access to Global Gateway projects and the parties involved.

1.7. The EESC suggests the creation of a one-stop-shop at EU representations to promote private sector investment and involve all economic and social stakeholders at regional and local level.

1.8. The EESC points out that there is still a significant lack of clarity regarding the nature of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the criteria for including projects in its official list. Consequently, it is essential that the People's Republic of China (PRC) provides accurate and up-to-date information on the investment programmes related to the BRI in order to ensure greater transparency and clarity on this initiative.

1.9. The EESC regrets the lack of real involvement of local European stakeholders, such as civil society organisations and social partners, in the overall process of development, monitoring, evaluating and implementing projects under the BRI in the EU. In this regard, the EESC would like to play a more active role in the key stages of the decision-making process for development projects associated with the BRI and the Global Gateway.

1.10. The EESC believes that the lack of coordination between infrastructure programmes in the EU and the PRC has led to inconsistencies in connectivity infrastructure, and emphasises the risk that BRI investments may undermine ownership of national strategic infrastructure in the EU.

1.11. The EESC raises concerns about the lack of coordination in the EU Member States' accession to the BRI initiative, risks to EU competitiveness, labour rights, money laundering, indebtedness and environmental issues related to Chinese investments in BRI projects.

1.12. The EESC considers it essential to improve coordination between the EU institutions and its Member States on the BRI in order to avoid fragmentation of relations with the PRC, which would harm the EU as a whole. It is essential to ensure that the EU Member States act together in relation to China and to promote effective communication between the EU institutions and the PRC.

1.13. The EESC stresses the need for BRI and Global Gateway projects to respect a number of principles and objectives, including compliance with EU values and the submission of detailed impact assessments to ensure their suitability.

1.14. For the EESC, **projects falling within the BRI** and carried out within or outside the EU27 but involving economic actors from the EU Member States (as beneficiaries, suppliers or donors), and **Global Gateway projects**, must undergo an **economic, financial, social, environmental and legal impact assessment** demonstrating their suitability and compatibility with the EU values and the principles and objectives set out in point 5.1.1 below.

2. Introduction

2.1. The global investment gap between high-income and low- and middle-income countries has been widening in recent years, even more so in the aftermath of the 'polycrisis' caused by the pandemic, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the recent Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

2.1.1. As well as negatively affecting global connectivity, this underfunding represents an opportunity for the major global players present on the world stage to widen their geopolitical sphere of influence where infrastructure now represents the core policy.

2.2. Over the last decade, some countries have implemented a strategy whereby soft power and political influence are carefully applied via major investment programmes targeting partner countries, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) launched by the People's Republic of China in 2013, the United States' Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII), the UK's Clean Green Initiative, Japan's Partnership for Quality Infrastructure and the India-Middle East Economic Corridor (IMEC).

2.3. In December 2021, the EU also launched its own strategy, the Global Gateway, with the aim of supporting global connectivity and responding to the BRI, which has repeatedly shaken the unity of the EU over the last 10 years.

2.3.1. Until at least 2019, the 27 EU Member States had no unified policy on the BRI in terms of:

- **a shared vision of the Initiative**, with 18 EU Member States having signed the memoranda of understanding with China ⁽¹⁾ and 20 having joined the BRI's main financial instrument (the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB)) ⁽²⁾ without the prior agreement of the EU institutions;
- **its potential effects with regard to neighbourhood policies** (e.g. the effects of grouping 14 + 1 countries with 9 EU Member States ⁽³⁾), in particular with the Balkan region) and **established EU programmes** such as the trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T).

2.4. In 2019, the EU's BRI strategy changed radically. The Joint Communication of the European Commission and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy entitled 'EU-China — A strategic outlook' ⁽⁴⁾ established a definitive shift from a vision of China as a **'strategic partner'** to a differentiated framework in which it is perceived as **'a cooperation partner, a negotiating partner, an economic competitor and a systemic rival'**. This moment marks a key point in EU-China relations, with China starting to be perceived to all intents and purposes primarily as a systemic rival, moving decisively away from the role of partner. Three objectives were defined: (i) deepen the EU's engagement with China to promote common interests at global level; (ii) seek more balanced and reciprocal economic relations; (iii) strengthen the EU's own domestic policies and industrial base. Ten actions were also established, to be implemented by means of an interesting innovation: **a uniform approach by all 27 EU Member States**. In this document, the EU called for a **'One China Policy'** adopted by the EU to be matched on the Chinese side by a **'One Europe Policy'**, without creating divisions within the EU.

