

BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

THE HURDLES ALONG THE WAY



Chinese and Pakistani workers sit on an excavator as they leave a newly built tunnel in northern Pakistan.

PHOTO: AAMIR QURESHI/AFP

ANM MUNIRUZZAMAN

CHINA'S Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is an ambitious programme which seeks to connect Asia with Africa and Europe via land and maritime network with six economic corridors. The BRI's geographical area is constantly expanding. So far it covers over 70 countries, accounting for about 65 percent of the world's population and around one-third of the world's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The name was coined in 2013 by China's President Xi Jinping, and the concept of the modern Silk Road was drawn from the ancient Silk Road, established throughout the Han Dynasty a thousand years ago, which was an important trade route that connected China to the Mediterranean region. The BRI contains a trade route and a transcontinental passage that links China with South-East Asia, South Asia, Central Asia, Russia and Europe by land, and a 21st-century maritime trade route, an ocean route connecting China's coastal regions with South-East and South Asia, the Pacific Ocean, and East Africa. The project is usually represented as a trade route, which would create a "belt" of land corridors and a maritime "road" (actually a sea route) of shipping lanes. The initiative defines five major priorities including various policy coordination to expand shared interests, enhance mutual trust, and build consensus on further cooperation. Infrastructure development of this scale cannot materialise without regional connectivity. This connectivity needs to facilitate the building of an infrastructure network that not only links all the sub-regions in Asia but also extends out to Europe and Africa. Transnational trade is one of the primary focuses of the BRI. Unimpeded trade will facilitate more trade between the nations and would remove many barriers of investment and trade and open up free trade areas to create a business-friendly environment at the regional and national level. The initiative would also facilitate financial integration to foster currency stability, build a sound framework for investment, financing, and credit services across Asia, while strengthening the role of institutions such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the BRICS New Development Bank, the Silk Road Fund, and sovereign wealth funds just to name a few. People to people contact lies at the very heart of the initiative. People across borders would have the opportunity to increase interaction and mutual understanding, be aware of potential benefits from expanded cooperation, and participate for the initiative's success. Bangladesh is an important member of BRI and has signed several MoUs for infrastructure construction and economic cooperation totalling USD 40 billion during the visit of President Xi Jinping to Dhaka in October 2016. As Bangladesh is a key maritime nation in an important geostrategic location along the Belt and Road, China has been trying to influence Bangladesh to play a major role in this geo-

economic and geo-connectivity vision called the BRI. One of the six economic corridors of BRI, the old BCIM (Bangladesh, China, India, and Myanmar) corridor which began with the Kunming initiative, addressed by academic Rehman Sobhan in 1999, will become a major BRI economic corridor; in fact, it will become one of the two major maritime economic corridors of BRI. MoUs were additionally signed for cooperation including maritime cooperation, joint practicability study on a free-trade space, new ICT framework, counter-terrorism collaboration, capability building, sharing of knowledge, disaster risk management, and cooperation on power and energy sectors. However, India has expressed its concerns regarding BRI, especially in regards to CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor) which runs through the disputed Kashmir region. The Rohingya crisis which has soured Bangladesh-Myanmar relations is another concern for the success of the BRI. Bangladesh doesn't share a border with China and is therefore dependent on transit from China via either India or Myanmar. Over the past five years, China's trade with countries along the Belt and Road exceeded USD 5.5 trillion. Chinese direct investment within the non-financial sectors of those countries reached USD 80 billion. China founded 82 overseas economic and trade cooperation zones in those countries, providing USD 8.9 billion worth of funds and creating 244,000 jobs. As of 2018, China signed 16 trade agreements with 24 countries and regional organisations, nearly half of them being part of the Belt and Road. Additionally, China founded 81 education establishments and 35 cultural centres. Within the first half of 2018, China spent around USD 39.3 million on Silk Road scholarships. Still, this mega project is facing a number of challenges. This includes the costs of the projects and the capabilities of host countries to afford the debt required to finance them. Centre for Global Development report shows that eight countries along the Belt and Road are struggling to repay the loans taken to finance such projects. These nations are Djibouti, Kyrgyzstan, Laos, the Maldives, Mongolia, Montenegro, Pakistan and Tajikistan, who will owe more than half of all their foreign debt to China. A mega project like the BRI will obviously face a lot of challenges and limitations in implementation. Primarily among them is the need for an efficient and effective management infrastructure to oversee and closely monitor its progress. BRI is certainly a grand initiative which is why it will require effective communication and strategic plans to be implemented successfully. Thus policymakers in countries along the BRI should emphasise on policy coordination to maximise their shared opportunities and mitigate their individual risks.

