

BEIJING'S OUTREACH

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - China

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The second forum on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that concluded in Beijing over the weekend suggests a subtle shift in China's framing of the ambitious initiative outlined by President Xi Jinping in 2013. Beijing's earlier articulation of the gigantic plan to promote global connectivity through China's investments had a "take-it-or-leave-it" approach. Xi's conciliatory tone this time around underlined China's eagerness to respond to the widespread international criticism of the BRI. Many countries and institutions — including India, Japan, Europe and the United States — voiced concerns that the BRI is motivated by China's ambition to expand its geopolitical influence at the expense of other powers. There has also been widespread criticism that the BRI projects were pushing recipient states into a debt trap, unsustainable environmentally, not transparent enough, and violating international norms.

At the second forum, Xi sought to reassure the world that BRI is about partnership rather than the pursuit of unilateral advantage. A joint communique issued after the summit reflected China's effort to negotiate a new consensus behind an initiative in which Xi invested massive personal political capital. The communique pledged to pursue high-standard, people-centred and sustainable development "in line with our national legislation, regulatory frameworks, international obligations, applicable international norms and standards". The communique was signed by Xi and 37 heads of state/government. Fourteen new countries became new signatories to the initiative. The communique also extended support for "collaboration among national and international financial institutions to provide diversified and sustainable financial support for projects,". It also underlined the importance of "improving livelihoods" of the local population.

Delhi, which stayed out of the second iteration of the forum, in line with its explicit criticism when the first BRI forum was organised in 2017, has to take into account the new BRI dynamics. Many countries had indeed joined India in highlighting the problems with BRI. As China begins to address these issues, more nations are joining the initiative by paying greater attention to BRI's terms and conditions. While sceptics around the world insist that the change in Beijing is more about style rather than substance, the next government in Delhi should take a fresh look at BRI. If China is ready for a productive consultation with India, Delhi should start engaging with Beijing. A case by case evaluation of infrastructure projects might allow Delhi to construct a practical approach to BRI. Over the last few years, Delhi has announced plans to develop connectivity projects on its own as well as in collaboration with other powers, especially Japan and the US. The next government must turn some of this talk into concrete outcomes. Delhi must also come to terms with the expanding scope of BRI that is enveloping the digital and space domains and is bound to create challenges much larger than those presented by Beijing's current projects on physical connectivity over land and sea.

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