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Research Article

CHINA'S BELT & ROAD INITIATIVE: HOW CAN INDIA RESPOND?

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ABSTRACT

The BRI is hailed as the most important infrastructure project of the 21st century. The Belt and Road Forum in May, 2017 was attended by participants from around 130 nations, along with 29 heads of states. Despite US and other powers registering their presence, India decided to not to be present. However India cannot afford to ignore the project. There is a need to develop a coherent policy response. Going ahead how can India respond to BRI? This paper explores the various obstacles that India and China will have to overcome to cooperate and attempts to chart a course for India to ensure national interest as well as security, peace and economic development in the region.

Key Words:

Connectivity, economic development,
growth corridor, cooperation

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INTRODUCTION

Belt & Road Initiative (BRI) also known as “One Belt One Road (OBOR)” initiative (the Central Compilation and Translation Bureau of China revised the English translation of the initiative due to misinterpretations of the word “one” in OBOR) was launched by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013, to improve and create new trading routes, links and business opportunities with China. It combines new and old projects, covers an expansive geographic scope, and includes efforts to strengthen hard infrastructure, soft infrastructure, and cultural ties.

At present, the plan extends to 65 countries with a combined Gross Domestic Product of \$23 trillion and includes some 4.4 billion people.

It has two main elements

One Belt: The Silk Road Economic Belt

Under it focus is on enhancing and developing land routes. A number of economic corridors connecting China with Mongolia and Russia, central Asia and South-East Asia will be developed.

One Road: The 21st Century Maritime Silk Road

This is a sea route (a reference to the old maritime Silk Road) which runs west from China's east coast to Europe through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean.



Figure 1 The six economic corridors designed to link China with developing countries

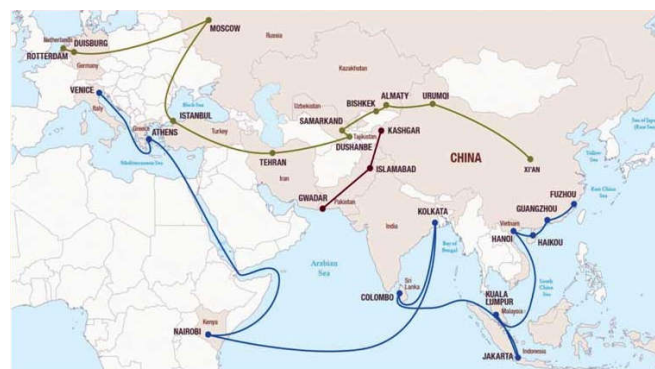


Figure 2 21st Century Maritime Silk Route

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RI is also puzzling because it is amorphous-it has no official list of member countries and most of the projects that sport the label would probably have been built anyway.

Obstacles in Cooperation

BRI has received broad support from other neighboring countries; however India has been reticent in its response. In fact, India's conspicuous absence from the Belt and Road Forum was seen as an affront to Chinese ambitions. Responding to a query on participation of India in OBOR/BRI Forum, Indian Foreign Office's spokesperson said: "We are of firm belief that connectivity initiatives must be based on universally recognized international norms, good governance, and rule of law, openness, transparency and equality. Connectivity initiatives must follow principles of financial responsibility to avoid projects that would create unsustainable debt burden for communities; balanced ecological and environmental protection and preservation standards; transparent assessment of project costs; and skill and technology transfer to help long term running and maintenance of the assets created by local communities. Connectivity projects must be pursued in a manner that respects sovereignty and territorial integrity . . . Guided by our principled position in the matter, we have been urging China to engage in a meaningful dialogue on its connectivity initiative, 'One Belt, One Road' which was later renamed as 'Belt and Road Initiative'. We are awaiting a positive response from the Chinese side . . . Regarding the so-called 'China-Pakistan Economic Corridor', which is being projected as the flagship project of the BRI/OBOR, the international community is well aware of India's position. No country can accept a project that ignores its core concerns on sovereignty and territorial integrity."

India's reluctance to join the BRI stems from strategic mistrust of its neighbors, India has fought wars with both China and Pakistan in the last 60 years. On various other international issues also India and China find each other in opposition, whether it is India's NSG membership or blocking India's bid to get Jaish-e-Mohammad chief Masood Azhar declared as a UN-designated terrorist. The recent Doklam standoff once again brought out the long standing border issues between the two countries.

