



Trains at the opening ceremony of the Railway of Raj, photographed on June 10, 2021 in Lagos, Nigeria.

(Photo/Xinhua)

THE FUTURE OF THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE IN RESPONDING TO GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT CRISIS

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Chinese President Xi Jinping sees a globally shared future built on four important global initiatives: the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Global Development Initiative (GDI), the Global Security Initiative (GSI), and the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI).

In the face of unprecedented global challenges, the

BRI emerges as a pivotal player in responding to the development crises that afflict nations worldwide. The BRI, represents one of the most ambitious and expansive infrastructure and economic development projects in modern history with China investing billions of dollars in infrastructure across Asia, Africa, and Europe.

In March 2013, President Xi Jinping proposed the vision of building a community with shared future for mankind and, in September and October of that year, he launched the Belt and Road Initiatives which initially took the form of the “One Belt, One Road initiative,” encompassing the overland Silk Road Economic Belt which focuses on land-based economic corridors and the Maritime Silk Road focuses on trade and connection along. These two components envisioned an interconnected network of trade routes spanning continents. Simultaneously, the BRI’s aspirations have grown with the establishment of a Digital Silk Road, a Polar Silk Road, a Health Silk Road, and a 5G-based Internet-of-Things (IoT) initiative.

These initiatives reflect China’s efforts to expand the scope of the Belt and Road Initiative beyond traditional infrastructure projects, addressing the evolving needs of the global economy and technology landscape. Each initiative focuses on a specific area of development, ranging from digital connectivity and healthcare to emerging technologies like 5G and the exploration of new trade routes.

The BRI has evolved into a comprehensive infrastructure and economic development strategy across continents. Encompassing over 150 countries and over 30 international organizations across Asia, Europe, Africa, and the Middle East which accounts for two-thirds of the world’s population and 40% of global GDP, the BRI seeks to enhance global connectivity, promote trade and economic cooperation, and foster shared development.

UNVEILING MILESTONES AND KEY DEVELOPMENTS

As of 2023, the initiative has made significant progress, impacting various sectors with a multitude of projects. The milestones and key developments in the BRI highlight its dynamic nature and China’s commitment to addressing challenges while expanding the initiative’s reach and impact on global development.

Geographic Scope: The BRI encompasses a broad geographical scope, connecting regions in Asia, Europe, Africa, and even extending to parts of the Middle East and Latin America.

The geographic scope of the BRI spans across more than 150 countries and covers around 65% of the world’s population and 40% of global GDP.

It’s important to note that the geographic scope of the BRI is continuously evolving, with new projects and partnerships being added over time.

Total Investment: Estimates of total investment in BRI projects vary, since 2013, cumulative BRI engagement amounts to about USD1.016 trillion, with about USD596 billion in construction contracts, and USD420 billion in non-financial investments. As of 2022, total Chinese investment in countries of the BRI pared down to around 67.8 billion U.S. dollars.

Infrastructure Development: The BRI focuses extensively on transportation infrastructure. It includes the development of railways, highways, ports, and airports to facilitate the movement of goods and people. As of June 2023, the China-Europe Railway Express has achieved an extensive network, encompassing over 200 cities in 25 European countries. This network spans 86 routes that traverse vital regions within the Eurasian hinterlands. This expansion signifies the remarkable reach and impact of the BRI on intercontinental trade and connectivity. Notable projects under the BRI include the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which reduces the distance between China and the Middle East from 12,900 kilometres by insecure sea lanes to a shorter and more secure distance of 3,000 kilometres by land, and the Nairobi-Mombasa Standard Gauge Railway in Kenya.

Energy: Chinese engagement related to the energy sector constitutes the largest share of China’s BRI engagement. BRI investments heavily target the energy sector, including the development of power plants, renewable energy projects, and oil and gas pipelines. Analyzing Chinese energy engagement in different BRI countries, Pakistan was the country that received the most energy engagement since the launch of BRI in 2013, receiving almost USD30 billion in investment and construction

Construction crews work at the construction site of the Sosian Geothermal Power Plant project on May 26, 2023 in Nakuru, Kenya.



