

Preface

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown us how quickly the progress of connecting the world can be brought to a halt. As the pandemic started to spread globally, we witnessed the closing of national and state borders and the curtailment of people's movements. Governments started looking inward, prioritising the health and social security of their own citizens over regional co-operation in the fight against the virus. The Covid-19 pandemic has thus created new realities. As the term "the new normal" becomes part of our vocabulary, it is yet to be seen what the new normal for multilateral co-operation will look like.

While the pandemic highlighted the risks inherent in the global mobility of people in terms of the rapid spread of infectious diseases, fears about a significant breakdown in international logistics and food supply chains proved largely to be unfounded. Indeed, the robustness of these global supply chains in the midst of tough social and economic Covid-19 measures put in place in many countries underlines the fact that globalisation is already the defining characteristic of our modern world. At the same time, the pandemic also brought to light the importance of closer, seamless and rapid co-ordination and cooperation between countries when dealing with trans-border threats. Building synergies to find commonalities will continue to be the best approach despite the major changes we can expect in global affairs.

Connectivity strategies continue to evolve. In recent years, there has been an increase in strategies launched by different countries. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) Strategy and the EU's Strategy for Connecting Europe and Asia are among the most prominent and relevant ones. These three strategies have a distinct geographic focus on Asia and Europe, and will therefore impact the future relationship between the two regions. While there are massive projects supported by China, countries in Asia are also looking to other global players for support. This serves both to avoid strong dependence on only one power as well as to try to get the best terms for joint connectivity projects. At the same time, this could contribute to creating a level playing field on which different stakeholders can voice their opinions and concerns without any one country dictating the terms. It is imperative that nations, as well as different regions, consult each other and identify possible joint projects instead of creating redundancies or duplicating their efforts. In the end it will be more beneficial to all parties if the suppliers coordinate and cooperate rather than compete for similar investments.

The distribution of global power is changing. The influence of India, Japan and other countries in the region will have a bigger impact on how global connectivity will evolve. With the shared perspective on the relevance of multilateralism and a rules-based order, the connections between Asia and Europe will only be further strengthened. The EU-Asia Connectivity strategy has been a concrete step taken towards building deeper ties between the two regions as well as to promote shared values and joint interests. The EU is also increasing its visibility in Central Asia by adapting its policies to the new opportunities that have emerged in the region. Like its strategy for other parts of the region, the EU's strategy towards Central Asia is based on promoting resilience, prosperity, and regional cooperation within the sub-region. The European Union and Asia can and should continue to foster cooperation and build synergies through mutually beneficial partnerships and co-operation agreements.

In these times of rapid changes and increasing ambiguity, more connectivity between the two regions has become imperative. In order to understand the various connectivity strategies as well as to see how more synergies can be built, we invited authors from both the regions to analyse the various connectivity approaches. The authors explore the concepts behind the strategies and their function within the wider foreign policy of the country supplying them. They also looked at possible areas for cooperation and competition, discussing the geopolitical impacts this may have. Finally, the authors elucidate how countries can position themselves in this regard.

The papers in this book were first presented in the 21st edition of the Asia-Europe Think Tank Dialogue, which has been organised annually since 1998 by the Regional Programme Political Dialogue Asia of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung and the EU Centre in Singapore. The dialogue forum serves as a platform for enhancing cooperation among institutes from both continents and supports the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) on a track-2 level. I am deeply grateful to Dr. Yeo Lay Hwee, the director of the EU Centre, for the excellent cooperation that we have been enjoying for more than two decades now. I hope that the insights shared in this book will further contribute to strengthening the ties between both regions.



Christian Echle
Director
Political Dialogue Asia, Singapore