2.5. This change of approach by the EU was reinforced in 2020-2022 by the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis (disruption of supply chains of goods and services, dependence on supplies of strategic products, etc.), the effects of Russia's cowardly aggression against Ukraine (energy dependency, inflation, stagnation, influx of Ukrainian refugees) and a series of policies implemented by the People's Republic of China (countermeasures against EU human rights sanctions, trade measures against the single market and China's controversial position on the war in Ukraine).

2.6. It is in this context that the European Union — through the Council conclusions of 29 March 2022 — has promoted **the principle of the European Union's open strategic autonomy**, with the aim of achieving a principle by which it reaffirms the commitment made at the Versailles Summit of 10 and 11 March 2022 to 'take more responsibility for the EU's security and to take further decisive steps towards building our European sovereignty, reducing its dependencies and designing a new growth and investment model for 2030', striving to 'achieve its economic and financial autonomy, while maintaining its openness, global cooperation with like-minded partners and their competitiveness, and reap the potential benefits thereof'.

2.7. According to the Council's conclusions, the Global Gateway Initiative should also contribute to achieving the EU's open strategic autonomy **'by promoting democratic values and high standards, good governance and transparency'** and to **'the use of the euro in development-related financial flows'**.

2.8. Based on recent geopolitical developments, the EESC — as the 'home' of European civil society organisations — believes that a careful assessment of both the EU's Global Gateway strategy and the Belt and Road Initiative should be carried out.

3. The European Union's Global Gateway Strategy

3.1. Through the Global Gateway strategy, the EU pledges to mobilise up to EUR 300 billion in investment between 2021 and 2027 to improve digital, energy and transport connection infrastructure, and to strengthen health, education and research systems worldwide.

3.2. The EU believes that the lack of investment in connectivity could hinder the recovery from the current crisis and preparedness for future emergencies (polycrises). Moreover, the lack of infrastructure limits the economic potential of connectivity between the EU, Asia and other regions.

⁽¹⁾ Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia.

⁽²⁾ Austria, Belgium, Croatia, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Spain, Sweden, Cyprus.

⁽³⁾ Bulgaria, Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Greece together with: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia.

⁽⁴⁾ JOIN(2019) 5 final.

3.3. The Global Gateway was created with the following objectives:

- a. securing new markets for EU goods and services;
- b. offering a viable alternative to competing development models, such as the BRI;
- c. facilitating the achievement of global decarbonisation goals, which lie at the heart of the European Green Deal;
- d. supporting the *de facto* establishment and expansion of EU technical and commercial standards, as well as those relating to human and labour rights and security, as global standards, enhancing Europe's open strategic autonomy ambitions.

3.4. In 2022, the Global Gateway made headway thanks to a series of major regional investment packages associated with it: the February 2022 Global Gateway Africa-Europe regional investment package, which pledges to mobilise up to EUR 150 billion in investments (with 11 strategic transport corridors facilitating mobility and trade within Africa and between Africa and Europe; measures to develop and strengthen regional and continent-wide value chains to optimise the African Continental Free Trade Area; the construction of the Cross River bridge at the Mfum-Ekok border crossing point between Cameroon and Nigeria, which will increase connectivity between the Economic Community of West African States and the Economic Community of Central African States); the EUR 10 billion Global Gateway investment package for the ASEAN region, and the Team Europe sustainable connectivity initiative linking the EU and the ASEAN.

3.4.1. A further regional investment package for the Western Balkans was also announced in February 2022. The Commission pledged EUR 3,2 billion in investment to support 21 projects in the transport, digital, environmental sustainability and energy sectors. The plan will help close the development gap between the EU and the region and support the post-pandemic economic recovery ⁽⁵⁾.

