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The new anti-colonialists

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By Harsh V Pant

It wasn't unexpected. But as in the past, India has, for the second time, rejected China's official invitation to attend the latter's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) forum, scheduled for April 25-27 in Beijing. New Delhi had turned down Beijing's invitation to the first BRI summit in May 2017, which saw some 129 countries and 29 heads of State gather in Beijing.

Even as countries like the US, Russia, Japan, Britain, Germany and France took part, India stood firm in its opposition to BRI, underlining its strong reservations on the Chinese initiative. It was the first big setback to China's attempts to project itself as a global leader via the BRI. Since then, several other setbacks have compounded the problem for China.

So, as India reiterates its opposition to BRI, China will make it about India's problematic track record, rather than its own. As Lou Chunhao, deputy director, Institute of South Asian Studies, China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), Beijing, told Global Times, China's official mouthpiece, "If India insists on turning its back on cooperation under the BRI, or even interferes with certain projects, it will miss many development opportunities and its links with other South Asian countries would be harmed."

New Delhi's 'boycott' comes against the backdrop of China's continuing attempts to block India's bid at the UN to declare Jaish-e-Mohammed chief Masood Azhar a global terrorist despite the February Pulwama attacks. Despite the Wuhan outreach, the informal summit in which Prime Minister Narendra Modi and President Xi Jinping met in May 2018, nothing seems to have fundamentally changed in the Sino-Indian dynamic.

Recent reports about China continuing to bolster its position in the Doklam plateau underscore the challenges at the border. And the original question of India's sovereignty continues to haunt BRI. As India's ambassador to China Vikram Misri has reiterated, "No country can participate in an initiative that ignores its core concerns on sovereignty and territorial integrity."

China's BRI outreach to the rest of the world, however, continues unabated. This month's forum will see over 100 countries, including about 40 leaders of governments, attending. Last month, Italy became the first European nation to sign up for BRI, despite growing scepticism in the West.



Careful about the neo-Orientalist project

Not too bright

China has successfully managed to capture the world's attention by calling for an urgent need to boost infrastructure development and transnational connectivity as the next stage of economic globalisation. Other major powers have been forced to respond with their own infrastructure and connectivity plans. The Indo-Pacific Economic Vision announced by the US last year is one example. There is a huge infrastructural demand in the world, and China has been the first major power to try to fill it.

But in the process of doing this, Beijing has found it difficult to overcome its tendency to ride roughshod over others. While India has opposed China's BRI on the grounds of sovereignty, there are other equally significant concerns it has highlighted, such as inclusivity, financial and environmental sustainability and the unilateral nature of BRI.

A number of countries that had joined the BRI bandwagon initially are now having second thoughts, and are echoing Indian views. Southeast Asian nations like Malaysia and Myanmar have recently expressed concerns about China's 'debt trap diplomacy' emanating out of BRI. From the Maldives and Sri Lanka to Malaysia and Thailand, questions are being raised about the future viability of many of the Chinese projects.

The West is tightening the screws on Chinese economic misbehaviour. The Federation of German Industries recently called on the EU to deal more firmly with China in tackling unfair competitive methods like product dumping, compulsive technology transfer and inequality in financial backing.

In more ways than one, India has shaped the emerging global discourse on connectivity and infrastructure by highlighting the predatory nature of China's BRI. Going beyond just opposing BRI because of bilateral sovereignty concerns vis-à-vis China, India has been able to shape the normative discourse in this realm. And, in the process, New Delhi, too, has been forced to reckon with its own limitations as a provider of public goods like regional connectivity.

By extension, India has been forced to improve its own performance, as well as think more creatively of partnering with other nations. There is a new seriousness in New Delhi's approach towards connectivity and infrastructure that was missing earlier.

The road to brickbats

India has balanced its opposition to BRI by maintaining its distance from the joint initiative launched by the US, Japan and Australia to fund infrastructure projects in the Indo-Pacific region that aims to fund projects to 'build infrastructure, address development challenges, increase connectivity and promote economic growth'. Instead, it has focused more on bilateral partnerships. India's engagement with Japan in South Asia as well as via the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor (AAGC) is the preferred model.

India has been the shaper of global discourse on China's BRI and its wider connectivity, despite initially being an outlier in its opposing stance.

Now, it's up to India's policymakers to effectively make use of the opportunities provided by growing concerns about the Chinese project to make India emerge as a net provider of regional connectivity.

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BLOG

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