Asia-Europe Sustainable Connectivity Scientific Conference

Shaping Asia-Europe Pathways for Human-Centric and Resilient Digital Connectivity

Introduction

The third online edition of the Asia-Europe Sustainable Connectivity Scientific Conference (AESCON3), which took place from 14-15 June 2023, was a key event for the EU-Asia scientific network. European and Asian experts presented insights into how to leverage opportunities and address challenges for human-centric, resilient digital connectivity and transformation.

DISCLAIMER - This report has been prepared with the financial assistance of the European Union. The views expressed herein are those of the research team and therefore do not necessarily reflect the official position of EU institutions.

14.06.2023: Towards Human-Centric Digital Societies

Opening Remarks

Helena König, Deputy Secretary-General for Economic and Global Issues at the European External Action Service, stressed the need for Asia-Europe cooperation on global internet governance, multi-stakeholder approaches for digital innovation, and ICTS connectivity. Sharing concerns about the market dominance of a few technology companies and calling for technology to protect vulnerable populations, she underlined the promising prospect of EU Global Gateway investments in the Indo-Pacific and the leadership of Asian partners on digital connectivity.

Toru Morikawa, Executive Director of the Asia-Europe Foundation, further framed the conference around a collaborative approach to global challenges, including sustainable development, human rights, and resilient and secure connectivity. Citing the

transformative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the rapid advancement of AI, he cited critical thinking and emotional intelligence as key qualities to ensure human-centric and secure digital connectivity, thus leaving no one behind.

Panel 1: Bridging Regional Interests and Global Challenges In Digital Connectivity

Joel Joseph S. Marciano, Jr. Ph.D., Director General at the Philippine Space Agency opened the panel by highlighting how the National Copernicus Capacity Support Action for the Philippines (CopPhil), an emblematic Global Gateway project for EU-Asia cooperation, contributes to climate conservation and resilience by improving satellite data exchange.

> *"The Philippines welcomes the partnership with the European Union as it strengthens the processing, use of satellite images and space-borne data to better prepare for natural disasters and climate change."*

Lurong Chen, Senior Economist at the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA), outlined that development gaps across communities and regions still limit universal connectivity and access to opportunities, along with inconsistent data governance frameworks and a lack of international rules for data exchange, linked to a lack of trust.

> *"Improving digital connectivity is fundamental for growth and development in a digital era."*

Mireia Paulo, Head of Management at the Centre for EU-Asia Connectivity at the Ruhr-Universität Bochum, explained that coordinated approaches to interoperability, security, rules-based competitiveness and data governance mechanisms between countries are essential enablers for the free flow of data with trust.

> *"There is a need to reconcile political and economic values, and international commitments to enable the free flow of data with trust."*

Manuel Widmann, Mercator Fellow on Digital Connectivity, building on the metaphor of data as 'the new oil', underlined the power imbalance causing unfavourable terms and a marginalised role for developing countries in international discussions on data flows. He

emphasised the need for an inclusive global approach to digital regulation to ensure no region is left behind.

> *"Data is the new oil: 50% of GDP is based on the digital economy."*

Moderator **Anita Prakash,** Senior Policy Advisor for International Economic Cooperation at ERIA, commended the session's unanimous call for renewed cooperation to make Asia and Europe 'future-ready' by improving data governance and free flow of data across borders with trust, as well as putting in place the necessary security mechanisms through international consensus. She reiterated that the interests of developing countries across Asia and Africa should be better considered when it comes to cooperation and connectivity among governments, people, and institutions.

Panel 2: Enhancing Human Rights Through Digital Connectivity

The Director of the United Nations Office in Brussels, **Camilla Brückner,** opened the panel by stressing that all rights should be protected online like they are protected offline, as recognised by the UN Human Rights Council in 2016. She argued that inclusive digital connectivity is urgently needed as a digital public good in Asia and around the world.

> *"Connectivity has become an essential gateway to economic, social, cultural, political, and civic participation."*

Myong-Hyun Go, Senior Research Fellow at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies, presented a case study of connectivity as an enabler for human rights in North Korea, whose regime struggles to maintain absolute control over information amid a flourishing mobile phone culture.

> *"The use of mobile phones in North Korea has increased substantially, allowing individuals to bypass state control and access external information."*

Marie-Therese Sekwenz, Researcher at the AI Futures Lab at TU Delft, outlined how digital connectivity enables essential functions for activists, political participation, fact-checking and the protection of workers.

> *"The protection of human rights in the digital age requires a comprehensive approach, including the establishment of shared red lines and the support of workers' rights."*

Introducing the concept of meaningful digital connectivity, **Osama Manzar,** Co-Founder and CEO at the Digital Empowerment Foundation, explained that digital literacy, access to devices, and a stable connection are not always a given. He emphasised that policymakers should ensure digital connectivity benefits everyone equally. One solution to ensure last-mile access to key digital services would be to send mobile public servants with digital equipment to tour remote areas.

> *"Many people in India do not have digital connectivity because they lack meaningful connectivity."*

Moderator **Rosanna Fanni**, Trade and Technology Dialogue Coordinator at CEPS, concluded the second panel by underlining that greater digital connectivity must go hand in hand with protecting everyone's freedoms and rights. According to her, governments and the state must be critically analysed – neither too much nor too little policy intervention can lay the foundations for meaningful digital connectivity, enabling citizens to exercise their rights and freedoms.

