



10/25/2023

The Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation 2023



Chinese President Xi Jinping holds talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin.
Photo Credit: Xinhua/Zhang Ling

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The BRI – A Trojan Horse for China’s World Hegemony?



China’s President for Life, Xi Jinping, addressing The Belt and Road Forum 2023 Photo Credit Bloomberg News.

Navigating a Decade of Global Collaboration

The Belt and Road Forum, a flagship event of China’s ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is a global gathering that brings together leaders and representatives from various countries to discuss and promote economic cooperation and infrastructure development. The BRI, launched in 2013 by Chinese President Xi Jinping, aims to enhance connectivity between Asia, Africa, and Europe through a network of infrastructure projects, including roads, railways, ports, and energy pipelines. This article explores the key takeaways from the Belt and Road Forum, its impact on the economic foreign policies of the participating regions, global trade, and diplomatic ties.

A colossal undertaking that seeks to revive ancient Silk Road trade routes and promote economic integration between China and the rest of the world, comprises of two main components: the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road. The Economic Belt focuses

on land-based infrastructure, while the Maritime Silk Road emphasizes maritime routes and port development.

Geopolitical Dimensions: Recreating the Silk Road for Global Influence

The BRI has faced scrutiny for its geopolitical undertones. Critics argue that it serves as a tool for China to extend its economic and geopolitical influence globally. This was a central theme in discussions during the Forum, as reported by Reuters before the event.¹ The initiative's proponents, however, emphasize its primary goal of boosting global trade and fostering mutual cooperation.

China's foreign policy under Xi Jinping, often described as increasingly assertive and employing 'Wolf Warrior diplomacy,' aligns with the goals of the BRI. Foreign Affairs Minister Wang Yi, a prominent figure in China's diplomatic landscape, has been instrumental in promoting China's solutions and voices on the global stage. Wang's description of the 'Two Guidances,' emphasizing China's role in guiding the global community towards a more just world order and ensuring international security, reflects China's proactive approach.² Wang's comparison of China as the 'leading goat' in 'guiding the reform of global governance' underscores China's assertiveness in shaping international norms.³

Russian President Vladimir Putin's attendance at the Forum, despite historical tensions and an outstanding warrant issued by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in March, added a layer of complexity.⁴ The fact that neither China nor Kyrgyzstan are ICC members provided a unique backdrop to Putin's participation, highlighting the geopolitical intricacies at play.

China's Multipolar Vision and Economic Impacts

The BRI was a platform for China to promote its visions of a "multipolar" world, aiming to empower the global south. The emphasis on mutual cooperation and shared benefits was evident in

¹ Reuters, "China to Host Belt and Road Forum in Beijing Oct. 17-18," October 11, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/china-host-belt-road-forum-beijing-oct-17-18-2023-10-11/>.

² Zhao Suisheng, *The Dragon Roars Back: Transformational Leaders and Dynamics of Chinese Foreign Policy*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2023).

³ Zhao Suisheng, *The Dragon Roars Back*, 2023.

⁴ Reuters.

the discussions and presentations during the event. Recent research by Boston University highlighted China's substantial financial contributions through its development finance institutions, reaching approximately \$331 billion between 2013 and 2021.⁵ However, concerns were raised regarding the potential debt distress faced by many of the recipient countries.

China's evolving role in the BRI was a key focus. Originally conceived as an infrastructure development project, the BRI has grown into a comprehensive vehicle for financing projects across the globe. This expanded scope includes not only economic development but also addressing broader global challenges such as food security, infectious diseases, artificial intelligence, and climate change.⁶ This shift signifies China's intent to position the BRI as a force for positive global change.

