

Draft Paper

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Connectivity, Contestation and Resilience of the Liberal Script for World Order



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1. Introduction

The liberal script is closely linked to connectivity as it is premised on openness, economic exchange, and institutionalized cooperation. Open markets and open societies facilitate cross-border economic, political, and societal linkages. With the global expansion of trade, investment, communication, migration, and transnational production, states become increasingly embedded in webs of connections, which can create interdependence. The liberal norms, rules, and procedures of the post-War international order have facilitated cross-border exchange, institutionalized globalization and helped manage interdependence.¹

Connectivity in this context may be best related to globalization and interdependence as an enabling condition: it facilitates flows across borders and, by increasing mutual dependence, creates incentives for international cooperation. With the resurgence of geopolitical competition and rivalry, however, connectivity is no longer viewed merely as a prerequisite or consequence of globalization. Connectivity has become an object of geopolitical competition and an instrument of power. Major powers struggle over the organization, direction, and control of cross-border linkages. Supply chains, ports, energy corridors, payment systems, digital infrastructures, critical technologies, and regulatory standards are increasingly treated as matters of national security. States seek to exploit, diversify or reduce dependencies, controlling strategic nodes, restricting access to critical technologies, building alternative infrastructures, and redirecting economic flows toward politically trusted partners. The contemporary geopolitical turn in international politics seems less about a return to territorial power politics, but a struggle over the global architecture of connectivity.

Much of the literature on challenges of the rule-based international order has focused on contestations of its liberal principles, norms, rules, and procedures and their resilience (e.g., Lake, Martin, and Risse 2021; Wiener, Lake, and Risse 2026; Börzel 2026). It has paid less attention to connectivity and its governance as a source and object of contestations. Scholarship on globalization and interdependence has long recognized that power asymmetries embedded in transnational networks produce costs of breaking relationships for some and opportunities for influence for others. Power is concentrated in critical nodes creating hierarchy and inequality. Asymmetric interdependence nourishes conflict rather than cooperation (Keohane and Nye 1977; Hirschman 1980; Krasner 1985; Strange 1988). More recent research on geoeconomics and weaponized interdependence (Farrell and Newman 2019) has focused on how states strategically exploit positions of structural advantage in transnational networks.

This paper argues that connectivity bridges the various literatures, providing a useful analytical lens for linking material and infrastructural transformations associated with globalization and interdependence to contestations of the liberal script and its resilience. Conceptualizing connectivity as structured configurations of networks through which resources, information, people, capital, technologies, and standards circulate across territorial borders and political and social boundaries sheds new light on an important but neglected paradox faced by the liberal script in coping with its contestations. The very connectivity that it helped to institutionalize

¹ For reasons of scope, the paper mostly focuses on the liberal script for organizing international politics analyzing the link between cross-border connectivity, contestations and resilience of the liberal international order (LIO). I am grateful to Inga Feldmann for her excellent research assistance.

and manage makes the liberal script more resilient and more vulnerable at the same time. Connectivity can both integrate and fragment, constrain and empower, stabilize and destabilize the international order (Kolb 2008).

One solution to this connectivity paradox is the specification of conditions under which the liberal script can effectively adapt the governance of connectivity to geopolitical competition and rivalry without compromising the liberal principles that enable connectivity and make it productive.

The paper starts with conceptualizing connectivity and its relationship to globalization, interdependence, and the liberal script. It moves on to the connectivity paradox, highlighting how structured configurations of cross-border connections and their governance is a source as well as an object of contestations of the liberal script, and, how cross-border connections can strengthen its resilience, at the same time. The final section discusses how liberal and non-liberal scripts differ with regard to organizing connectivity and the ensuing resilience dilemma they face.

2. Connectivity and the Liberal Script

Connectivity, globalization, interdependence

Connectivity links globalization, interdependence, and geopolitics as an organizing concept rather than replacing them as a master-concept. Globalization organizes, expands, and densifies cross-border connections; interdependence captures the mutual effects of those connections producing both costs of breaking relationships and opportunities for influence; and geopolitics and geoeconomics emerge when the distribution and governance of those connections become objects of strategic competition and contestation.