(Photo: Xinhua)

contracts, majority of which have been in hydropower and coal followed by Russia and Saudi Arabia. Projects like the China-Central Asia Gas Pipeline and the Karot Hydropower Station in Pakistan exemplify this focus.

Trade Facilitation: The BRI aims to reduce trade barriers by improving connectivity and streamlining customs procedures. China's trade with the countries engaged in the BRI has exhibited steady growth, expanding at an annual rate of 6.4 percent between 2013 and 2022. This growth has culminated in a total trade value of USD19.1 trillion, reflecting the initiative's role in fostering economic collaboration and connectivity among participating nations. This is expected to boost trade volumes between participating countries.

THE FUTURE OF THE BRI IN RESPONDING TO GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT CRISES DEPENDS ON SEVERAL FACTORS

China's willingness and capacity to adapt the BRI to the changing global and local contexts, values, and needs, and to improve its governance, environmental, and social performance based on more consultation, participation, and evaluation from relevant stakeholders. The BRI should remain adaptable and flexible to respond effectively to global development crises. This may involve adjusting investment priorities, aligning projects with local needs, and incorporating lessons learnt from previous experiences.

The willingness and capacity of participating countries to balance their economic and strategic interests with their development needs and local priorities, and to leverage the BRI to promote their own sustainable and inclusive development agendas, through more transparent and accountable decision-making, risk management, and public participation.

The willingness and capacity of non-participating countries, international organizations, and civil society actors to engage with the BRI in a constructive and critical manner, and to use their leverage and expertise to counteract potential negative impacts, promote best practices and standards, and foster dialogue and collaboration among various stakeholders.

The ability of the BRI to respond to challenges and criticisms. Some experts argue that the initiative lacks transparency, accountability, and sustainability standards, and that it risks creating more debt, corruption, and en-

vironmental degradation than benefits for some countries. Some countries have also expressed concerns about China's strategic ambitions, human rights violations, and competition with other powers, such as the US and India.

Therefore, the future of the BRI depends on whether and how it can navigate and contribute to these complex and dynamic challenges and opportunities, in ways that align with the overarching goals of sustainable and inclusive development. Engaging with international organizations, regional partnerships, and other stakeholders can enhance coordination in responding to development crises, ensure project transparency, and promote sustainable development.

THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE RESPONSE TO GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT CRISIS

With the BRI's expansive infrastructure projects and economic partnerships, it aims to promote connectivity, trade, and development across Asia, Europe, Africa, and even beyond. As the world faces mounting global development crises, such as environmental vulnerabilities, climate change and economic inequality, the future of BRI holds great potential in responding to these challenges and fostering resilience on a global scale.

One of the central tenets of the BRI is that it will strengthen economic growth, reduce poverty, and promote sustainable development across its member countries. A significant part of this process will have to do with responding to global development crises as they occur. In the long run, these crises, if left unaddressed, threaten to undermine the success of the initiative as a whole. In that regard, China's role in managing global development crises will be essential in determining the effectiveness of the BRI, particularly in helping countries achieve its long term development goals.

The BRI strategically aligns with and supports regional and multilateral development initiatives, such as the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, the African Union's Agenda 2063, and the European Union's Strategy on Connecting Europe and Asia.

For instance, during the 2018 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) summit in Beijing, which marked the largest-ever meeting between Chinese and African leaders, a significant declaration was made. China and African nations agreed to deepen their cooperation by align-



Photo/Xinhua

Employees work on a fiberglass production line at Junshi Egypt for Fiberglass Industry S.A.E on June 26, 2023 in Egypt.

ing Africa's Agenda 2063 development strategies with the BRI. This envisioned synergy aimed to enhance connectivity in various areas, including policy, infrastructure, trade, finance, and industrial capacity under the BRI. It also sought to foster increased collaboration in planning African infrastructure and industrial development. Hence, the future of the BRI in addressing global development crises heavily relies as it aligns with participants's initiatives that recognizes the interrelationship between crises.