Diplomatic Significance: Putin's Presence and Global Partnerships

Deemed the "most diplomatic event of the year," with Putin as the guest of honor.⁷ This event underscored the close relationship between China and Russia, challenging the conventional narrative of global power dynamics. Putin's three-hour-long bilateral meetings with Chinese President Xi Jinping highlighted the commitment to strengthening ties between the two nations.⁸

The geopolitical implications of China and Russia's joint calls for a ceasefire in the Middle East, particularly amid rising tensions between Israel and Hamas, showcased a united front that contrasts with the positions taken by European and US leaders.⁹ The Forum became a platform for China and Russia to emphasize their long-term commitment and cooperation against what they perceive as a US-led world order. Their long running strategic alliance through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization has developed over the years especially culminating in their strategic partnership to green light the February 22, 2022, invasion of Ukraine and subsequent sanctions of Russia and exodus of Western firms and foreign direct investment. This strategic blunder of Putin

⁵ Amy Hawkins, "China Woos Global South and Embraces Putin at Belt and Road Beijing Summit," October 16, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/oct/16/china-woos-global-south-and-embraces-putin-at-belt-and-road-beijing-summit>.

⁶ Hawkins, "China Woos Global South and Embraces Putin."

⁷ Simone McCarthy, "Putin's Prominence and the Shadow of Conflict: Key Takeaways from China's Belt and Road Forum," CNN, October 19, 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/10/19/china/china-bri-forum-key-takeaways-intl-hnk/index.html>.

⁸ McCarthy, "Putin's Prominence and the Shadow of Conflict."

⁹ McCarthy, "Putin's Prominence and the Shadow of Conflict."

not only burnt all bridges with the West but opened the door for China to monopolize the Russian economy by buying cheap oil, gas, and electricity while replacing Western goods and services with Chinese goods and services. The multipolar world of strong China and a devastated Russia provided an interesting backdrop as the Global South remains dependent on their assistance and products for years to come.

Challenges and Divergences: Italy's Possible Exit and African Perspectives

Despite the collaborative spirit of this initiative, challenges and potential divergences among participant nations were evident. Italy, the sole G7 member participating in the BRI, is considering exiting the project when its membership expires.¹⁰ This raises questions about the alignment of interests and perceived benefits among diverse nations within the initiative.

From an African perspective, The Belt and Road Forum witnessed active participation from over 130 leaders from the continent, reflecting the importance African nations attribute to China's BRI.¹¹ The Forum became a platform for African leaders, including the presidents of Congo, Kenya, Nigeria, and Zambia, to express their hopes for sustainable development and elevate their bilateral relations with China.

Albert Muchanga, the head of trade and industry for the African Union Commission, downplayed concerns about the BRI being a debt trap for poor countries, emphasizing that China's initiative came at the "right time" for boosting Africa's development.¹²

¹⁰ McCarthy, "Putin's Prominence and the Shadow of Conflict."

¹¹ The North Africa Post, "African Leaders Attend 3rd Belt and Road Forum in Beijing," October 18, 2023, <https://northafricapost.com/72168-african-leaders-attend-3rd-belt-and-road-forum-in-beijing.html>.

¹² The North Africa Post, "African Leaders Attend 3rd Belt and Road Forum in Beijing."



Kenyan President William Ruto discusses the strengthening of Kenyan-Chinese relations regarding economic development. Photo Credit: Xinhua/Wang Guansen

Conclusion: Navigating Forward in Global Collaboration

In conclusion, The Belt and Road Forum 2023 encapsulated a decade of global collaboration and discussions. The Initiative, originally conceived as a means to enhance connectivity, has evolved into a multifaceted global force with geopolitical, economic, and diplomatic dimensions. The Forum's discussions showcased both the opportunities and challenges presented by the BRI, emphasizing the need for collaborative efforts and a commitment to ensuring sustainable and mutually beneficial development. As participating nations navigate the complex terrain of global collaboration, the BRI remains a central player in shaping the future of international relations and economic cooperation. The peaceful Global Village prior to the Maidan Revolution of 2014 was a thriving community of nations, which brought the standards of living up for many of the world's poor. The investment of the West in Russia and China over the past number of decades have been forgotten as leaders, Putin and Xi, who benefited from the West's investment, empowered themselves into becoming "Presidents for Life" and then declared that their New World Order would be multi-polar. Their new hegemony is based on their authoritarian model, while they believe the West will further decay. Unfortunately, the danger in their new initiative is evident, the rest of the World may not wish to aspire to their model.

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