To serve as bridge between existing concepts without becoming an empty signifier, connectivity is not merely defined by the existence, speed, and density of all sorts of cross-border connections. It becomes a meaningful theoretical concept when it specifies what connections, between what actors, with what structures, and with what consequences exist. Connectivity then is conceptualized as *structured configurations of networks and infrastructures* – ports, railways, cables, pipelines, payment systems, supply chains, data networks – *that connect actors through the circulations of resources, information, people, capital, and technologies across territorial borders and political and social boundaries* (cf. Kolb 2008). These networks and infrastructures enable globalization and can create interdependencies involving both vulnerabilities and power opportunities (Hirschman 1980; Keohane and Nye 1977; Krasner 1985; Fjäder 2018; Farrell and Newman 2019).

Seen from this perspective, the resurgence of geopolitics does not necessarily signal a reversal of globalization and interdependence. Rather than deglobalization whereby state reduce their economic, political, and social connections with each other (Kornprobst and Paul 2021; Van Bergeijk 2025), we see a growing politicization of and competition over networks and infrastructures that have sustained globalization and created interdependence. Geopolitical competition increasingly concerns the ability to shape, control, redirect, or insulate against

connectivity. Geoeconomic instruments are particularly important in this regard because they allow states to build and manage structural dependencies and translate asymmetric positions within economic networks into political leverage (Hirschman 1980; Krasner 1985; Farrell and Newman 2019). Export controls, sanctions, investment restrictions, supply-chain policies, infrastructure initiatives, and technological standards are therefore not merely instruments of economic policy. They are means of geopolitical power through which states seek to alter the distribution of capabilities and dependencies underpinning international order.

The contemporary contestations of the LIO are, hence, not only a geopolitical struggle over the networks and infrastructures through which global exchange takes place but also the norms, rules, and procedures that govern connectivity, globalization, and interdependence. The consequences of these contestations for the LIO are contingent upon how states seek to reorganize cross-border connections and their governance.

The liberal script and connectivity

The liberal script is a set of ideas and institutions for the organization of societies based on individual and collective self-determination (Börzel, Gerschewski, and Zürn 2024; Börzel and Risse 2023). Its principal components are human rights, the rule of law and democracy, pluralism and tolerance, as well as market economy and private property rights.

Connectivity is strongly associated with the liberal script as the basis upon which liberal ideas and institutions unfold as governing principles of cross-national linkages and relations. However, the liberal script does not only enable and facilitate connectivity. Connectivity is part of what makes the liberal script liberal.

The liberal script assumes openness within and beyond the state. Individual and collective self-determination presupposes that individuals, firms, civil society organizations, and governments can legitimately engage in exchanges that cut across political borders and social boundaries. Connectivity is therefore not simply an empirical consequence of the liberal script. It follows from a liberal conception of political and economic order in which individuals possess rights that are not exhausted by their citizenship of a particular state (e.g., freedom of movement), in which markets allow voluntary exchange beyond national borders (e.g., free trade and investment), and in which states accept reciprocal constraints on their sovereignty (e.g., respect for human rights). Political, economic, and social life is not only open to relationships beyond the state. Cross-border linkages that create interdependence can foster peace and prosperity, particularly among democracies and if regulated and managed by international institutions (Oneal and Russett 1999; Russett and Oneal 2001).

Connectivity is constitutive for the liberal script – but it is not inherently liberal. States can become more connected to others by building extensive infrastructure networks, digital networks, financial networks, and trade relationships without becoming more liberal or globally integrated. Finally, the liberal script with its prescription of systemic openness enables and facilitates connectivity, but it is also particularly vulnerable to economic, social, and informational penetration, e.g., disinformation campaigns to influence elections (Farrell and Newman 2019; Oatley 2019; Ries 2022).

The relationship between connectivity, globalization, and interdependence depends on the nature of the underlying script. Liberal ideas and institutions do not only enable and facilitate connectivity, they give connectivity a particular – liberal – form which makes the liberal script more resilient and more vulnerable at the same time.

