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# Belt and Road Initiative: Recent Trends

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China is one of the biggest beneficiaries of globalization. Since its reform and opening up, China has successfully climbed the ladder of the global economic chain. Today it is the second largest economy in the world and on the path to become the number one. The integrated world economy has helped China become the factory of the world and also the largest trading partner of most of the countries. China holds a foreign exchange reserve amounting to more than $3 trillion. However, China needs to develop new growth models in order to continue growing. The party leadership is keenly aware of the need to change the growth trajectory.

It would not be farfetched to say that the Chinese government is in the process of promoting a new phase of globalization. The changes in the political system in China will also have a direct impact on its economic policies and ambitions. To add to this the abolition of presidential term limit has further strengthened the policy making in China. Xi Jinping is President for life and his speech at the 19th Party Congress clearly laid out an agenda for global plans for China. Xi has also been discussing ways to promote and maintain the global economic growth.

The Communist Party of China (CPC) under the leadership of Xi Jinping proposed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013. This is a grand economic plan designed to benefit China and the world at large by connecting the markets with the consumers. China's BRI is expected to be almost seven times larger than the Marshall Plan. China has laid out a grand plan of cooperating with the world with China as centre. China wants to help the world in developing and is keen on building infrastructure which will help in the mobility of goods and people.

This China centric global growth will help in changing the idea of 'globalization' with China at the centre of the new direction of global growth. Xi Jinping has termed it as the "the project of the century" (Chan 2018). Some have also argued that the BRI is a clear indication of a shift from the Deng Xiaoping dictum of 'hide our capabilities and bide our time' and the push China to give birth to a "Eurasia (dominated by China), an economic and trading area to rival the transatlantic one (dominated by America)" (Gill 2017).

A major summit was organized in May 2017 in China in which head of 29 countries participated. The next summit is scheduled for 2019. During the closing of the summit, Xi reiterated the non-political and only economic aspect of the BRI. He asserted, "The 'Belt and Road Initiative' is not set by ideology. We won't set a political agenda. It's not exclusive" (Leng 2017). During the summit Xi had also argued that, "The primary intention and the highest goal of the 'Belt and Road Initiative' is to allow each member to jointly address global economic challenges, find new growth opportunities and drivers, achieve a win-win situation and keep moving toward a community with joint destiny" (Tang 2017). However, the inclusion of BRI in the CPC Constitution does give it the status of an ideology and with this Xi joined the ranks of Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping (*Xinhua* 2017).

Even though Xi has been focusing on the benefits which the BRI promises for the other partner countries, it is difficult to ignore the domestic issues and debates which back the BRI. Major emphasis was given to the BRI during Xi Jinping's speech at the 19th Party Congress. Xi said: "China adheres to the fundamental national policy of opening up and pursues development with its doors open wide. China will actively promote international cooperation through the Belt and Road Initiative. In doing so, we hope to achieve policy, infrastructure, trade, financial, and people-to-people connectivity and thus build a new platform for international cooperation to create new drivers of shared development" (China Daily 2017).

*BRI will help China use its excessive production capacities and also in the development of its underdeveloped western regions and provide a profitable investment option for the unused domestic savings.*

The Chinese government is also using the BRI to push for domestic support. According to two scholars, "Xi's vision could not only guide the peaceful development of the human race, but would benefit non-human animal species and plants as well." (Daly and Rojansky 2018). Thus, the attempt to highlight the economically and ecologically beneficial aspects of the BRI. The Chinese government and the media have been consistently working towards directing the debates surrounding BRI to the economic gains it can provide.

## Chinese motivations

There is a great deal of speculation regarding the reason behind the Chinese government's push for such a grand initiative. The major point of argument is that with the help of the BRI, China will be looking for newer markets to export its production capacity and also look for untapped markets for the Chinese goods and commodities. Chinese domestic companies producing steel, cement etc. have been facing major challenges with the slow domestic economy. BRI will help them use their excessive production capacities. BRI will also help in the development of the underdeveloped western regions of China and provide a profitable investment option for the unused domestic savings (China Power 2017).

Another argument is directed towards the push for a more assertive foreign policy. China is no more interested in following the 'hide your capabilities, and bide your time' policy and is keen to fight for its rightful place in the global order. Some scholars have also argued that China is keen on developing an alternative to dollar as the international currency by using the Renminbi as the official currency of trade across the BRI (Daly and Rojansky 2018).

The Chinese media has been aggressively promoting stories of the ways the BRI will help in developing countries in Asia, Africa and Europe. In one article the China Daily argues, "Trade between all the countries proposed in the BRI is possible today. But the BRI will make trade more efficient through newly built roads, railways, and shipping ports. The proposed infrastructure is through mutual agreement, not through threats of military intervention. If a country does not want to participate, they can simply refuse. It is their decision" (McClymond 2018). Such arguments continue to reiterate the peaceful and benign image of the Chinese investment under the BRI.