3.5. At the end of 2022, a year on from the launch of the Global Gateway, the EU committed over EUR 9 billion in grants for key investments in Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean and the Pacific. The EU also approved an additional EUR 6,05 billion in financial guarantees to support 40 investment programmes in sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and the Asia-Pacific region, which are expected to generate more than EUR 50 billion in investments in key sectors. In addition, the agreement signed in May 2022 between the EFSD + and the EIB guaranteed EUR 26,7 billion of coverage for sovereign loans in areas such as clean energy and green infrastructure. In this respect, 34 projects for EUR 7,4 billion of investments have already been approved. Finally, as regards the Western Balkans and the south-eastern neighbouring countries, the EU and European financial institutions have so far mobilised EUR 14 billion of the EUR 77 billion they planned to have raised by 2027 ⁽⁶⁾.

3.6. One of the main projects ⁽⁷⁾ under the umbrella of the Global Gateway which the EU Member States prioritised in 2023 and early 2024 is the establishment of bilateral partnerships with resource-rich countries, in particular in Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America and the Caribbean, with the aim of helping these regions promote investments along the whole of critical raw materials value chains. The partner countries will then be supported to develop regional value chains, diversifying their economies and creating local added value.

3.7. *An assessment of the Global Gateway*

3.7.1. The EESC welcomes the launch of the Global Gateway and hopes that it this strategy will help to secure the EU's open strategic autonomy. The EESC therefore believes that it will be possible to strengthen economic and political ties with partner countries, affirming its democratic and social principles and enabling the EU to compete effectively with China and the US for the provision of infrastructure worldwide.

3.7.2. In the current context, the EESC is of the view that the Global Gateway can become a tool for the political, economic and security stabilisation of the EU's immediate neighbours, thereby strengthening Europe's geopolitical positions both in terms of addressing the root causes of migration to Europe and mitigating the political, economic, social and environmental risks.

⁽⁵⁾ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_1362

⁽⁶⁾ https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_7656

⁽⁷⁾ <https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-sets-outs-projects-to-make-global-gateway-visible-on-the-ground/>

3.7.3. While acknowledging that the initiative represents an opportunity to improve the efficiency and coherence of EU investment and connectivity policies, the EESC has doubts about the real possibility of mobilising the necessary funding ⁽⁸⁾. It is not clear how many of the promised investments will actually materialise. Almost half of the EUR 300 billion that the European Commission aims to mobilise should be catalysed from the private sector. In December 2022, one year after the official launch of the initiative, the involvement of the private sector still appears to be marginal or at least in the process of being defined ⁽⁹⁾.

3.7.4. The EESC believes that the Global Gateway initiative, which focuses mainly on limiting debt stress risks for partner countries, would appear to offer a more reliable opportunity for the development of global infrastructure than other alternatives, such as the BRI. The EU's funding model is a mix of grants, preferential loans and guarantees aimed at stimulating private sector investment, while the BRI focuses mainly on loans. In order to make the Global Gateway competitive with third party investment initiatives, the EESC stresses the importance of making administrative procedures for allocating funds more accessible and of ensuring that precise, appropriate timeframes are established for the procedures associated with the necessary economic, social and environmental impact assessments to ensure that they are efficient and effective for those involved.

3.7.5. The EESC's view is that the Global Gateway should ensure greater strategic coordination between EU funds and those implemented by the 27 EU Member States. This strategic coordination has so far been completely absent and should be organised and coordinated by the EU itself on certain strategic EU objectives ⁽¹⁰⁾.

3.7.5.1. The EESC regrets that insufficient information (e.g. on the composition of the Global Gateway Committee) was provided, both quantitatively and qualitatively, for the first meeting of the Global Gateway Committee on 11 December 2022.

3.8. The EESC is prepared to organise regular meetings between the Global Gateway Committee and civil society organisations/social partners in order to ensure a constant flow of information to local stakeholders in the initiative and to assess and highlight the strategic nature of the Global Gateway.

3.8.1. The EESC reiterates that Global Gateway investment programmes must be based on an impact assessment aimed not only at highlighting geopolitical strategic considerations but also at ensuring democratic ownership of development initiatives in partner countries and the economic, social and environmental sustainability of the projects. The EESC points out that, while it is sure that investment projects financed by the EIB are subject to an economic, social and environmental impact assessment and monitoring, there are still some reservations regarding investment projects financed by other EU funds, due to a lack of clarity regarding the procedures for assessing the impact, monitoring and implementing the actions of each project.

