

Connectivity and EU-Asia relations

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The Committee on Foreign Affairs adopted the own-initiative report by Reinhard BÜTIKOFER (Greens/EFA) on connectivity and EU-Asia relations.

The report noted that considerable economic potential between Europe, Asia and other continents remains untapped owing to a lack of physical and digital infrastructure. The importance of an effective EU Connectivity Strategy has been further underscored by the COVID-19 pandemic, which made both the weaknesses and strengths of the European and global connectivity networks clear to see.

Principles of the Connectivity Strategy

Connectivity plays in the geopolitical relations of the EU and its Member States and underlines the fact that connectivity, as a fundamental orientation of the European Union, is deeply ingrained in the EU's approach to domestic and international challenges.

Members urged the Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS) to create a global EU Connectivity Strategy as an extension of the current EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy with the goal of strengthening the EU's role as a true and indispensable geopolitical and geo-economic actor.

The Strategy must comprehensively address a broad spectrum of political, economic, cultural, sustainability and security dimensions based on the EU's fundamental values.

Members invited all European countries to join the EU's Connectivity Strategy, including countries in the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), the Western Balkans and the European Neighbourhood, and to functionally integrate the different developing regions. The UK is also encouraged to join forces with the EU in promoting strategic international connectivity.

Governance of the Strategy

The Strategy must be monitored and coordinated with the pursuit of internal connectivity within the EU and between the EU and its prospective members, such as through the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) or the Three Seas Initiative, strengthening shared values, standards and interests, and providing shared ownership of the Strategy for EU institutions and the Member States.

Stressing the multidimensional nature of the Strategy, which will require effective coordination of existing strategies, policies and projects for international connectivity and interoperability, Members expect existing coordination between the EEAS and the Commission Directorates-General to be enhanced in this regard. Moreover, Parliament, the Council, the Member States and national parliaments should all be involved in the Strategy.

European and Member States' development banks, investment agencies and export credit agencies should play a central role in managing investment in international connectivity projects.

For the Strategy to be credible, it needs to be equipped with the necessary tools and means to implement it on a scale that matches its ambition. Adequate public resources should be allocated under the 2021-2027 MFF.

Priorities of the Strategy

The Strategy should also be clearly focused on a definitive set of priorities such as, *inter alia*: green transition, transport, digital transformation; health, trade, investment and security.

Connectivity partnerships

The committee strongly welcomed the establishment of the EU-Japan Partnership on Sustainable Connectivity and Quality Infrastructure, with its focus on sustainable connectivity with the Western Balkans, Eastern Europe, Central Asia, the Indo-Pacific and Africa. It hopes the EU and Japan will actively promote the connectivity partnership among relevant target groups and manage to kick-start the operationalisation of the partnership in the first half of 2021.

Both Russia and Turkey also have interests in becoming stakeholders in EU-Asia connectivity. Members are willing to partner with them where possible. They regretted however that projects funded by China in Central Asia lack transparency.

Members considered that the EU should strengthen cooperation with the US.

Global connectivity

Members strongly emphasised the fact that the Strategy must pay particular attention to connectivity with the European Neighbourhood and with the neighbouring continent of Africa, given its increasingly geopolitical relevance for several global actors.

Lastly, the Commission should present a new communication approach with a clear narrative in order to create adequate visibility and sufficient accountability for EU connectivity policies and their results.