One important aspect of the BRI's response to this global development crisis is China's engagement with international partners. While the BRI is primarily a Chinese initiative, it has elicited support from countries worldwide, including ones that are not a part of the initiative. Close collaboration with international partners will be critical in ensuring the success of the BRI, and it is through these relationships that China can help to coordinate multilateral efforts to address development challenges across the globe. The BRI is presented as a collaborative initiative with mutual benefits. China emphasizes that the initiative is open to all countries and aims to foster inclusive development and cooperation.

ADDRESSING ECONOMIC CRISES

BRI has the potential to play a crucial role in addressing economic crises by promoting trade and investment along its corridors. The initiative's focus on infrastructure development enables countries to enhance connectivity,

reduce logistical costs, and boost economic growth. By improving transportation networks and establishing special economic zones, BRI encourages trade diversification and regional integration, creating opportunities for countries to recover from economic downturns. Furthermore, BRI projects provide employment opportunities, stimulate local economies, and facilitate technology transfer, thus contributing to poverty reduction and inclusive development.

By maintaining and increasing economic cooperation, BRI can help to mitigate the negative impacts of economic crises on local economies. Additionally, the BRI can foster the diversification of economic activities and assist with the optimization of trade and investment flows, thereby providing aid to unstable and financially weak nations. Enhanced collaboration and increased investment in digital infrastructure, technology transfer, and sustainable business practices can further strengthen economic growth, productivity, and overall development, thereby helping countries respond to crises effectively.

TACKLING CLIMATE CHANGE

China has increasingly recognized the importance of environmental sustainability in BRI projects. The greening of the Belt and Road Initiative, driven by China, entails development initiatives aligned with the 2030 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDG) targets that also present climate action-posi-

tive investment opportunities. The BRI's energy related engagement in the first half of 2023 were the greenest in any 6-month period since the BRI's launch in 2013. In the first 6 months of 2023, about 55% of energy engagement went into solar, wind and hydropower.

The BRI recognizes the importance of addressing environmental challenges, including climate change and energy security. As the world is faced with the urgent need to transition towards sustainable energy sources, the BRI can play a pivotal role in facilitating the development of green energy infrastructure.

The BRI has the potential to address climate-related issues by incorporating green development practices, renewable energy, and climate-conscious infrastructure. By investing in clean energy projects, such as solar, wind and hydroelectric power projects, BRI can help countries transition towards low-carbon economies and contribute to global efforts in responding to environmental crises.

The BRI's focus on sustainable infrastructure can serve as a model for environmentally conscious development, setting the stage for a green recovery in the face of climate change.

Additionally, BRI's emphasis on connectivity and trade facilitation can encourage the adoption of sustainable practices and promote the exchange of green technologies. China's commitment to the Paris Agreement and its green Belt and Road principles demonstrate a growing recognition of the need for environmental stewardship within the initiative. By investing in renewable energy projects and promoting sustainable practices, the BRI can help to mitigate the adverse effects of climate change as one of the global developmental crises.

RESPONDING TO GLOBAL HEALTH CRISES

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of global health cooperation and preparedness. The scope and influence of the BRI extend beyond just infrastructure, and the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for a comprehensive approach to global health within the BRI framework.

In response to the crisis, China took steps to incorporate health infrastructure and cooperation into the BRI projects. For instance, China provided medical supplies and assistance to BRI partner countries and established health corridors to facilitate the movement of essential medical resources. These efforts demonstrate an initial response to

addressing global health challenges within the BRI.

The BRI, with its emphasis on connectivity and collaboration, is well-positioned to facilitate the exchange of knowledge, resources, and medical expertise to aid countries in responding to global health crises. Infrastructure projects funded by the BRI can enhance health-care systems, facilitate the transport of medical supplies, and promote knowledge sharing among nations. As the world seeks to recover from the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic, the BRI's investments in healthcare infrastructure could prove instrumental in building more resilient societies. Additionally, BRI's emphasis on digital connectivity can facilitate the sharing of health-related information and expertise, enabling quick responses to future health crises.

Moving into the future, the BRI could further enhance its capacity in responding to global health crises by:

Strengthening healthcare infrastructure: The BRI could emphasize building and upgrading hospitals, laboratories, and healthcare facilities in partner countries. Investing in healthcare infrastructure can help countries better prepare and respond to future health crises.