3.8.1.1. The highly inclusive nature of the Global Gateway gives rise to a further concern, as it would allow EU Member States to promote unilaterally or bilaterally financed infrastructure and investment projects without the direct supervision of the EU institutions, if no EU funds have been requested. For this reason, the EESC is concerned that projects that are not in line with EU economic, social and environmental standards may also be included in the initiative, thus escaping an appropriate economic, social and environmental impact assessment.

3.8.1.2. In the EESC's view, therefore, an impact assessment should be carried out for each project, respecting its democratic ownership and financial sustainability both for the EU and for the countries concerned, thus contributing to:

- climate change mitigation;
- environmental protection;
- the affirmation of human and labour rights;
- the EU's competitiveness.

3.9. The EESC believes that, in order to affirm the necessary transparency of the Global Gateway initiative, its portal should contain all Global Gateway-labelled projects together with all the necessary information on the investment projects — including their relevant economic, social and environmental impact assessments — and the state and non-state actors involved in them.

⁽⁸⁾ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI\(2023\)739296](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/thinktank/en/document/EPRS_BRI(2023)739296)

⁽⁹⁾ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/01/10/europe-china-eu-global-gateway-bri-economic-development/>

⁽¹⁰⁾ <https://www.bruegel.org/blog-post/global-gateway-real-step-towards-stronger-europe-world>

3.9.1. While welcoming the creation of the Team Europe Partnership Portal linked to the Global Gateway, the EESC believes that there is potential for it to be implemented more effectively.

3.10. In the view of the EESC, the EU institutions and the Member States should ensure effective information and communication on the opportunities that the Global Gateway initiative can provide to regional and local state and non-state actors, ensuring that a one-stop shop is opened in the EU's representations and thus facilitating EU private sector investment and the involvement of all potential economic and social, public and private actors.

4. The Belt and Road Initiative strategy

4.1. Since 2013, the BRI has channelled some USD 962 billion into infrastructure construction (EUR 573 billion) and non-financial investment (EUR 389 billion) worldwide ⁽¹¹⁾.

4.2. The stated aims of the BRI include coordinating development strategies and increasing connections between participating countries through the construction of infrastructure, such as railways, motorways, ports and pipelines, and promoting commercial, financial and people-to-people exchanges. More than 200 cooperation documents have been signed under the BRI, with 151 countries and 32 international organisations.

4.3. Via the construction of infrastructure abroad, the BRI fulfils a number of objectives:

- a. supporting exports (17,1 % of GDP in 2022) and ensuring the absorption of Chinese manufacturing overproduction not absorbed by domestic demand in sectors such as iron and steel, aluminium, cement, coal, glass and paper;
- b. ensuring better access to communication routes and international trade for western regions (such as Yunnan and Xinjiang, which are distant from maritime traffic) through the construction of transport infrastructure in Central Asia and South-East Asia;
- c. increasing China's global influence and challenging — through the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank — the dominant role of institutions such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, with the aim of achieving a comprehensive reform of the system;
- d. by promoting Chinese trade and investment abroad, the BRI can be an important tool for stimulating the role of the Chinese currency, the Renminbi, as an international currency;
- e. the construction of new logistics infrastructure could enable China to obtain part of its energy supply from alternative channels to the route through the Strait of Malacca, via which an estimated 80 % of Chinese oil imports arrive.

4.4. In recent years, the BRI has slowed down in terms of both the number of new projects and the value of the contracts signed. In 2022, China concluded 5 514 new contracts (-743 compared to 2021) with a total value of USD 130 billion (-3,3 %) ⁽¹²⁾. It is plausible that this slowdown may be linked to factors such as greater caution on the part of Chinese developers and investors over the feasibility of and financial return on investments, and less willingness among partner countries to take out new debt to finance BRI projects.

4.4.1. Several partner countries have encountered construction shortcomings in the infrastructure financed under the BRI, calling into question the quality of the projects covered by the initiative ⁽¹³⁾. At the same time, some projects have been suspended or cancelled due to concerns related to excessive debt, high prices and instances of corruption ⁽¹⁴⁾. In addition, the implementation of a number of projects has contributed significantly to financial instability in certain partner countries. In the case of Montenegro, where 25 % of public debt is held by China, debts contracted to finance BRI-related infrastructure projects are often considered to be the trigger for the country's unsustainable debt ⁽¹⁵⁾.