Also, there are apprehensions that economic corridors with China will bring bordering states under the increasing influence of China, further weakening their physical, economic, social and emotional chord with mainland India. It is especially relevant in the context of north-eastern states which will be connected with China through BCIM-EC (Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor).

Considering the lack of a detailed operational plan and transparency on part of Beijing, India is right in its reservations towards BRI. However there are several reasons for India to actively participate in BRI-

Need for Cooperation

First is economics. Many foreign policy analysts view this initiative largely through a geopolitical lens, seeing it as Beijing's attempt to gain political leverage over its neighbors. There is no doubt that is part of Beijing's strategic calculation. However, some of the key drivers behind OBOR are largely

motivated by China's pressing economic concerns. China is one of the largest economic partners for most of the countries in the Eurasia, including India. Hence it would be in interest of India to cooperate with China on the matter. According to a report by Asian Development Bank developing Asia will need to invest \$26 trillion from 2016 to 2030, or \$1.7 trillion per year, if the region is to maintain its growth momentum, eradicate poverty, and respond to climate change (climate-adjusted estimate). A large part of this sum will come from AIIB (Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank). Being the second largest shareholder in AIIB, it would put India in a difficult position, if the country chooses to oppose BRI.

Second, presence of Pakistan on the west has prevented India from connecting with Central Asia and Eastern Europe. BRI presents a new opportunity for India to improve its relations with the western neighbor. Chinese ambassador to India Luo Zhaohui in a speech offered to re-name the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) – a key component of OBOR – to allay Indian objections.

Third, BRI coincides with gradual retreat of Washington from Asian geo-economic sphere. The Obama administration's "Asia pivot" policy, which manifested in a hard negotiated Trans Pacific Partnership trade agreement (among 12 nations controlling approximately 40% of the global GDP), was later quashed by the Trump administration. Going ahead, India may not rely on USA as a stable strategic ally.

Forth, India's neighbours including Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh have shown interest in China led initiative. Recusing from BRI will only isolate the country in its neighborhood.

Fifth, BCIM is a special project under BRI. It is also an important part of India's 'Act East' policy which seeks to improve connectivity with India's Eastern neighbors and the North-Eastern region. Developing the BCIM economic corridor is not possible without full Chinese support. India has also vowed to be part of Maritime Silk Road, the maritime component of BRI.

Finally, a close relationship with China is in long term interest of India. Despite a plethora of complex challenges and a troubled past India and China have maintained peace and cooperates at various international platforms including UN, New Development Bank, SCO, AIIB.

Policy Recommendation

So far India's response to BRI has been two pronged, namely a "rhetorical response" criticizing BRI and second, an alternative economic vision to compete with BRI.

Statements by Indian Foreign Office depict an aggressive posturing vis-à-vis China in the recent years. Although CPEC is the main reason, its criticism of BRI goes beyond CPEC and rather target China's hidden agenda behind the projects. Indian foreign secretary Subrahmanyam Jaishankar talking about BRI in 2015 said:

"Where we are concerned, this is a national Chinese initiative. The Chinese devised it, created a blueprint. It wasn't an international initiative they discussed with the world, with countries that are interested or affected by it...A national

initiative is devised with national interests, it is not incumbent on others to buy it.”

The second aspect depicts India’s broader strategic vision to counter BRI by teaming up with other countries. It includes BBIN (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal), BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectorial Technical and Economic Cooperation), North-South corridor, Mekong Ganga Project, project Mausam and Asia-Africa Growth Corridor. The growth corridor, whose outline had been formulated during in the India-Japan joint declaration during PM Modi’s visit to Japan last year, was formally announced a few days after the Belt and Road Forum via a vision document. The project, which is expected to receive \$200 billion worth funding from Japan, is being projected as a more “inclusive” initiative, with the terminology seeming directed against Chinese projects.

However these projects lack a singular vision like BRI. There is a need to integrate all these projects to improve transportation, people-to-people connectivity and cultural ties with neighboring countries.



Figure 3 Potential New Routes

CONCLUSION

The most crucial component for success of any connectivity project is mutual trust. In its current form it is not possible for India to fully embrace BRI. While India continues to build a strong counter-narrative against OBOR through its diplomatic channels and economic clout, there is also a need to keep dialogue with China open over the issue.

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