3. The Connectivity Paradox

Connectivity has both a constitutive and a contestable relationship to the liberal script. On the one hand, liberal rules and institutions facilitate cross-border connectivity, embed liberal principles in material practices, and generate constituencies with an interest in preserving openness and cooperation. Connectivity not only constitute but sustains the liberal script if it increases the benefits of institutionalized exchange and raises the costs of systemic disruption. At the same time, resulting dependencies create opportunities for coercion and exposure to vulnerabilities, giving rise to contestations of liberal openness, both at the domestic and the international level.

Connectivity as a source for resilience

Connectivity can embed liberal ideas and institutions in material practices. For instance, the liberal character of free trade is not simply that states trade with each other but that the exchange of goods, capital, or services is predictable and non-arbitrary. Likewise, international human rights partly depend on individuals, organizations, and information moving freely across borders.

These liberal practices create constituencies that sustain connectivity because they have something to lose in case of breakdown – even if they do not support the liberal script as such. Dense economic and institutional connections produce switching costs. States, firms, and societies acquire interests in maintaining predictable rules, open markets, and functioning institutions. Firms dependent on supply chains, financial institutions dependent on stable rules, citizens benefit from mobility, and governments use international markets for revenue. They all have reasons to resist wholesale disruption. The benefits and vulnerabilities of connectivity are not equally distributed, neither between nor within states. Yet, even states or companies that benefit less or are more vulnerable to disruptions may have strong incentives to support liberal institutions sustaining connectivity as dismantling cross-border networks and infrastructures would incur prohibitive costs on them (Nye and Keohane 1971).

In short, connectivity strengthens the resilience of the liberal script if it embeds its ideas and institutions in material practices and generates interests in sustaining connectivity and the liberal institutions that enable and facilitate it.

Connectivity as a source of contestation

Because of its distributional consequences regarding power and vulnerability, connectivity has always been contested, both within liberal societies (e.g., anti-globalization movements) and at the international level (e.g., Global South demands for a New International Economic Order).

Connectivity is the basis of interdependence, which often is asymmetrical. Some are more vulnerable to disruptions or breakdown of connections than others. Even actors that endorse the liberal script start to perceive connectivity and the interdependences it creates not simply as a source of mutual gains but as a security risk, when economic competitors, geopolitical rivals, and even long-standing liberal allies weaponize vulnerabilities. As a result, connectivity as well as the liberal ideas and institutions that enable and facilitate it have become increasingly contested: What kinds of cross-border connections should exist, who should control them, on what terms and under whose rules?

Within liberal societies, these contestations have emerged as a new cleavage next to classical divides organized around class, religion, urban-rural, and center-periphery (Marks and Wilson 2000; Kriesi 2010; Zürn and De Wilde 2016). The new cleavage is about openness vs. closure, integration vs. demarcation, cosmopolitanism vs. nationalism; it pits those who are connected against those left behind (Godehardt and Postel-Vinay 2020: 6). Illiberal forces have successfully linked economic (inequality), political (disenfranchisement), and socio-cultural (diversity) grievances to the openness of markets and societies (free movement of goods, capital, people, information) to mobilize voters (Norris and Inglehart 2019; Schäfer and Zürn 2023).

At the international level, the geopolitical turn and the weaponization of interdependence by non-liberal competitors (China) and geopolitical rivals (Russia) but also by long-standing liberal allies (US) have given rise to contestations regarding which states should be connected to whom, through which networks and infrastructures, on whose terms, under whose authority and according to whose rules and (regulatory) standards. These contestations have been fueled by domestic contestations over free trade, migration, popular sovereignty, and integration (Lake, Martin, and Risse 2021; Wiener, Lake, and Risse 2026). Thus, the LIO is not only under pressure because non-liberal states challenge liberal norms, rules and procedures for governing connectivity but because the domestic political foundations of liberal connectivity on which the LIO rests are increasingly being contested within liberal states.