4.4.2. The initiative has been criticised for a lack of transparency regarding the environmental standards of its projects ⁽¹⁶⁾. Moreover, Chinese companies involved in the implementation of such projects have often favoured Chinese labour (bypassing national regulations on labour law and health and safety at work) over local workers, preventing partner countries from taking advantage of projects to occupy part of their workforce and benefit from the transfer of skills.

⁽¹¹⁾ <https://www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/>

⁽¹²⁾ <http://fec.mofcom.gov.cn/article/fwydyj/tjsj/202302/20230203384457.shtml>

⁽¹³⁾ <https://www.wsj.com/amp/articles/china-global-mega-projects-infrastructure-falling-apart-11674166180>

⁽¹⁴⁾ <https://www.businessinsider.com/china-spends-twice-us-but-belt-road-initiative-losing-steam-2021-9?r=US&IR=T>

⁽¹⁵⁾ <https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/will-montenegros-new-government-bring-a-new-china-strategy/>

⁽¹⁶⁾ <https://www.iai.it/en/publicazioni/how-green-chinas-belt-and-road-initiative>

4.4.3. During the third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation held in October 2023, it was reiterated that, although the BRI has evolved, it remains essential for the overall strategy of the PRC. In the coming years, the BRI will focus on eight key objectives for fostering high-quality growth⁽¹⁷⁾. These include: i) the expansion of the China-Europe Railway Express; ii) participation in the Trans-Caspian Corridor; iii) new BRI trade areas; iv) more access to foreign investment; v) financing for innovative projects; vi) sustainable development; vii) cultural and scientific training and exchanges; viii) promoting integrity and strengthening the BRI's institutions.

4.4.3.1. China's commitment to greater market opening for foreign companies was also reaffirmed during the forum, when it pledged over USD 100 billion in new financing for emerging economies, with a particular focus on Chinese development banks and the Silk Road Fund, emphasising south-south cooperation as a means to strengthen ties with the developing world, balancing Western influence⁽¹⁸⁾.

4.5. *An assessment of the Belt and Road Initiative*

4.5.1. Although 10 years have passed since the launch of the BRI, the EESC is of the view that there is a substantial lack of clarity on the nature of the initiative and, consequently, on the criteria for a project to be included in the official list of BRI projects. The EESC therefore considers that, for reasons of transparency and clarity, the PRC should provide accurate and up-to-date information on investment programmes falling within the initiative.

4.5.2. The EESC regrets that the launch of the BRI, both within the EU and in non-EU neighbourhood countries, has led to a lack of coordination between EU-China infrastructure programmes, creating inconsistencies in connectivity infrastructure. The EESC also stresses that BRI investments could weaken ownership of strategic national infrastructure in EU Member States.

4.5.3. The EESC points to a complete lack of reciprocity in economic relations between the EU and the PRC, to the clear disadvantage of EU businesses.

4.5.4. The EESC is deeply concerned that the signing of Memoranda of Understanding by individual EU Member States, without any kind of coordination by the European institutions, could undermine the unity of the EU. The EESC also reiterates that the '14 + 1' cooperation framework, which includes 9 EU Member States, could trigger some EU cohesion risks.

4.5.5. In the EESC's view, BRI projects, if not carefully assessed, could harm the long-term competitiveness of the EU as a result of the forced transfer of technology to China.

4.5.6. The EESC regrets that Chinese companies investing in BRI projects in the EU do not ensure that workers' social and labour rights are respected.

4.5.7. The EESC notes that, since they do not comply with EU financial regulations, Chinese investments in BRI projects can provide opportunities for money laundering by organised crime.

4.5.8. The EESC highlights the worrying phenomenon of over-indebtedness in non-EU countries and the consequent loss of strategic guarantees. This is the case in non-EU countries such as Pakistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Sri Lanka, the Maldives and one EU candidate country: Montenegro.

4.5.9. The EESC regrets that Chinese companies involved in BRI programmes do not comply with EU environmental standards, as they continue to fund and implement projects that are incompatible with the European Green Deal.

