

Belt and Road Initiative and what's in it for Bangladesh



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THE second Belt and Road Forum (BRF) was recently held in Beijing. This is the second time the forum took stock and set the pathways for future endeavours of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) since this major initiative was launched in 2013.

In his address to the forum, President Xi Jinping also set new guidelines for the BRI to proceed in the coming years. He laid a lot of emphasis on the progress of BRI for the common good of humanity. In his words: "The flow of goods, capital, technology and people can provide strong impetus and broad space for economic growth. As the Chinese saying goes, 'The ceaseless flow of rivers makes the oceans deep.' However, were such inflow to be cut, the ocean, however big, would eventually dry up."

In his speech, the Chinese president also touched upon some areas where BRI has to take special care and note. Specifically, all BRI projects in the future will have to adhere to strict international standards in quality. Projects will also have to be clean and green. There would be zero tolerance for any misappropriation or corruption in BRI projects. Special care has to be taken so that all project planning meets the environmental standards and no damage is done in the construction process to the environment.

Issues of the so-called "debt trap" also came up for discussion. It was pointed out that both lending and borrowing countries have to be more responsible for debt management and borrowing should only be done with capacity of repayment in mind. The five key areas of focus of BRI were also emphasised upon

during the forum: policy coordination, connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration and people-to-people contact. It was pointed out that for the successful implementation of BRI, all these five areas of focus must receive the highest attention.

A number of sideline events also took place during the forum touching upon specific aspects of the initiative: there was a CEOs' forum on joint investment and business opportunities; a Belt and Road News Network meeting; a Belt and Road Studies Network meeting comprising of major think tanks in BRI countries, to name a few. A number of new initiatives were also launched to support the BRI—notable amongst them are the Beijing Initiative for Clean Silk Road, Belt and Road Energy Partnership, Belt and Road Initiative Tax Administration Cooperation Mechanism. The International Silk Road Academy of Science was also launched along with the Alliance of International Science Organizations in the Belt and Road Region. The Belt and Road News Network will be a platform for cooperation amongst major news outlets and media houses in BRI countries. Similarly, the newly launched Belt and Road Studies Network will be a platform to bring together major think tanks in BRI countries to carry out research studies on different aspects of the initiative and provide policy inputs.

A special emphasis was also put on creating the Digital Silk Road Initiative. It was well understood that in this age of digital revolution, physical infrastructure alone cannot bring prosperity to people. There is thus the need for creating an effective digital infrastructure connecting all countries in BRI. It is well-known that BRI is a people-centric project. Therefore, people-to-people interaction amongst BRI countries is of utmost importance. People's connectivity in the BRI region through exchanges and expansion of

tourism is of significance. China will also support 5,000 people from the innovation centres in BRI countries through conducting exchanges, training programmes and joint research over the next five years. Another 10,000 representatives of political parties, think tanks, non-government organisations from countries participating in BRI will be invited to China for exchanges in the next five years. To sum it up, the BRF shed light on the new pathways for progress of the BRI in the next few years.

at Kunming in China, pass through Myanmar and Bangladesh, and end up in Kolkata, India. Recently, a bilateral contract has been signed between China and Myanmar known as China-Myanmar Economic Corridor (CMEC). Bangladesh is going to start implementing other BRI projects very shortly. During the visit of President Xi Jinping in Bangladesh in 2016, a USD 40 billion package was pledged and necessary MOUs signed, of which USD 26 billion is meant for infrastructural

the projects, we must give priority to our national needs and objectives. Being a climate-change-affected country, we will have to be extra cautious and sensitive in maintaining the highest environmental standards in all these projects. The so-called debt trap should also warn us that we have to be responsible and cautious in taking debts and managing them well. Transparency and accountability should be maintained in the planning and execution of these large projects. Project completion maintaining the highest degree of quality and international standards is of utmost importance. Going by our past record and experience, this is quite a tall order but given the size and importance of the projects, we cannot afford to compromise on any account.

BRI is a comprehensive undertaking that can transform our development endeavours and also support us in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. We will need to have a coordinated policy approach in three policy domains: trade, finance and investment (TFI). Only then can we better streamline the efforts to a win-win outcome.

Any mega project of this scale will also have geopolitical and geostrategic implications. We must therefore also carefully analyse these aspects as we move towards implementation of BRI.

In his speech at the forum, President Xi Jinping said: "Joint development of the Belt and Road Initiative embraces the historical trend of economic globalisations, responds to the call for global governance system reform and conforms to the strong desire of people of all countries to live better lives."

Indeed, development and improving people's lives should be our goal.



Construction work going on for the Karnaphuli tunnel which is a BRI project.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

Bangladesh is a signatory country of BRI. It is also a key strategic partner of the initiative. Of the six economic corridors upon which the concept of BRI is built, one corridor will pass through Bangladesh. The old Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar (BCIM) corridor is now to become the BRI corridor linking Kunming to Kolkata. There are only two corridors of the six corridors which are identified as maritime corridors and the old BCIM corridor is one of them. It will start

development under BRI. Bangladesh stands to benefit enormously when these projects are completed; we will be linked by land through the corridor to the Chinese mainland which will then lead to connectivity through the other corridors to the rest of the world.