## Initial responses

When Xi had promoted the idea of the BRI, it was welcomed with great fanfare and applause. Initially with the exception of India, almost all the countries were on board with the Chinese vision of building a global belt and road connectivity. However, with time countries like United Kingdom, Japan, Vietnam, France, Australia and Germany have also expressed concerns regarding the strategic aspect of the BRI (Ghiasy et al 2018: 1).

India had refused to attend the First Belt and Road Forum held in Beijing in May 2017 and has been very critical of the Chinese plans for BRI especially because of the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which directly hurts Indian sovereignty. The Chinese projects under the CPEC cover the disputed regions between India and Pakistan, thus highlighting the Chinese insensitivity towards Indian territorial integrity and making China 'a major stake holder in the existing dispute' (Ghiasy et al 2018: 30). In addition to this India had also expressed concerns regarding the "unsustainable debt burden for countries" for the involved countries (Perlez and Brasher 2017). The problem of debt burden has proven to be true with respect to a large number of countries participating in the BRI.

Though there were hopes that India and China may decide to cooperate on project by project basis the recently concluded Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit made the Indian stand very clear. New Delhi was the only member which refused to endorse the BRI (Shubham 2018). In the words of the Indian Prime Minister, "Connectivity with the neighbouring countries is India's priority. We welcome the connectivity projects which are sustainable and efficient and which respect territorial integrity and sovereignty of the countries" (Money Control 2018). However, the ongoing cooperation between India and China in Afghanistan has provided some hope to the call for cooperation under the BRI. Keeping the Indian apprehensions in view, towards CPEC, this looks unlikely.

## Concerns Surrounding BRI: Foreign and Domestic

In the last five years the Chinese government has pushed for the BRI in every possible platform. According to a report in Xinhua in the last five years under the BRI the Chinese government has been involved in establishing around 82 overseas economic and trade cooperation zones. In addition to this, it has also invested $28.9 billion and has also helped in the creation of 244,000 local jobs. By the end of May 2018 China had signed around 16 free trade agreements with about 24 countries out of which around half are on the BRI routes. The report also argued that the BRI is not primarily an economic initiative. It is involved in helping the concerned countries in other aspects as well. As per the report Beijing has been involved in establishing around 81 educational bodies and 35 cultural centres and has also spent around $39.3 million on the Silk Road scholarships (Yang 2018). Even though the Indian stance has remained unchanged, there has been a major shift in the approach of the other participating countries towards the Chinese investments under the BRI.

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The situation on the ground is not as positive as the Chinese government would like to portray. There has been a rising concern of debt trap among the countries which had initially agreed to join the BRI. The concerns regarding the debt trap debate gained momentum after Sri Lanka leased the Hambantota Port and land around it to a Chinese company for 99 years. Though the deal was signed not under the BRI it has become an example for how things will pan out for the countries receiving investments under the BRI. As per a report by the Centre for Global Development, 23 out of 68 countries participating in the BRI are prone to debt issues due to domestic challenges (Camba and Yao 2018). In addition to Hambantota, Chinese ownership of ports has increased since 2013.

China today has ownership of Gwadar, Obock, Kuantan, Kyaukpyu, Melaka Gateway, Muara and Feydhoo Finolhu (Ghiasy et al 2018: 6).

The problems with the BRI have come to the forefront in the last five years as a number of countries have started to reconsider the proposed projects and there appears to be a slowing down of the momentum of investments. One of the most prominent announcements in this regard was from the Malaysian government where they announced that they will postpone the work on two major Chinese investment plans amounting to around 20 billion dollars. The Malaysian Prime Minister had also argued that if a local company was building the railways, the cost would have been half of what was proposed by China under the BRI (*NDTV* 2018). To conclude he described the new wave of economic dependence as "a new version of colonialism" and referred to China as a rich country (*Financial Times* 2018).

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Malaysia is not a standalone example in this regard as the Chinese investments have started to face challenges in a number of countries. The Chinese projects have been facing hurdles in Laos as well. One of the major causes of concern is the high speed railway which is being constructed under the BRI. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) Laos owes around 65 percent of its external debt to China (Hutt 2018).

