

Critical Analysis on the Hot Issues Among the International Debates on the Belt and Road Initiative

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Abstract—The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been a topic of hot debate among international Sinologists and pundits in recent years. What are the focuses of these international debates on the Belt and Road Initiative, why do they exactly exist, and how does China respond to these key issues? By examining these international debates on the Belt and Road Initiative, this article argues that these debates primarily focus on three problems: the purpose, essence and influence of the Belt and Road Initiative. The situation is due to different research positions, national interests, ideologies, cultural traditions. As a result, China should actively adopt innovative ways of cooperation, strengthen equal communication, and make policy adjustments to respond to the challenges from the international community to promote the development of the Belt and Road Initiative.

Keywords—China; the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); international debate

I. INTRODUCTION

Since China put forward the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013, the international community has been arguing about it for a long time. On the one hand, there are some rational interpretations of the Belt and Road Initiative; on the other hand, there are also some misunderstandings and suspicions which distort the original meaning of the Belt and Road Initiative, too. In April 2019, the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation was held in Beijing. The international community's debate on the Belt and Road Initiative has also entered a climax stage. These disputes primarily focus on the following issues.

II. DEBATE ON THE PURPOSE OF THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

How do we view the purpose of the Belt and Road Initiative? The international community has different opinions on this issue. The following opinions are the mainly representative categories.

A. To Change the Global Governance System

This view holds that the Belt and Road Initiative aims at rebalancing and redeveloping the global space, transforming the old global governance system. António Guterres, the Secretary General of the United Nations, pointed out that in the face of the problems of closure, fragmentation and exclusion in the old global governance system, the Belt and

Road Initiative is committed to improving the irrational elements existing in the old global governance system [1]. Jusuf Wanandi, the co-founder of the Centre for Strategic and International Studies, believes that the Belt and Road Initiative is the result of the Chinese government's overall consideration of the existing global governance system which has huge defects and deficiencies [2].

B. To Build a Human Community with a Shared Future

This view holds that the real meaning of the Belt and Road Initiative is to build a human community with a shared future. For example, Jean-Pierre Raffarin, the former prime minister of France, argues that China's implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative is a great practice in building a community of human destiny, which makes the Eurasian-African geopolitical strategy as a whole, a community of interests, responsibility and destiny [3]. Former Japanese Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda believes that the Belt and Road Initiative transcends the large-scale thinking that is solely related to China's interests and is a concrete manifestation and practice of building a human community with a shared future. Professor Huang Jing, who is from the National University of Singapore said that the Belt and Road Initiative can bring a steady stream of political dividends to China. The BRI is building a community of interests and destiny through economic integration with other countries [4]. In addition, Forbes published an article saying that the Belt and Road Initiative is trying to find new ways to avoid geo-economic and political confrontation. The real meaning of the Belt and Road Initiative is to build a human community with a shared future [5].

C. To Counter the US Asia-Pacific Rebalancing Strategy

The view holds that the Belt and Road Initiative is China's strategic westward policy in response to the eastward shift of the strategic focus of the US. The direct aim is to counter the US Asia-Pacific Rebalancing Strategy [6]. In 2014, Sergei Lousianin, the deputy director of the Far East Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, pointed out that the Belt and Road Initiative tries to reclassify the economic map of the Pacific Ocean to Europe. This is an effective weapon for China to suppress the US and squeeze it out to the edge of the Atlantic [7]. The Australia News Network published an article saying that the Belt and Road Initiative reduced the sensitivity of geopolitics through the name of "double silk road", and then established a geographical zone

that counter the US Asia-Pacific rebalancing strategy on the vast Eurasian continent, which has in fact formed a balance between China and the US in the Asia Pacific region [8].

III. DEBATE ON THE ESSENCE OF THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

How do we view the essence of the Belt and Road Initiative? The international community has various opinions on the issue. The representative opinions include the following categories.

A. *Public Goods*

Some people hold that the Belt and Road Initiative is open and inclusive and encourages the participation of the international community. It is the most popular sustainable international public product by far. António Guterres believes that the goals of the Belt and Road Initiative are the same as the macro goals of the UN Millennium Project, and they are all public goods provided to the world [9]. Kin Phea, Director General of International Relations Institute of Cambodia, believes that the Belt and Road Initiative proposed by China is a public product accepted by the international community, providing an important platform and opportunity for deepening cooperation among countries around the world. Professor Zheng Yongnian who is from National University of Singapore pointed out that the Belt and Road Initiative is a public product provided by China to the international community in the existing international system, and when China provides international public goods, the rules are not formulated unilaterally by China, but jointly formulated by people on the basis of joint deliberations. Such international public good is more sustainable.

B. *Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics*

The point of view holds that the Belt and Road Initiative not only benefits the Central Asian region, but also inevitably affects the change of the entire world economic structure. This is a strategic, overall and innovative major diplomatic layout with Chinese characteristics. Professor Wang Zheng from the East West University of the United States pointed out that the Belt and Road Initiative is a special diplomatic strategy that is gradually maturing [10]. Evandro Menezes de Carvalho, head of the Center for Brazil-China Studies at the Getulio Vargas Foundation, pointed out that China's economic and social development depends on a new international strategy that is more active and more global. The Belt and Road Initiative is the best interpretation of China's new diplomatic concept. Egon Krenz, the former General Secretary of the Central Committee of the German Socialist Party, has a similar standpoint.