Contemporary contestations are about connectivity and the liberal norms, rules, and procedures according to which connectivity should be organized. Sovereigntist and anti-globalist contestations rarely demand complete disconnection. Rather, they aim at replacing the liberal connectivity script of open, rule-governed transnational connectivity by non-liberal alternatives of politically controlled, selective, and territorial bound connectivity.

4. Connectivity Scripts and their Resilience

Liberal and non-liberal connectivity scripts

Major powers do not simply compete over territory and markets anymore. They increasingly compete over connectivity and its governance. This competition can be analyzed in terms of connectivity scripts understood as normative and strategic conceptions, which encode different answers to four fundamental questions: 1) which actors should be connected, 2) how to structure their connection, 3) under whose control, and 4) according to which norms and rules and standards.

The EU's Global Gateway (GG) and China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) offer two distinct connectivity scripts.² Both describe infrastructure, trade, financial exchange, and people-to-people exchange as mutually reinforcing forms of connectivity. The main difference is not so much connectivity, but its governance.

The EU script is about *liberal connectivity*. It is built around liberal principles, including openness, free movement, reciprocity, non-discrimination, the rule of law, and human rights. These principles prescribe cross-border connections to be rule-governed, non-discriminatory, and mutually accessible. This involves open international economic exchange, cross-border mobility, institutionalized cooperation, constraints on unilateral state action, and some degree of external interdependence. The liberal principles have implications for who to connect and how, as well as for who controls the networks and sets the rules.

Openness and non-discrimination imply broad inclusiveness; at the same time, inclusion is conditional upon accepting that connectivity is rule-based, and that these rules are broadly liberal, requiring transparency and reciprocity of cross-border connections, open and sustainable market, the pluralized control of critical nodes by public and private actors, as well as compliance with regulatory and democratic standards set by multilateral institutions. The EU's GG explicitly links transport, energy, and digital infrastructure to the respect of human rights, rule of law, and democracy as well as environmental and social standards, private investment, and regulatory cooperation. This liberal conditionality shall ensure that connectivity sustains the liberal script, both at the international and the domestic level.

The Chinese connectivity script can be characterized as *sovereign connectivity*. Connectivity is unconditional, in accordance to the "Westphalian" principles of sovereign equality of states, non-interference in domestic affairs, and voluntary cooperation. The BRI is open to all countries and emphasizes respect for different development paths and political systems. It explicitly rejects the liberal conditionality of the EU connectivity script as liberal interventionism. The focus is on infrastructure that shall enable socio-economic development while strengthening sovereign authority and consolidating and entrenching non-liberal scripts (Çelik 2025; Börzel, Langbein, Wu, and Krüsmann 2026; Darieva, Krüsmann, and Langbein 2026). Cross-border connections shall be built, coordinated, and controlled by sovereign states, mostly through infrastructures. International rules to govern connectivity shall be based on voluntary cooperation, possibly in the framework of the United Nations, preserving instead of constraining state sovereignty.

China's sovereign connectivity script shares the commitment of the EU's liberal connectivity script to certain forms of openness and international exchange, market operation, and international cooperation (Flint and Zhu 2019; Han and Paul 2020; Börzel and Wu forthcoming). However, it largely rejects the governance of connectivity based on liberal principles. Contestations target any liberal constraints on state sovereignty, be they political (individual human rights, democratic elections, rule of law) or economic (free market access, fair competition). Accordingly, Beijing engages in "order-shaping" seeking to forge international norms, rules, and

² The following draws on Börzel, Krüsmann, Langbein, and Wu 2024, and Börzel and Wu forthcoming. See also Godehardt and Postel-Vinay 2020.

standards for governing connectivity based on sovereign equality, non-interference, and mutual benefits (King and He 2026).

The EU's liberal connectivity script and China's script of sovereign connectivity equally face the geopolitical challenge that critical nodes create strategic leverage. The vulnerabilities associated with connectivity differ. So do the contestations connectivity scripts have to cope with.

Coping with connectivity contestations

Resilience of a script, broadly defined, is about the ability to cope with major challenges without compromising core features (SCRIPTS 2025: 7). For connectivity scripts, this translates into coping with connectivity contestations by, simultaneously, *reducing vulnerability and preventing connectivity from being weaponized, while preserving the principles that give the script its distinctive character*.