However, managing such massive infrastructural investment and development is not always easy. We will need to develop our policy and management capacities to reap the benefits of this initiative. In identifying

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PROJECT SYNDICATE

India's Cult of Modi



SHASHI THAROOR

IN 2014, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi came to power at the helm of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) after articulating a vision of a revived India, a manufacturing giant with high-tech capabilities which could meet the rising aspirations of a growing young population. Modi promised voters that his administration would be an era of "achhe din" (good times), marked by "minimum government, maximum governance," inclusive development ("sab ka saath sab ka vikas"), high employment, and rising economic growth and prosperity. Voters believed him in droves.

But in India's just-completed election, Modi repeated none of this. He knew full well that the hollowness of his own promises (and his abject failure to fulfil any of them) would come back to haunt him if he did.

So, instead, Modi ran a very different sort of campaign. India, he claimed, was beset by enemies within and without. Only he—a muscular nationalist with a 56-inch chest—and his stout band of watchful Chowkidars could keep the country safe from terrorists, infiltrators, "anti-nationals," and "termites" seeking to hollow out the sturdy structure of the majoritarian Hindu Rashtra, a Hindu nation, that he was building. It worked. Modi's "khaki" campaign gave him an even bigger electoral victory than in 2014: 303 of the 543 seats in the lower house, and another 50 in the hands of his allies.

The 2019 Indian election will be a case

study in how to upend the conventional assumption of electoral politics that an incumbent is judged on his record of performance against his own promises. Modi failed spectacularly against the very yardsticks he had set himself, cheerfully moved the goalposts, and scored big goals in a totally different game from the one he said five years ago he would play. And yet the voters rewarded him. Why?

The only plausible explanation starts with the construction of the most extraordinary personality cult in modern Indian history.

The cult of Modi is now buttressed by larger-than-life imagery, hundreds of thousands of social-media warriors, an intimidated "mainstream" media, ubiquitous cameramen, and a slick publicity machinery that was switched on 24/7, all lubricated by 5,600 crore rupees (USD 750 million) of taxpayer funds relentlessly promoting his every move. This was indeed a "Prime Minister with a difference," but not in quite the way the slogan implied, for this was India's first prime minister who cast a shadow far larger than his substance.

Of course, this exercise was aided and abetted by a formidable party organisation: millions of members recruited through "missed calls" (when recipients call back, they reach a BJP recruiter); effective polling booth committees active well before elections, including hundreds of thousands of "panna pramukhs" (BJP workers, each in charge of cultivating voters on a single page of the electoral register); foot soldiers of the Hindu-supremacist RSS, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh or National Volunteer Corps, delegated from every shakha (cell) in a state to interact with sensitive constituencies; campaign squads persistently visiting voters' homes with leaflets and arguments; and a command structure that relayed instructions down the hierarchy with swift and unchallengeable authority.

And so, relentlessly bombarded by propaganda and by the effective messaging of a well-honed party machine, 37.4 percent of India's voters decided that Modi was indeed the embodiment of their nation, and that it was almost their duty to vote for him—not necessarily for the feckless, opportunistic, and often faceless candidates presented listed on ballots next to the lotus symbol of the BJP, but for Modi himself. The presidentialisation of India's parliamentary system is complete.

Does this mean that issues no longer matter, performance is irrelevant, and Indian voters are beguiled purely by personality? It certainly seems that way in those states that turned toward the BJP. Tellingly, better-educated voters in Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Punjab (where Hindus are not in a crushing majority) were not so easily taken in by stirring rhetoric and majoritarian militarism. And it must be noted that 37 percent of the popular vote gave Modi 56 percent of the

seats in India's first-past-the-post system. Still, a win is a win by the rules. And this is a big win.

It is nonetheless extraordinary that the BJP was able to persuade people to vote their prejudices rather than their economic interests. After all, why would a young man who voted for Modi in 2014, expecting to get a job that he needs, vote for him again in 2019 when he is still unemployed? He does so, apparently, because he is consumed by fear and sees in Modi his protector. The object of that fear is often defined as a Muslim—and additionally as a malign Pakistani general or a terrorist despatched by him—who must be confronted by a strongman ruler.

The worry for many Indian liberals is that our long-cherished idea of our country as a benign, inclusive state—thriving in its astonishing diversity of religions, ethnicities, languages, and castes—is collapsing. In its place is emerging an India that is less pluralistic, less accepting of difference, less inclusive, and less tolerant than the one we had long celebrated. The ideal of unity has given way to one of uniformity; patriotism has been redefined as chauvinism; independent institutions are yielding to a dominant government; democracy is being reshaped into one-man rule.

This is what Modi cheerfully dubs "New India." It is a vision that has left many fearful Indians yearning for the old one.

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A supporter of Bharatiya Janata Party, wearing a mask of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, checks his mobile phone as he attends an election campaign rally being addressed by Modi in Meerut.

PHOTO: REUTERS

A WORD A DAY

INVEIGLE
VERB

To get something or to persuade someone to do something by deception or flattery.

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

WHERE IS THE GENERAL GOING?
RIDING OFF INTO THE SUNSET
DON'T THEY USUALLY DO THAT RIDING A HORSE?

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

WORST ART INSTALLATION EVER.
HAR HAR.
DAD! FIX THE DRIVER! THESE ARE GIRL SOCKS!

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