15.06.2023: Digital Connectivity for a Resilient Shared Future

Panel 3: Securing Resilience Through Cybersecurity Cooperation

Lorenzo Pupillo, Head of the Cybersecurity@CEPS Initiative, explained that information sharing, cybersecurity standards, trust and private-public collaboration are prerequisites for any country aiming to foster cyber resilience amid continuous technological breakthroughs. Cybersecurity cooperation could address global threats by optimising information sharing, rather than encouraging freeriding with unequal benefits.

> *"India's G20 Presidency makes the country an important player in promoting a culture of trust and security in the region."*

Melanie Garson, Acting Director of Geopolitics at the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, highlighted private actors' crucial – but also controversial – power and responsibility as the main entities neutralising multiplying cyber threats, drawing from the case study of Russia's war on Ukraine.

> *"Cyber-attacks can have severe consequences for nations, leading to political destabilisation and economic costs. We need to coordinate with tech companies to face the next cyber-enabled geopolitical crisis."*

Fitriani Bintang Timur, Senior Researcher at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) Indonesia, emphasised that Asia and Europe, namely ASEAN and the EU, need to collaborate more on confidence-building measures and cyber resilience for ICT in critical infrastructure sectors, including energy, government buildings and transportation.

> *"Not all countries, especially smaller and digitally less mature ones, have what it takes to foster cyber resilience."*

Moderator **Sohyun Shin** from The Sejong Institute summarised the practical problem of achieving global cyber resilience: seeking resilience within one country rather than building a cooperative system at a more significant regional or international scale. Paying attention to the different needs across Northeast and Southeast Asia's challenging geopolitical landscape would be as important as better cooperation with the private sector and sharing best practices between Asia and Europe.

> *"Cyber-resilience is not only required in situations of conflict or armed conflict. It is necessary for our daily lives."*

Panel 4: Disaster Preparedness and Prevention

Dinesh Chand Sharma, Standards & Public Policy Director, Seconded European Standardisation Expert in India, emphasised the importance of standards to achieve interoperability and leverage technology and data to safeguard lives, infrastructure and economies following disasters.

> *"To increase our preparedness for possible future disasters, we need a common standard for all digital technologies."*

Irina Rafliana from the German Development Institute emphasised the importance of considering societal dimensions, technological advancements, and the continuous growth of knowledge in disaster risk reduction efforts. Building on the case of the 2018 volcano-induced Sunda Strait tsunami, she highlighted the need for a digitally literate society and systems to inform the general public. Transregional interoperability has a role to play in this effort.

> *"The notion of risks, of technology and of mobility actually does not differ much between the North and South."*
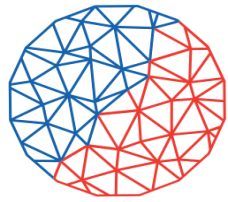
Muhammad Habib, from CSIS Indonesia in Jakarta, focused on the strategic importance of submarine cables in Southeast Asia. As this area of connectivity is not sufficiently resilient against interference, he recommends enhancing cooperation through the Global Gateway, which could serve as a guiding framework for future initiatives.

> *"We need to improve dialogue between submarine cable stakeholders, which are crucial for interconnectivity, energy transmission, and disaster preparedness."*

Moderator **Stefania Benaglia,** Head of the Global Connectivity Programme at CEPS, summarised key issues from the panel as a need for a more strategic approach to critical digital assets, as well as to put the human-centric dimension – or user perspective – higher up the policy agenda, and finally to not rely on a single type of technology to achieve efficient interoperability. She concluded that global standards and interoperability could attenuate unhealthy competition and create progress towards common global goals.

Closing remarks

In conclusion to the two-day event, **David Ringrose**, Head of Connectivity and Digital Transition at the European External Action Service, commended the discussion for combining political and practical issues to advance Asia-Europe cooperation in advancing human-centric and resilient digital connectivity, including through the Global Gateway. Compared to traditional areas of connectivity, such as energy and transport, cooperation processes and tools for digital connectivity need enhanced cooperation efforts considering the pace of digital development. Thanking all panellists, partners and organisers for AESCON3, he called on the audience to keep an eye on EU communication channels for upcoming announcements on digital diplomacy.

Policy Recommendations

Position the EU and Asia as leaders in human-centric digital connectivity

1. Design digital policies with a **holistic approach** integrating other areas of governance, such as <u>healthcare, education, and foreign policy</u>.
2. Ensure that **multilateral cooperation** on data governance is **truly inclusive** and does not result in further power imbalances and unequal access to digital economy benefits among different regions, countries and communities.
3. **Ensure meaningful connectivity for underserved communities** to prevent further marginalisation in the digital age, as <u>digital access now conditions access to a growing number of human rights.</u>

Create the conditions for a new data economy era

1. **Formalise** *the Asia-Europe connectivity partnership for the* **digital economy** under the emerging Indo-Pacific economic cooperation architecture.
2. Work together at a bi-regional level to:
   a. Set up a **policy framework** to promote data connectivity and the free flow of data with trust, namely addressing privacy, cybersecurity and user protection issues.
   b. Seek international consensus on this framework.
3. To **increase Asian participation in digital economy** value chains and regional competitiveness in the global economy.

Assess and address the risks of rapidly emerging technologies

1. Formulate a geopolitical policy to **coordinate with technology companies** on their position and responsibility at the intersection of technology and global digital resilience, including in preparation for upcoming cyber-enabled geopolitical crises.
2. **Regulate Artificial Intelligence (AI)** to protect everyone's agency - workers, students, entrepreneurs – and their right to equal opportunity for participating in a digital economy.
3. At a bi-regional level, **exchange knowledge** on the forthcoming EU AI Act while exploring the implications and opportunities for EU-Asia cooperation.