Due to their distinct underlying principles, the liberal and the sovereign connectivity script face different vulnerabilities. For the EU, its primary vulnerability lies in asymmetrical interdependence within open networks (security, economic, energy, technology). To avoid weaponization, it needs to reduce dependence on the US for security, on Russia for energy, and on China for trade. De-risking involves the selective closure of networks and infrastructures through diversification, state regulation, and state control. While de-risking aims at strategically managing vulnerabilities rather than dismantling interdependencies (Helwig and Sinkkonen 2022; Gabor 2023; Kerim 2026), striving for more strategic autonomy may ultimately result in protectionism (tariffs, export controls), excessive state intervention (subsidies, strategic stockpiling), and discrimination (privileging politically aligned partners), undermining core liberal principles. In addition, uncoordinated, unilateral de-risking can ultimately destabilize the entire international system by setting off a self-enforcing breaking up of global trade flows, by raising the costs of the green energy transition, or by undermining nuclear deterrence (Mohr and Trebesch 2025; Nye 2020; Tønnesson 2015; Kerim 2026). At the same time, “hyper-connectivity”, characterized by information overload, unmanageable workflow interruptions, and systemic fragility, increases exposure to weaponization and spill-over effects between different sectors (Kolb 2008).

The resilience dilemma the EU faces is that preserving liberal connectivity requires limiting connectivity in a way to reduce the risk of weaponization and hyper-connectivity.

China has to cope with a different challenge. Its sovereign connectivity script is more compatible with state intervention and state control to reduce vulnerabilities by diversification, domestic substitution, capital and infrastructure controls, or strategic stockpiling. Yet, China's capacity to protect itself from weaponized interdependence can generate incentives for others to reduce their dependence on China. Its primary vulnerability lies with the attractiveness of its connectivity script resulting in a distinct resilience dilemma.

Further research will show how the EU and China have dealt with their respective resilience dilemma. Existing studies suggest that China's connectivity script is becoming more strategically assertive without necessarily becoming wholly anti-liberal, whereas the EU's liberal

connectivity script is becoming more strategically defensive without necessarily becoming illiberal (Börzel, Krüsmann, Langbein, and Wu 2024; Börzel, Langbein, Wu, and Krüsmann 2026; ; Börzel and Wu forthcoming).

5. Conclusion

The paper has argued that connectivity provides a conceptual link between globalization, interdependence, and geopolitics, on the one hand, and contestations, and the resilience of the liberal script, on the other. Globalization creates dense connections, which can generate asymmetric interdependence whose vulnerabilities are weaponized in geopolitical competition and rivalry, giving rise to political conflict of openness and sovereignty at the domestic level. The new cleavage contests connectivity and its governance at the domestic level, while the resurgence of geopolitical competition and rivalry makes liberal institutions enabling and facilitating connectivity a source and an object of contestations at the international level. These interlinking contestations test the resilience of the liberal script for which connectivity is constitutive.

Contemporary contestations of the liberal script are to a significant extent about whether the liberal script should constitute and govern an increasingly interconnected world or whether it should be replaced by a less or non-liberal alternative.

The future of the liberal script will depend on the resilience of the liberal (connectivity) script, aka its ability to reconcile openness with security, distributive fairness, and political control, while preserving its core liberal principles that enable and facilitate connectivity in the first place.

Such rewriting of the liberal connectivity script may be politically or geographically confined to liberal democracies or certain world regions. Still, such selective rescripting would not necessarily have to give way to deglobalization (Kornprobst and Paul 2021; Van Bergeijk 2025). Transnational networks and infrastructures are strategic assets. States rarely seek complete decoupling but focus on managing risks. An international system can be highly connected through multiple competing and politically controlled networks and infrastructures. Rather than disintegration and fragmentation, we might see a multiplex world that remains highly interconnected but is increasingly characterized by competing networks, differentiated access, regionalized flows, and politically conditioned forms of interdependence.

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