

BRI Nexus Promoting Multilateralism in a Post-Pandemic World

By **MONEEF R. ZOU'BI**

BORN of centuries-long interactions between China and other civilizations along the ancient Silk Road, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) appears as the quintessential manifestation of multilateralism on the world stage since the Second World War which was, sad to say, one of quite a different kind. The BRI sets out to capture the spirit of the Silk Road, or to articulate, in contemporary vernacular, an Eastern inclination towards human solidarity.

Described by former Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs (2012–2013) Bob Carr as “China’s contemporary conversation with the world,” the character of the BRI is one of engagement. China seeks through its involvement in world affairs to introduce a roadmap for future global economic growth and connectivity. Interestingly enough, this mission accords with the opinion of former U.S. Secretary of Transportation Anthony Renard Foxx, expressed in his comment, “The reality about transportation is that it’s future-oriented. If we’re planning for what we have, we’re behind the curve.”

The first five years (2013-2018) of the BRI polarized international attention, and at the same time provoked considerable debate. Typically described as a cooperative arrangement amongst like-minded states committed to advancing worldwide infrastructure and connectivity projects, the BRI has expanded in breadth and depth in tandem with the countries and players involved in it, and the objectives pursued.

In 2019, Beijing hosted the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (BRF), an event highlighting the extensive progress of a wide range of worldwide infrastructure projects since the BRI’s official launch in 2013. The Joint Communique that it

published, agreed on at a Leaders’ Roundtable, called for greater cooperation, reaffirming that “strengthening multilateralism remains essential in addressing global challenges.” The founding in late 2018, moreover, of the non-profit BRF Advisory Council has provided intellectual support for both the BRI and the BRF through policy recommendations aimed at fostering practical cooperation and promoting further understanding of the BRI. Perhaps most significantly, the BRF Advisory Council’s main mission is to promote synergy between the BRI and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted in 2015, whose aim is to promote world economic growth. This represents a long overdue nexus of politics and policies.

I maintain that the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development still stands as the representative political manifesto for the post-COVID-19 world over the next decade. Hence my belief that reviving the spirit of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is imperative for the factoring in of new health and globalization pa-



An ambassador’s wife poses for a photo with a simulated model of China’s bullet train in Xi’an, Shaanxi Province on July 8, 2021.

rameters. The revised Agenda must, moreover, extend the human solidarity ethic beyond the contours of our immediate response to the outbreak of COVID-19.

One year on, we appear to be moving ever closer to overcoming the scourge that has so dramatically altered life on our planet over the past 18 months. But the gradual abatement of this most devastating pandemic of a century leaves massive debris in its wake — not just by virtue of the millions it has killed, but also the chaos it has wrought on entire societies, evident in burnt-out health care systems, the stunting of children’s education and hence development, and water, energy, and food insecurity, to name but a few. The stringent tests it posed for political, social, and business leaders found many wanting; political theorists and pundits alike have failed to address the non-health aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Today, institutions, nations, communities, organizations, and companies around the world need a new operation model. There is now, more than ever, a vital need for purpose-driven, visionary leadership rooted in the common values of human responsibility, and willingness to search out global solutions to global problems.

In view of the prominent oppositional trends to multilateralism that are evident in many corners of the globe, promoting multilateralism may seem imprudent in the current international milieu. However, that multilateralism not only facilitates achievement of common goals and objectives, but also constitutes a necessary cooperative component of today’s world has been proven beyond doubt — as the BRI has unequivocally demonstrated. The potential for achieving wide-ranging, positive developments around the world, and for enabling and securing such developments clearly necessitates multilateral approaches.

Belligerent nationalism, or what has often been described as a “fortress mindset,” on the other hand, will not work. Pervasive discontent with existing multilateral institutional structures threatens our systems of global cooperation. Human insecurity, and the accelerating ecological crisis due to climate change, could culminate in the irreversible, large-scale collapse of ecosystems. But times of crisis and comprehensive challenges may also transmute into a new era of sustainable futures, and a new age of united humanity. Therefore, humankind should do its utmost to make today multilateralism’s finest hour. This is clearly evident in the

overarching philosophy governing the BRI, wherein groups of states work together in unprecedented and innovative ways.

Fortunately, many governments around the world are reaffirming their commitment to multilateralism. One example is that of the Alliance for Multilateralism, an initiative launched by the French and German Foreign Ministers in April 2019, with subsequent support from China. The Alliance consists in an informal network of countries united in their conviction that a rules-based multilateral order is the only reliable guarantee of international stability and peace.

Likewise, the Declaration on the Commemoration of the Seventy-fifth Anniversary of the United Nations, adopted by the General Assembly on September 21, 2020, and aptly referenced by WHO Director General Dr Tedros Ghebreyesus, states, “We need a multilateral system that is inclusive, networked, and effective. Member states have identified 12 areas of action that can only be addressed through reinvigorated multilateralism.” It

goes on, “The COVID-19 pandemic has reminded us in the most powerful way that we are closely interconnected and only as strong as our weakest link. Only by working together and in solidarity can we end the pandemic and effectively tackle its consequences. Only together can we build resilience against future pandemics and other global challenges. Multilateralism

is not an option but a necessity as we build back better for a more equal, more resilient, and more sustainable world.”

Dr. Joanna Nurse, strategic advisor to the InterAction Council, once proposed the establishment of a Global Emergency Council for People and Planet. The body would facilitate multilateral leadership with heads of government and a neutral panel of global leaders, enabling coordinated and strategic responses to global emergencies. Significantly, such a mechanism would work towards enhancing swift action at scale to avert global emergencies. As an embodiment of human solidarity through help and support from UN agencies, the international community, heads of government, donors, the private sector, civil society, and professional bodies could achieve these noble goals. ■

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