Chinese investments are facing problems in Pakistan as well. In August a bus carrying Chinese engineers was blown up by a suicide bomber. Balochistan Liberation Army (BLA) claimed responsibility for the attack in which three Chinese nationals were injured. They expressed their anger on the grounds of Chinese extracting gold from their region (Wu 2018). Reports of other incidences of clashes between the Chinese nationals and Pakistani police officials have also started to surface. In one such case Chinese engineers got into a clash with the policemen at Khanewal (Shah 2018). On the other hand, the benefits like tax exceptions which the Chinese companies enjoy in Pakistan have adversely affected the chances of local business houses and this is creating certain domestic anger. Pakistan's commerce minister, Abdul Razak Dawood, wanted a one year suspension of Chinese projects under the CPEC (Hussain 2018). The government of Pakistan also argued that there is a need for increasing the projects which have a socio-economic focus (South China Morning Post 2018).

The recent cancellation of the hydro power plant between China and Nepal are indication of trouble. In June 2018 both China and Nepal were contradicting itself whether the 1.8 billion dollars West Seti Project is still under consideration or not (Lo 2018).

Similar trend is evident in Myanmar as well. There has been an ongoing resentment against the Chinese investments in the country. As per a recent study there are chances of increased opposition to the Chinese BRI projects if they do not employ the local people (Lwin 2018). The voice of concern was expressed by the Myanmar's Planning and Finance Minister Soe Win when he argued, "Lessons that we learned from our neighbouring countries that over investment is not good sometimes" (Swarajya 2018). The proposed Kyaukpyu Deepwater Port project is also facing hurdles in Myanmar. The Myanmar government has decided to reduce the amount of Chinese investment from 7.3 billion dollars to 1.3 billion dollars. This is done fearing debt trap and also with the aim of avoiding any major loans from China (Roy Chaudhury 2018). However, there are reports that Myanmar is keen to sign the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC) which will be connecting Kunming with seaport at Kyaukpyu in Myanmar's Rakhine state (Thiha 2018). The slow progress of the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor is one of the major reason behind the decision of Myanmar (Dasgupta 2018).

A number of countries like Vietnam have adopted the wait and watch policy. Because of the ongoing problems associated with the BRI investments, countries are not too keen on letting China be the primary fund provider for projects. There was a lot of debate between China and Thailand over the proposed railway line from China via Laos to Thailand. However, after a lot of negotiations the project was finally started in December 2017 (Reuters 2017).

A large number of Chinese companies are also using the BRI to push for smaller investments in the field of entertainment in the form of spas and amusement parks. Such initiatives are perceived as helping the overall goal of the Chinese government in gaining local support. In the words of Chen Shaofeng, vice dean of the Institute for Cultural Industries at Peking University, "One of the goals is cultural exchange along the Belt and Road to improve our soft power" (Stevenson and Li 2018). However, some of the companies are also using the idea of BRI to appear in line with the government policies (Stevenson and Li 2018).

The major challenge to the BRI is not limited to the partner countries only. The recent slowdown in the Chinese economy has raised a number concerns regarding the feasibility of funding projects abroad. There is a strong opposition emerging within the Chinese society and government which believes that the money should be invested domestically. These limitations have cautious lending on the part of Chinese officials. The caution was echoed by Yi Gang, the new governor of China's central bank when he remarked, "Ensuring debt sustainability — that is very important" (Bradsher 2018).

# Conclusion

As argued by Igor Rogelja, "The elusive nature of the win-win solutions promised by the Chinese government flowing from the BRI that would satisfy the wide array of actors participating in the initiative while avoiding significant pushback from China's large trading partners, points towards two potential outcomes: a watering down of the initiative to something less ambitious and epic sounding, or an apologetic hardening of its geostrategic logic and the ensuing world-order competition across Eurasia" (Rogelja 2018: 29).

In just five years after the BRI was proposed by China, the perspectives around the world have been changing. It appears that the recipient countries, which were very happy with the hope of getting cheap Chinese loans for domestic development, are reconsidering their plans. Beijing had perhaps hoped for a 'smooth sailing' of its proposals. However, in the last few years there has been an increase in the discontent and dissatisfaction towards the Chinese plans. If such hurdles continue to appear it may affect the overall future of the BRI and also of the money which China has already invested in the projects. The most logical option which appears is that China should reconsider the speed of announcing the projects and work towards accommodating the ambitions of the partner nations. If only Chinese companies and Chinese people appear to be benefiting from the BRI it may lead to major anger towards China and thus harm its overall long-term agenda. The major theme which emerges is that money alone is not going to help China gain access to countries under the BRI umbrella. BRI needs to incorporate and promote more than just infrastructure growth and economic trade route. ■

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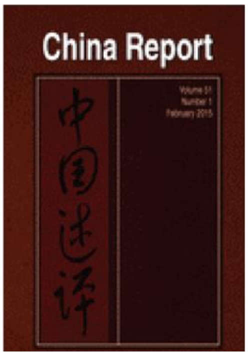


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