

Institute of Chinese Studies

# WEDNESDAY SEMINAR

*A Decade of the BRI:  
Impact, Implications and  
Challenges for India*

## REPORT

Speaker :

**Wenjing Gao**  
**Manish**

*11 October 2023*

## SUMMARY

- The seminar revisited China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was introduced a decade ago. The speakers highlighted the aims of the BRI, and how they have manifested through China's actions over the last ten years. Further, they highlighted the implications of the same for India, with the countries surrounding India actively participating in the BRI.
- Gao noted that the BRI forms a significant component of China's foreign policy, with the participation of nearly 150 countries, and over 3,000 affiliated infrastructure ventures. She asserted that the BRI could generate over a trillion dollars in investments. At the same time, allegations of corruption and environmental concerns have emerged.
- Manish highlighted the broader aims of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), under the BRI, which include the creation of a regional production chain for advanced manufacturing and innovation. However, lack of political trust and Pakistan's sovereign credit ratings have hindered progress.
- The speakers concluded by stating that countries like Kazakhstan are emerging as hubs, despite being landlocked with limited avenues for international trade. This growth is driven by the demand for connectivity, which must develop under a cooperative framework. Unilateral ventures towards connectivity, such as China's, will be challenged by the rest of the world.

## REPORT

**Speakers: Dr. Wenjing Gao**, Research Scholar.

**Prof. Manish**, Professor and Dean, School of International Studies, Central University of Gujarat, Gandhinagar.

**Chair: Dr. Atul Bhardwaj**, Fellow, Pradhan Mantri Museum and Library, New Delhi; and, Adjunct Fellow, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.

**Date:** 11 October 2023

**Venue:** Zoom Webinar

The seminar began with the chair highlighting that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has defined the geopolitics of today. Furthermore, given its evolving trajectory, it shall also play an integral role in shaping the geopolitical realities of the future, especially with regard to connectivity. Following a brief introduction of the BRI, as a continent-spanning project, Dr. Wenjing Gao began her presentation. Tracing the history of the BRI, she noted how it originated from the One Belt One Road Initiative. She posited that the initiative plays a central role in Xi Jinping's policies. This can be seen through its incorporation into the CPC's constitution in 2017.

Dr. Gao pointed out that despite reports from the West, the BRI has not been entirely ineffective; it has come to represent China's involvement in international trade.

According to a World Bank analysis, the initiative provides financial support to both China and its partner nations, thereby improving the lives of 100–200 million people worldwide. The speaker noted that despite the financial support, participating nations face significant challenges such as heavy indebtedness, rampant corruption, and pressing environmental concerns. Moreover, the BRI lacks transparency, a key feature found in international initiatives of the World Bank.

Despite facing criticism, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been undergoing significant changes and evolution since 2019 to align with China's new economic objectives. This transformation involves shifting towards greener and more digitalized projects such as the Digital Silk Road. Dr. Gao emphasizes a heightened focus on implementing BRI projects that are both manageable and sustainable. Notably, Xi Jinping's introduction of three new initiatives—namely, the Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI), and Global Civilization Initiative (GCI)—reflects China's aspirations for global governance and underscores the notable recent transformation of the BRI.

The speaker cautioned that even though new projects are being launched, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) will remain relevant due to its constitutional status. However, she argued that the growing significance of the Global Development Initiative (GDI) in the People's Republic of China's (PRC) foreign policy may eventually overshadow the BRI. As China's broader aims encompass the interests of the Global South, there is an evident association between the newly introduced initiatives and fundamental principles of the UN, such as human rights, development, and security.

On the basis of her fieldwork, Dr. Gao claimed that it is challenging to assess the successes and shortcomings of the initiative from an Indian standpoint since India is not a partner country within the BRI. Nevertheless, India has voiced serious concerns about the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is an integral part of the BRI. India believes that CPEC could legitimise Pakistan's illegal occupation of a part of the Indian Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir. This would disregard India's core concerns and infringe upon its sovereignty and territorial integrity. However, the question whether India is willing to compromise its political freedoms in pursuit of economic prosperity remains unanswered.

Professor Manish highlighted the ongoing debates regarding the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). He specifically examined whether BRI is primarily a geostrategic or geoeconomic endeavour. He argued that while there are strategic considerations involved, countries participating in the BRI are also driven by pressing domestic economic challenges. Therefore, BRI represents the fusion of strategic and economic drivers. The speaker emphasized the challenge of reconciling these aspects, as strategic goals can sometimes hinder the promotion of economic initiatives.

The geostrategic dimensions of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) can be traced back to 2013, during the 18th Party Congress. It was noted that China's neighbouring countries hold

considerable strategic importance. Therefore, China should strive to strengthen its relations with them through economic ties and security cooperation. This proactive foreign policy has reinforced the perception that the BRI is primarily driven by broad geostrategic objectives.

According to Prof. Manish, although the geo-economic aspects are commensurate with Chinese aims, they lack a sense of completeness. He noted that various analysts have underestimated the economic agenda of the BRI, and have attached excessive importance to its geostrategic significance. The speaker argued that the initiative encompasses both elements and they are not in conflict with each other.

The speaker considered the cases of two of China's close allies, Pakistan and Nepal to examine the BRI. Nepal signed up for the BRI in 2017; however, no project under the BRI has been implemented in Nepal since then. Similarly, progress on the CPEC in Pakistan has been slowed down due to concerns about security and economic challenges. Prof. Manish highlighted that China wants to expand BRI into Afghanistan, which made international community suspicious about China's intent to gain access to Afghanistan's abundant resources.

Prof. Manish also underlined the key differences between India and China with respect to connectivity initiatives. In his view, both nations are revisualising Asia's map economically as well as strategically. India's approach is largely based on cooperation in stark contrast to China's unilateral approach. This has raised concerns about the necessity of an environment of trust and confidence as a prerequisite for introducing connectivity projects. The speaker concluded his presentation by asserting the need to reconsider how India can achieve its aims through cooperation with neighbouring countries with regard to connectivity projects.

The chair, Mr. Bhardwaj, further highlighted India's position vis-a-vis China in the context of connectivity projects in Asia. The growing assertiveness emanating from China, and manifesting in its policies and initiatives including the GDI, GSI, and the GCI has raised significant concerns in policy-making circles. The analysis presented by Dr. Gao and Prof. Manish granted an in-depth view of the impact of the BRI on the global stage.

*This report was prepared by Muskan Poonia, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies, New Delhi.*

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