4.5.10. The EESC recognises that the BRI has merely filled a space that was negligently left blank in the 'underestimates' of the EU and its Member States during the 2010-2019 ten-year period. Although since 2007, with the Central Asia Strategy, the EU has identified the strategic priorities for connecting transport and energy networks, only with the BRI have significant investment flows been directed to this area and to other areas (the Balkans, Mediterranean and Atlantic ports, Africa, South East Asia, etc.). In this context, the investments made by Chinese companies have certainly improved the infrastructure interconnectivity of these areas and strategically important intermodal hubs.

⁽¹⁷⁾ <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202310/18/WS652f416ca31090682a5e92d2.html>

⁽¹⁸⁾ <http://www.beltandroadforum.org/english/>

4.5.11. The EESC notes that the EU has financed directly (in the case of the Pelješac Bridge in Croatia) and indirectly (through the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the European Investment Bank and the European Investment Fund) projects falling under the BRI without, however, ensuring the necessary coordination or at least compliance with environmental, social and other standards ⁽¹⁹⁾.

4.5.12. The EESC believes that a framework for closer coordination between the EU institutions and the 27 Member States is needed with regard to the BRI. It is not desirable for relations with China to be entrusted to 27 bilateral relationships or managed through individual Memorandums of Understanding or cooperation frameworks, such as 14 + 1. In such a context, although they may end up favouring some countries, the power relations between the 27 EU Member States tend overall to favour only China and represent a systemic risk for the EU as a whole. It is therefore essential to ensure that the EU Member States act together with regard to China and to foster effective communication between the EU institutions and the PRC.

4.5.13. The EESC has strong environmental and security concerns with regard to the PRC's intentions to use the Arctic route as the BRI's North Sea Road, easing maritime flows through the Strait of Malacca.

4.5.14. The EESC regrets that the BRI does not provide for the real involvement of local actors (civil society organisations and social partners) in devising, monitoring, evaluating and implementing projects, thus missing an important opportunity for sharing these projects with the main local actors to whom they are addressed.

5. For a joint strategy of the EU Global Gateway and Belt and Road Initiative

5.1. The EESC hopes that the conditions will be created as soon as possible to create complementarity between the Global Gateway, BRI and PGII, as a sign of a thawing of global relations.

5.1.1. The EESC believes that **projects falling within the BRI and implemented within the territory of the 27 EU Member States or outside this area but involving economic actors belonging to the EU Member States** (as beneficiaries, suppliers or donors), **and Global Gateway projects must:**

— promote the following principles:

- peace and security;
- the EU values enshrined in the Treaties;
- human rights as enshrined in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948);
- the provisions contained in the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union ⁽²⁰⁾;
- respect for the ILO's fundamental conventions. The PRC has ratified six of the nine fundamental conventions. Those remaining to be ratified are: Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organise, 1948 (No 87), the Right to Organise and Collective Bargaining, 1949 (No 98), and the Convention on a Promotional Framework for Health and Safety at Work 2006 (No 187);

— guarantee the following objectives:

- the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations;
- the twin green and digital transitions;
- the European Pillar of Social Rights;
- the EU's open strategic autonomy;
- European ownership of EU strategic infrastructure and productions;
- the EU's competitiveness;
- a level playing field and fair competition;
- the fight against tax evasion and money laundering.

⁽¹⁹⁾ European Court of Auditors, 'The EU's response to China's state-driven investment strategy'. Review No 3.

⁽²⁰⁾ OJ C 326, 26.10.2012, p. 391.

On the basis of these principles and objectives, BRI projects, as well as those of the Global Gateway, will therefore have to undergo an economic, financial, social, environmental and legal impact assessment demonstrating their suitability and compatibility with EU values and the above-mentioned principles and objectives set out in this paragraph.

5.1.1.1. This impact assessment must be conducted within reasonable time limits:

- **in the case of the BRI: by the EU and the Member States involved in the BRI project working together;**
- **in the case of the Global Gateway: by the EU and the non-EU countries involved in the Global Gateway project;**

before allowing such projects to be launched within the EU or involve EU economic actors (in the case of the BRI) or in the non-EU state, in the case of the Global Gateway.

5.2. The EESC is willing to organise regular meetings within the EU-China Round Table to discuss the BRI and the Global Gateway with representatives of civil society organisations and social partners, seeking to highlight the opportunities and problems of the two programmes, along with potential solutions. It asks to be able to do this.

Brussels, 14 December 2023.

The President
of the European Economic and Social Committee
Oliver RÖPKE