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The coming of age of Rahul Gandhi

Congress Party's wins in three heartland states in assembly elections could fire up next year's race for the parliament

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

THE three most important take-aways of the Congress Party's victory in assembly elections in the heartland states of India are: (1) it has suddenly opened up the race for power in the parliamentary polls due in the first quarter of the New Year; (2) it has dramatically altered the political equation between the Congress and its regional allies; and (3) most significantly, the coming of age of Rahul Gandhi, the fifth generation scion of the Nehru-Gandhi family, as a politician and the helmsman of the 133-year-old party. The Congress' wins in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan meant the heaviest defeat for Prime Minister Narendra Modi-led BJP in the last four years. Not that the Congress has not won assembly elections on its own in the past—it has done so in Punjab, Karnataka and Goa (the party emerged as the largest party in the elections). But what the results of the polls in the heartland states have done is breach the aura

Rahul Gandhi's bargaining power in trying to forge a pan-India anti-BJP alliance with regional parties with the Congress as its anchor and mount the most serious challenge to Modi. The win in the three states will enhance 48-year-old Rahul Gandhi's image as the credible, main leader of an anti-BJP front in dealing with the more experienced, firebrand and ambitious politicians of regional parties like Mamata Banerjee, Mayawati and Sharad Pawar, and some others who are not known to be comfortable with a man much junior to them. An immediate effect is already visible. Mayawati's Bahujan Samaj Party, which had refused to align with the Congress in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan assembly polls, has promptly extended support to the Congress' bid for government formation in Madhya Pradesh where the Rahul Gandhi-led party fell short of simple majority by two seats. The victory for Rahul Gandhi could not have come at a better time: just five days ahead of the first anniversary of his

Maosists a few years ago and the party did not even have a prominent chief ministerial face in sharp contrast to the saffron party's Raman Singh, Chief Minister for the last 15 years. In the last few months, Rahul Gandhi has succeeded in tapping into the widespread resentment over the farming sector crisis festering for more than four years, lack of jobs for the youth, and the Modi government's shock demonetisation (scrapping of high-value currency notes of Rs 1,000 and Rs 500) in November 2016 that badly hit industries, especially the medium and small enterprises. What added to the woes of the industries was the introduction of a nationwide uniform goods and services tax (GST). Rahul Gandhi made these issues the party's key planks. He spiced up the planks by mounting an attack on the BJP on the issues of corruption and crony capitalism in connection with India's Rs 36,000-crore deal with France to buy Rafale fighter planes. He repeatedly brought Modi into his firing line in



Rahul Gandhi interacting with locals in Gujarat.

PHOTO: PTI

of invincibility built up by the BJP's victory in a series of state-level elections across India, the most important being the remarkable triumph in Uttar Pradesh, since Modi became PM in May 2014. The significance of the message from the results in the three heartland states lies in the fact that they together accounted for a total of 65 parliamentary seats. In 2014, the Congress could manage to win just three of those, yielding 62 to the BJP that led the latter to come to power in India. But if the voters' mood as reflected in the latest assembly elections continues in the coming parliamentary polls, the BJP risks losing at least 31 of the 65 seats. Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh are the states where the Congress and the BJP are in a direct contest against each other. Add to this another seven states where the same scenario applies—Assam, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Haryana, Goa and Delhi. A total of 133 parliamentary seats will be at stake in these ten states taken together. The BJP is in power in six of these seven states and so the party will have to cope with double anti-incumbency (as the party is also in power at the Centre) in next year's parliamentary polls. This, coupled with the Congress' victory in the three heartland states, could fire up the 2019 race for parliament and make it much more closely-fought than anticipated so far. Tuesday's results will also consolidate

