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Responding to BRI Challenges

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The Belt and Road Forum (BRF), held at Beijing on 14-15 May, left memorable imprints on world's leaders and scholars. Its traces would be calculated for years to come to reshape the global connectivity and cooperation. China has wonderfully done its sublime task. Responses from other countries will continue to flow.

Some powerful countries, however, are not on board. The United States has an ambivalent policy toward the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for quite some time. The BRI has become a test case for the United States. It is not supporting it as well nor is it opposing. The Trump Administration sent Matt Pottinger, Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for East Asia at the National Security Council to the BRF.

His presence amounted to a nod from Washington and its ability to appreciate the building of infrastructure. He said that American companies especially engaged in construction, engineering, oil and gas, and finances have a lot to offer to the BRI. While he supported the initiative, he also questioned debt burden, environmental issues, and transparency of the BRI.

The United Nations, World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) gave unflinching support to the BRI at the moot. They understood the vitality of the connectivity.

Critics say that Trump is a bit lenient toward China to get its support to fix the North Korean issue. They believe that Trump is conceding global leadership to China and that the BRI is not just trade integration, it is China's grand plan to capture global leadership. These are old geo-political tribal views based upon old dictums.

These concerns are futile. They are far from reality. China is serious about transparency not only within China but about BRI projects. Under its anti-corruption drive, around one million people have been punished since 2013. China has made a number of measures to ensure transparency in BRI projects. Debt is going to be eased after BRI projects are materialised and gain strength.

Countries can refuse any loans and investments if they deem it necessary or a potential threat to their finances and future expensive investments offers by Chinese companies. China does not impose its will on sovereign governments. They can choose and pick if their national interest allows them to do so.

Environmental degradation is the chief concern of the BRI. It is the revival of the ancient Silk Road - not the destruction of the Silk Road with new technologies to preserve the human heritage and environment.

No country could concede leadership to any country through its will. It is a natural process. Power shifted from a Euro-centric focus to the United States after World War II. They did not concede to the United States happily or angrily. It was the decision of history. The rise of China is also natural. Power just cannot be conceded to China by the United States. These are economic realities and the historic course of these events cannot be changed.

The gathering of 29 world's leaders at the Belt and Road moot in Beijing on 14-15 May was testimony to this unfolding reality taking place in favour of China. Smaller and developing countries have an equal share in the BRI. They are keen to participate to change economic under-development into opportunity and prosperity. The BRI is not a

tool of exploitation for them. They want to reap the benefits and want to emulate the example of rapid growth of Chinese economy. All are keen to become “China”. This was the sentiment prevailing in Beijing.

Sooner or later, Japan has no choice but to join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the BRI. The unofficial participation of Japanese leaders, former Prime Minister Yukio Hatoyama, and scholars at the BRF, at least, gave this impression. If not, Japan would be left behind. Japan has the time to re-evaluate its potential participation as the third largest global economy. Doors are open.

India has its own legitimate role to play in shaping the economy of the 21st century. It is not a competition of power politics divided between China and India. Unlike developing China, India has not been able to come up with a global initiative nor is it willing to join the Chinese-led initiative. Opposing the BRI on the basis of the CPEC is not persuasive and credible, and India has terribly failed on that baseless mantra in convincing the world.

Development leads to stability and the creation of a better neighbourhood. This was a lesson learnt at the BRF. China’s relations with its fourteen neighbours have improved after it has achieved economic sustainability. It is time for India to learn from the Chinese experience. China is more than willing to accommodate India and happy to lend any support to ease tension with Pakistan.

Together the United States, Japan, and India cannot resist the BRI that has built a strong global consensus along the BR countries for connectivity, development, and cooperation. President Xi Jinping rightly remarked at the BRF that “the pursuit of this initiative is based on extensive consultation and its benefits will be shared by all of us.” The United States, Japan, India, and other countries could also share the benefits of the BRI and play an important role in transforming the lives of billions of people around the world.

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