Promoting medical research and development: Collaboration in medical research and development between BRI countries can lead to the discovery of new treatments, vaccines, and diagnostic methods. Joint research projects and sharing of scientific knowledge can better equip countries to combat global health challenges. For example, China has collaborated with African countries in developing traditional medicine to treat COVID-19.

Improving healthcare cooperation and capacity building: The BRI can facilitate stronger cooperation between healthcare professionals, institutions, and organizations across partner countries. Exchange programs, training initiatives, and knowledge sharing can enhance healthcare capabilities and preparedness.

Supporting digital health initiatives: The BRI could promote the adoption of digital health technologies, such as telemedicine and health data sharing platforms. This would enable remote healthcare delivery, early warning systems, and efficient response mechanisms during health crises.

Incorporating public health considerations in project planning: The BRI can integrate public health considerations into project planning, ensuring that infrastructure projects are designed in a way that enhances health resilience. This may involve incorporating healthcare infra-

structure and systems into the design and functionality of ports, railways, and other infrastructure projects.

Overall, the future of the BRI in responding to global health crises lies in its ability to effectively integrate healthcare infrastructure, research, and cooperation into its framework. By prioritizing health resilience within the initiative, the BRI can play a significant role in mitigating global health challenges and strengthening global health security in the future.

FOSTERING INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT

The success of BRI lies also in its ability to promote inclusive development and reduce inequalities. By investing in infrastructure projects in underdeveloped regions, BRI can stimulate economic growth and uplift marginalized communities. Furthermore, BRI's focus on people-to-people connectivity, cultural exchanges, tourism and education initiatives can foster cross-cultural understanding, respect, social cohesion and strengthen global solidarity during challenging times. These initiatives can bridge cultural gaps and foster understanding among nations, creating a conducive environment for cooperation during development crises.

By prioritizing inclusive development, BRI can contribute to poverty eradication, social stability and sustainable growth, ensuring that the benefits of globalization reach all segments of society.

In conclusion, China's Belt and Road Initiative has the potential to be a catalyst in responding to global development crises. The BRI's future in responding to global

This is the landscape arrangement of the Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation near the China National Convention Center in Beijing.



(Photo/Xinhua)

development crises rests on its adaptability to changing circumstances and its capacity to address pressing and current challenges. BRI stands at the forefront of addressing the multifaceted challenges that define global development crisis by fostering international cooperation, promoting sustainable development, transparency, and a commitment to addressing the evolving needs of participating nations. By aligning with global development goals and addressing emerging challenges, the future of BRI holds immense promise in shaping a more prosperous, sustainable and resilient world.

As we face significant challenges, the BRI must continue to adapt and evolve, delivering benefits that create sustainable and inclusive development outcomes not just prioritizing efficiency and speed but also taking into account the social and environmental implications of its projects. The BRI's ability to integrate lessons from ongoing challenges and align with broader global development goals will shape its effectiveness in the years to come.

Notwithstanding the positive impact, challenges such as rising debt burdens and environmental issues have emerged, impacting countries like Kenya, Ethiopia, Zambia, and Uganda who have, at a point, found it challenging to manage their escalating debt obligations. The ability of the BRI to respond effectively to global development crises also hinges on addressing these challenges head-on.

To secure the BRI's long-term success, there is a critical need for transparent and responsible lending practices, ensuring that participating countries can manage their debt obligations effectively. Additionally, incorporating environmentally sustainable practices within BRI projects is crucial to align the initiative with global efforts toward a more sustainable future.

A collaborative approach that involves not only China and participating nations but also international organizations is paramount. By fostering cooperation, promoting good governance, and adapting to changing global circumstances, the BRI can position itself as a dynamic force for positive change. Ultimately, tackling the identified issues will be pivotal in realizing the BRI's potential to contribute significantly to global development, especially in times of crises, and to foster a more interconnected and prosperous world.

Finally, while the initiative continues to evolve, it is imperative for stakeholders to work together to harness its full potential and navigate the path toward a more prosperous future for all. 🇺🇸