

A new roadmap for the Belt and Road Initiative



Russian President Vladimir Putin, Chinese President Xi Jinping with his wife Peng Liyuan and other leaders at the Belt and Road Forum at the Great Hall of the People, in Beijing, China, on 26 April. REUTERS

BRI 2 incorporates industrial capacity building, technological cooperation and environmental protection.

The Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (BRF) was held in Beijing from 25-27 April 2019, with the theme of “Belt and Road Cooperation: Shaping a Brighter Shared Future”. The Forum was attended by 37 heads of state and delegates from 150 countries and 90 international organisations around the world. At the end of the conference, it was revealed that 282 deliverables worth \$64 billion were signed, sprawling into agriculture, science and technology, ecological protection, cultural exchange etc., spheres, thus taking the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) beyond the infrastructure connectivity projects. I was among the few Indians—perhaps the only one from the academic circles—to attend the forum and had the opportunity to engage in extensive discussions with delegates from other countries.

The Belt and Road Initiative is almost six years old and China has taken a stock of the “project of the century” in terms of its geo-economics as well as politics. One thing which emerged clearly out of President Xi Jinping’s speech during the Forum on 26th morning was that China was convinced that the projects signed with 125 countries and 29 international organisations during the first forum in 2017 had “taken roots” along the “six economic corridors” in various countries (newly signed China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, CMEC, maintaining the tally at 6), as China’s trade with the BRI countries exceeded \$6 trillion, implying that 50% of China’s GDP originates from these countries. Not only China, but various countries along the BRI including the participants from new entrant Italy (the first in the G7) and Switzerland etc., echo President Xi Jinping’s words that the “BRI is a common road of opportunities, a road towards prosperity”. The China club, as many have referred to it, is undoubtedly becoming more and more attractive to the countries across the globe.

There was near unanimity amongst the participants that prior to the Chinese initiative, the US and its allies were the sole providers of global goods, however, when China was willing to provide the same and wanting to make them inclusive by everyone’s participation, its intention was being questioned. Delegates from South Asia saw the initiative as a massive opportunity for building capacities and eradicating poverty. China has invested billions of dollars in India’s immediate neighbourhood; in Bangladesh, infrastructure projects over \$10 billion are being executed. Nepal is executing the China-Nepal Transit and Transportation Agreement, which will facilitate the building of a connectivity network in terms of roads, rails, air and optical fibre cables along Koshi, Kaligandaki, Karnali etc., corridors. Interestingly, during this forum, of all the 13 bilateral and 16 multilateral

agreements with Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Pakistan, almost none was in the infrastructure sector. India's official absence from the 2019 forum was conspicuous even though our flag flew high along the BRI countries' flags at every venue of the forum. India has been critical of China's insensitivity towards India's core interest in the region, especially China's investment in the Pakistan Occupied Kashmir.

While the "Five Connectivity" and "mutual consultation, joint development contribution, and shared benefits" remain the golden principles of the BRI, however, BRI 2 has laid emphasis on the "high quality development" that would be accompanied by greater opening up to the outside world; green, clean and sustainable development bringing greater benefits to the people along the BRI countries in terms of poverty alleviation, employment opportunities, and bonding between the people as was demonstrated by President Xi Jinping's speech at the forum. In this regard, he said the projects would adhere to the international norms of bidding, local laws and customs, and transparent financing. Execution of the projects "under the broad daylight" spelled that China would monitor the projects for malpractices such as corruption and under the table deals. Secondly, he emphasised on the free flow of commodities, capital, technology and personnel and the mutual learning from civilisations, and said that innovation was the key to productivity and would drive the fourth Industrial Revolution. The "high quality development" perhaps is meant to blunt the Japanese pitch of building "quality infrastructure" in the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor and the Indo-Pacific Region, where India is a partner country. The presence of all the ten ASEAN countries and many African and Latin American countries at the forum showed that the Japanese pitch was never a counter to the BRI. Furthermore, the presence of former Japanese Prime Minister Yukio Hatayama and many other delegates from Japan showed that the country had warmed up to the Chinese initiative, and was even proposing joint investment in third countries, which China welcomed for various reasons including financing of the projects.

Certainly, if the focus of the first forum was infrastructure development and reclamation of the old Silk Road, BRI 2 incorporated industrial capacity building, technological cooperation, environmental protection, cultural connections and legal sensitivities more prominently, thus enhancing the scope of the BRI from Eurasia to other continents. For example, there were many delegates from the Latin American countries, who felt themselves to be a part of the initiative, contrary to their feelings a few years ago. No wonder China has been talking less of building "major country relationship" with the US, rather it is vehemently proposing the idea of "building a community of shared future", for it has been seen more inclusive and enshrining the components of common development, prosperity and security. This has been referred to at various summits including this one and is supported by China's commitment to deliver things on the ground. For example, President Xi Jinping flagged out five points as to what China will be offering to the world in the coming years. One, China will further open and deepen its reforms and give greater market access to foreign investors (a concern Indian companies and many from the West has flagged). Two, China supports international cooperation on intellectual property rights (one of the reasons behind the ongoing US-China trade war). Three, China will increase imports of goods and services, will aim at further lowering the tariffs and non-trade barriers. To this effect another Import Expo would be held in Shanghai later this year. Four, China will promote international macroeconomic policy Coordination. Five, China will continue to implement the policy of opening up to the outside world. For policy coordination and consultation, as well as to undertake various field research and projects pertaining to various facets of the BRI globally, a Belt and Road Study Network (BRSN) has been established, having top scholars from over 60 think-tanks and universities globally.

Finally, as I have argued earlier, the BRI is here to stay. The longevity of the BRI has been ensured by it being incorporated into the Constitution of the Communist Party of China and the life-term presidency of Xi Jinping. In other words, it is a part of Xi Jinping's "Thought for New Era of Socialism", which makes it an important component of China's development blueprint, as well as the dream of the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. As for India, "opposition" to or "boycott" of the BRI will not yield any results. India's passive participation in BRI through the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor (BCIM) has been rendered meaningless, as the corridor has been replaced by the CMEC. The question of sovereignty as regards the Pakistan Occupied Kashmir is not new. Did we stop engaging with China or Pakistan on account of this? If not, I believe, it is time for India to rethink on the question of BRI.