anointment as the President of the Congress as he took over the mantle from his Italy-born mother Sonia Gandhi on December 16, 2017. The recent polls in Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh and Rajasthan were a crucial test for the leadership qualities of Rahul Gandhi who has frequently been subjected to jibes by his critics, including the BJP, as a "pappu" (a greenhorn) in politics. Not so anymore as the emphatic wins in the three states have undoubtedly cemented his position as the top leader of India's oldest party to take on the BJP in a straight contest in the coming parliamentary polls. Mind you, Rahul Gandhi had taken over the Congress leadership at the most critical juncture of the party which was at its nadir after being consigned to its worst performance in the general election in 2014 and defeats in a series of elections in states thereafter. The party's pan-India presence shrunk considerably. Such was the plight of the party that serious questions were raised about its ability to bounce back and stave off the challenges of a more resourceful, combative and the killer instinct of the BJP's ruthless election apparatus. So the wins in Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Chhattisgarh are a watershed moment in the beginning of the Rahul era in the Congress. What was particularly creditable for him is the manner in which he fronted the campaign in Chhattisgarh where almost the entire top brass of the state Congress was annihilated in a deadly ambush by

on the Rafale deal, along with the Supreme Court dealing with it on petitions, created a popular perception that there is something amiss in the deal. Perceptions may not always be right but it matters in electoral politics. Rahul Gandhi's coming of age as a politician is also visible in the fact that either he or his party steadfastly refused to respond to the BJP's frequent use of polarising narratives on the issues of "illegal" migrants in Assam, Ram temple in Ayodhya and changing of Islamic names of places. The Congress assessment is that biting the bait of polarising issues would only help the BJP in the consolidation of Hindu votes. Rahul Gandhi's restraint in dealing with his rivals at a news conference when the election results were announced on Tuesday was commendable. In sharp contrast to the BJP's frequent calls for a "Congress-mukt Bharat" (an India free from Congress), Rahul said he envisioned an India not to be "mukt" of anyone, including the BJP. The biggest challenge for Rahul Gandhi is to sustain the momentum generated by the assembly polls in the three states till the battle for parliament and wait for his party's "achche din" (good days).

Pallab Bhattacharya is a special correspondent at The Daily Star.

QUOTABLE Quote

BOB DYLAN (b. 1941)
AMERICAN SINGER-SONGWRITER, AUTHOR, AND ARTIST

I think of a hero as someone who understands the degree of responsibility that comes with his freedom.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Indiana player
- 6 Looks upon
- 11 Solitary
- 12 Mumbai's nation
- 13 Like some stoves
- 15 Court divider
- 16 Picnic invader
- 17 Brit's brew
- 18 Brit's brew
- 20 Not obtuse
- 23 Mistake
- 27 Do some modeling
- 28 Corn Belt state
- 29 Fine-tune
- 31 Boxer Liston
- 32 Holds onto
- 34 The works
- 37 Letter after sigma

DOWN

- 1 Lowly chessman
- 2 Lotion additive
- 3 Old codger
- 4 Conclude
- 5 Money-back offer
- 6 Moral excellence
- 7 Roadhouse
- 8 Fix text
- 9 Carafe contents
- 10 Long account
- 14 First numero
- 18 T-bone, e.g.
- 19 Singing groups
- 20 Fitting
- 21 Milk source
- 22 Take advantage of
- 24 Director Howard
- 25 Hold title to
- 26 Sunbeam
- 30 Stovetop item
- 31 Brief bursts
- 33 Water, in France
- 34 Saddler's tools
- 35 Pirate's take
- 36 Nuts
- 38 Painter Joan
- 39 A fan of
- 40 Senior
- 42 Dapper guy
- 43 Negating word

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

P	L	O	W	A	W	A	Y		
C	R	O	N	E	W	O	M	A	N
H	E	F	T	S	L	O	O	N	Y
E	S	T	A	T	E	U	K	E	
S	T	E	P	M	A	G	N	E	T
S	O	D	F	I	X	A	T	E	
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P	L	A	Z	A	S	R	N	S	
V	I	O	L	E	T	S	E	A	L
I	L	L	I	E	Q	U	A	T	E
A	L	I	B	I	U	N	D	E	
L	A	T	I	N	I	N	E	R	T
R	A	N	K	P	Y	R	E		

BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

THEY SAY "TO MAKE A FRIEND, BE A FRIEND."

HELLO, PAL, HOW'S MY BUDDY DOING?

GET YOUR GWA* HANDS OFF ME, JERK!

THAT WASN'T VERY FRIENDLY!

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT

TA-DAAAA!

IS WREN GOING POTTY ALL BY HERSELF NOW?

YEP SHE STARTED LAST NIGHT.

THAT WAS A PRETTY LOUD "TA-DAAA"

YOU SHOULD HAVE HEARD MY "WOO-HOO!"