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**Belt and Road: The Crossroads of Evolution, Reorientation,
and the Pursuit of Sustainable Global Connectivity (2013-2025)**



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Introduction

When Chinese President Xi Jinping introduced the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, not many people expected the magnitude and sustainability that it would have. It was the vision of a win-win cooperation and mutual prosperity. The BRI was set to



recycle the ancient Silk Road, via modern infrastructure, trade, and cultural connections. There are several evolutionary stages in this initiative over the last ten years which include ambitious constructions works and a rebalanced approach towards sustainability and digitalization. The future of the BRI in 2013-2025 demonstrates not only the flexibility in the Chinese strategy, but also the changes in the perceptions of globalization and development in the whole world.

Foundation Phase (2013-2016): Construction of the Infrastructure of

Connectivity

The initial part of the BRI was defined by zeal, diplomatic expansion and institutionalization. The initial moves of China were based on the establishment of alliances in Asia, Africa and Europe. Beijing showed dedication to offering alternative sources of development finance without the involvement of Western dominated institutions such as World Bank and IMF by the creation of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) in 2015 and the Silk Road Fund in 2014.

The Chinese-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) and the Addis Ababa-Djibouti Railway were the embodiment of the Chinese global ambition being took into the real

world. The BRI story of these times was centered on physical infrastructure as being the foundation on which economic integration and reduction of poverty would be built up; ports, roads, railways. However, the growth also caused the first discussions about accountability, financial sustainability, and sustainability regarding the environment.

Expansion and Institutionalization (2017-2019): International Forums and Increasing Criticism

The second phase was the consolidation of the BRI as one of the core pillars of foreign policy of China. In 2017 and 2019, more than 130 countries and 30 international organizations attended Belt and Road Forums of International Cooperation, an indication of a wide international



participation. BRI was posed by China as a platform in accordance with the United Nations 2030 Agenda of Sustainable Development, specifically SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure) and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) (United Nations, 2018).

Nevertheless, this is also the time when the international criticism was increasing. The Western policymakers depicted the initiative more strongly as a geopolitical leverage, accusing Beijing of trapping the developing nations in debt. The governments of some African and Southeast Asian countries started to renegotiate the terms of projects which indicates their anxiety regarding the debt sustainability and sovereignty.

Chinese think tanks and ministries began to focus on high-quality cooperation and mutual benefit and were conscious of the global skepticism. Green standards and digital cooperation frameworks were already present on the agenda of policy speeches, which was an allusion to a new change (NDRC, 2019).

Consolidation and Reorientation (2020-2025): Mega-Projects to Green and Digital Way

The global spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 severely affected the global momentum of the BRI. Building setbacks, travel limitations and economic burden compelled China to re-evaluate its plan. However, innovation was also triggered by the pandemic. The Beijing Policy initiated the health silk road to promote cooperation in medical supply and the digital silk road to increase the digital infrastructure in partner countries.

Since 2020, the BRI has embarked on what analysts call BRI 2.0, which focuses on sustainability, debt management, and digitalization. The Green Development Guidelines on Overseas Investment and Cooperation (2021) became a pivotal change in the direction of an environmentally responsible practice. The new direction is seen in solar energy initiatives in Pakistan, hydropower initiatives in Laos and the green port initiatives in Greece.



Reorientation is also in line with international demands of green and resilient recovery. The BRI is becoming more and more similar to the international development



standards by implementing climate-friendly investments, which makes it a less geopolitical instrument. Nevertheless, there is a question mark regarding the transparency of implementation and the discrepancy between speech and fact. It is not whether the BRI will survive; but rather what it will be in an extremely decarbonizing and digitalizing world.

Viewpoint: The Future of the BRI is in Cooperation in Sustainability

The Belt and Road is at a crossroads as the 2025 approaches. It derives its future legitimacy on the way it manages to incorporate elements of sustainable development, inclusive governance, and technological equity. The attempts of China to match the BRI with climate action (SDG 13) and responsible consumption (SDG 12) are indicative of the fact that the initiative needs to go beyond the sphere of infrastructure and become a systematic global governance change.

Instead of seeing the BRI in the prism of geopolitical rivalry, the international community must regard its transformative nature as an arena of South-South cooperation. Provided that partner countries will be able to find the fair terms and include local people, the BRI may turn into a pillar of the sustainable globalization, what Xi Jinping refers to as a community with a common future of the mankind.

The credibility of the BRI will, however, be based on transparency, participatory governance and environmental accountability. The desire of China to have multilateral relations with the G20, UN agencies, and regional organizations will either make the BRI transform into an instrument of global change or a certain instrument of strategic projection of Chinese influence.



Conclusion: Between the Connectivity and the Collective Responsibility

The development of the Belt and Road Initiative during the period of 2013-2025 highlights the adaptive diplomacy of China in the time of uncertainty. Since the times of building railways and ports, the BRI has changed in size and ideology. It is no longer only a physical pathway but a developing philosophy of inter-relationship growth.

Provided that China and its allies persist in being transparent, sustainable, and inclusive, the BRI may make globalization in the 21st century re-purposed anew, infrastructure becoming a bridge to joint development, as opposed to rivalry. The future of the BRI in this regard is not only roads and rails, but living in a more sustainable way and a more equal global partnership.