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Issue Brief

Belt and Road Initiative Summit: A Disinterested Response from India

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That India refused to participate in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) Summit exposes its fears of internationalization of Kashmir dispute and its anti-connectivity approach to state-to-state relations.

On China's invitation to participate in the Summit, Indian Foreign Secretary, Subramanyam Jaishankar, responded:

*"They have extended an invitation to the government to participate in the Summit. How India can participate in the Summit when China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) runs through Pakistan Occupied Kashmir? It is for China, a country sensitive to such matters, should say how can a country whose sovereignty has been violated can come on an invitation."*¹

There are two aspects of this disinterested response: New Delhi's disapproval of One Belt One Road (OBOR) as Beijing's attempt to expand its influence in the Indian Ocean, and, opposition to CPEC due to the Kashmir dispute.

OBOR is one ambitious project and may stir the apprehensions among regional and global actors. It has two components: Silk Road Economic Belt and Maritime Silk Road. To address regional and global concerns, and take all the stakeholders on board, China announced to host a forum in January.²



On Jan 7, 2017, *Economic Times India*

stated, "New Delhi, according to sources, is still reluctant to endorse OBOR."³ India lies in the middle of both the land and maritime routes, which gives it an advantageous position in a project spreading over three continents and a multi-layered network of global trade.

¹ PTI, "China violates sovereignty : S Jaishankar tells China", The Indian Express, Feb 22, 2017. <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/cpec-violates-sovereignty-s-jaishankar-tells-china-4538588/>

² Huaxia, "Xi says China to host Belt and Road forum in May", Xinhua, Jan 1, 2017. http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-01/17/c_135990723.htm

³ China wants India in one-belt-one-road meet, India remains wary", The Economic Times, Jan 7, 2017.

India is expected to join the project as it is one of the founding members of Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB), which will support BRI projects along with the Silk Road Funds. Many quarters in India believe that India must join OBOR. Shayan Saram, in his article titled 'India must join the China's Silk Road Initiative', advised New Delhi to come on board to avoiding marginalization in global economy and play a proactive role in BRI just as earlier, India decided to become a part of AIIB.⁴ Any such prudent suggestion falls on deaf ears. Indian Media also views OBOR positively. On February 24, 2017, *Daily Pioneer* published an article, 'India should gear up for One Belt One Road', and suggested the government to tap its intellectual resources to define its position vis-à-vis OBOR. The columnist, R.K. Pachauri was of the view that “India can gain more as an insider than as a disinterested bystander.”⁵

Despite being a part of OBOR, New Delhi remains restive to the efforts of regional connectivity in economic plane.

India's claim on Kashmir as its integral part is hollow. Kashmir dispute, until resolved, doesn't make India the legitimate owner of the territory. From violation of the United Nations Resolutions to holding a plebiscite in Kashmir to the recent wave of Kashmiri's mass protest after Burhan Vani's death uncovers India's massive human rights abuse in the region. In her book, Farhana Qazi penned a detailed account of her observations on the under-reported pain and undocumented sufferings of the Kashmiris, ““Kashmiris were forbidden to walk in the streets without purpose, and in case of an emergency, they needed their papers to cross security checkpoints. No one was free.”⁶ India denies the people of Kashmir their basic rights to life and expects Pakistan to do the same. To the people whom India denies even the right to live, why would it give them the chance to prosper in wake of the multibillion dollar project that is underway?

Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) published a report on why India loathes CPEC. SIPRI's publication, 'Silk Road Economic Belt—Considering Security Implications and the EU-China Cooperation Prospects', brought to fore India's fears of internationalization of Kashmir dispute to view. It maintains that CPEC will make China a stakeholder in the Kashmir dispute, which has been a neutral

<http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/china-wants-india-in-one-belt-one-road-meet-india-remains-wary/articleshow/56383009.cms>

⁴ Shayan Saram, “India must join China's Silk Route initiative”, *Hindustan Times*, Mar 18, 2017. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/ht-view/india-must-join-china-s-silk-route-initiative/story-cZJ5kG4ktsvRaRXI9yRkqO.html>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Farhana Qazi, “Secrets of the Kashmir Valley: My Journey through the Conflict between India and Pakistan”, 2016. Pharos Media and Publishing Pvt Ltd, pg: 22

observer of the dispute. Author's note of the report unveils the hypocrisy hidden behind India's opposition to CPEC: "India strictly opposes CPEC, and while the Economic Belt is not a harbinger of a new conflict, it has so far intensified the historic competition over influence in South Asia."⁷

India's accusations of CPEC as a violation of its territory, too, does not hold water because, throughout the history, Gilgit-Baltistan enjoyed independent status. The Gilgit region was ruled by *Rajas* and *Mirs* in assistance with *Wazirs* (ministers). The Baltistan region was divided into eight principalities (*Rondeu, Astore, Skardu, Shigar, Kiris, Khaplu, Tolti and Kharmang*) governed in internal and external affairs by *Makpon Amacha* and *Yabgo*, the ruling elites, and *Rajas* of Skardu. Owing to its geographical position and trade passes, Gilgit-Baltistan region became a lucrative place for the Sikhs of Punjab and Dogras of Kashmir. From 1840 to 1890, Sikhs and Dogras occupied a large piece of land in the region. From 1891-1892, the British Indian Army occupied Hunza, Gilgit and Nagar, which brought the whole region under the British rule. Later on, from 1890-1935, the British formed this area as a single unit divided into four sub-units: *Gilgit, Ladakh, Kargil and Skardu*. Internal affairs of the region were controlled by the Kashmir government and external by the British. In 1935, Kashmir government leased out the region to the British government for 60 years. After the British left the sub-continent, The Gilgit Scouts managed to get freedom under the Gilgit Revolution. Since January 1, 1949, this region has been administered by Pakistan.⁸

China, today, is a global economic giant. It has resources and experiences which it can utilize to expand its sphere of economic activities beyond its home. India will gain little by its tried policy of isolating itself from its neighbors. Economic cooperation could become a bargaining chip, in some distant future, which India can use to effectively address its concerns on OBOR and CPEC. India should adopt an open-minded and mature stance towards the greater regional and global economic shifts. After denouncement of Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), New Delhi can put itself at the verge of marginalization in the era of global economy. India can gain more by becoming a proactive participant in the project rather than staying a disinterested bystander. .

⁷ <https://www.sipri.org/publications/2017/other-publications/silk-road-economic-belt>

⁸ For a detailed history of Gilgit-Baltistan: A socio-political study of Gilgit-Baltistan Province by Omar Farooq Zaman <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.717.1246&rep=rep1&type=pdf>