C. *China Marshall Plan*

Some international scholars and personages believe that the Belt and Road Initiative will give China the power to play the most important role in Asia by subsidizing infrastructure development to neighboring countries, which is essentially the Marshall Plan with Chinese characteristics [11]. Shannon Tiezzi, a research associate at the U.S.-China Policy Foundation, pointed out that the Belt and Road Initiative is very similar to the Marshall Plan of the United

States, which is a rising power trying to achieve its foreign policy goals with economic strength. The Marshall Plan had helped the United States become a world superpower, and China hopes to achieve the same ambition by the Belt and Road Initiative [12]. Professor Parag Khanna from National University of Singapore believes that the Belt and Road Initiative has a long-term positive impact on Asia-Africa cooperation, enabling Asian and African countries to equally participate in the global economic development process. He called it "a continental-scale Marshall Plan" [13]. Professor Kevin Gallagher from Boston University bluntly said, "The Belt and Road Initiative is China's Marshall Plan in the 21st century" [14].

IV. DEBATE ON THE INFLUENCE OF THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

What impacts will the Belt and Road Initiative bring to the world? This is one of the most concerned issues of the international community. The debate on this issue could be summarized as positive and negative aspects separately.

A. *Negative Influence*

The representative negative standpoint is that the Belt and Road Initiative is creating a huge "debt trap" for member countries. This view holds that China will provide huge loans to the countries along the route to plunge them into a "debt trap" and eventually acquire the strategic assets of these countries. In 2017, Brahma Chellaney, a professor at the Center for Policy Research in New Delhi, firstly pointed out that the Belt and Road Initiative is China's well-designed "debt trap". China funded developing countries' infrastructure projects by giving huge loans to these countries to make them into a debt dilemma and ultimately to acquire the strategic assets of these countries [15]. Later, the US and other Western countries expressed similar standpoints. For example, at the hearing of US-China Economic and Security Review Commission in 2018, Daniel Kliman, a Senior Fellow at Center for a New American Security, pointed out that the Belt and Road Initiative creates a "debt trap" through providing loans that exceed the debtor's ability to repay, and ultimately aims at controlling the geostrategic policies of debtor countries [16]. In 2019, Brad Sherman, Chairman of the House Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, and Nonproliferation, accused that "China is getting many countries into debt traps and endanger the sovereignty of these countries by the Belt and Road Initiative at the "China's growing influence in Asia and the United States" hearing [17]. The former U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Treasury Secretary Mnuchin, and International Monetary Fund Managing Director Christine Lagarde have successively expressed similar "worries". Such views are very popular in American academic and political circles, and have become the "mainstream cognition" of society and continue to be staged.

B. *Positive Influence*

The positive standpoints affirm the worldwide significance of the Belt and Road Initiative.

- Firstly, it is conducive to promoting globalization with Chinese characteristics. Joseph Stiglitz, the

Nobel Prize winner in Economics, believes that China has invited the countries along the route, especially some poor countries and some neglected countries, to jointly build a new infrastructure network covering Eurasia and Africa in the construction of the Belt and Road Initiative, which is a good way to promote globalization with Chinese characteristics [18]. Dmitry Drobnitsky and Deborah Brautigam, who is famous political scientist and a leading authority on China-Africa relations at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies separately, have similar opinion.

- Secondly, it is to build a new mode of international cooperation. Klaus Schwab, Founder and Executive Chairman of the World Economic Forum, believes that the Belt and Road Initiative is an innovative way of cooperation. BRI is creating a new platform that allows countries and regions to participate equally and achieve win-win results, which is expected to become a paragon of international cooperation and win-win development mode [19].
- Thirdly, it is a new attempt to improve the international order. The Belt and Road Initiative is considered to be China's first serious attempt to reshape the international order by the international community. China invests resources overseas and achieves huge returns. In the process, China has steadily promoted the establishment of a new global economic and political order. Iri Paroubek, the former Czech Prime Minister and former President of the Social Democratic Party, pointed out that a new global economic and political order is currently taking shape in the international arena, and the Belt and Road Initiative will be one of the activities to promote this order.
- Finally, it is setting a new example of human progress. The Belt and Road Initiative has become an important path to promote the development of the cause of mankind and peace and stability in the world, and has set a new example for world peace and prosperity and human progress. For example, Kishore Mahbubani, a senior adviser and professor at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore, believes that the Belt and Road Initiative is reshaping the cultural and historical ties between the countries along the route. This is a process of economic prosperity and cultural renaissance. Martin Jacques, a Senior Fellow at the Department of Politics and International Studies, and Pierre Picquart, an expert in geopolitics and human geography at the University of Paris VIII, have similar standpoints.

V. DISCUSSION

As mentioned above, international Sinologists and pundits have some reasonable commentaries on the purpose, essence and influence of the Belt and Road Initiative. However, there are some misunderstandings on the core issues of the Belt and Road Initiative inevitably due to

different research positions, national interests, ideology, cultural traditions and other special factors. It is necessary to further discuss and critically analyze some certain standpoints.

A. *The Purpose of the Belt and Road Initiative: to Counter the US -Asia-Pacific Rebalancing Strategy or Not*

The Belt and Road Initiative not only embodies the spirit of peace, friendship, openness and inclusiveness of the ancient Silk Road, but also closely matches with the development strategies or initiatives put forward by many other countries along the route. Chinese government has repeatedly stressed that the purpose of the Belt and Road Initiative is to support the common development of countries along the route, and it is by no means to seek the scope of political power. As a result, the views put forward by the international community are obviously a misunderstanding that the Belt and Road Initiative is to counter the US Asia-Pacific Rebalancing Strategy.

B. *The Nature of the Belt and Road Initiative: the China Marshall Plan or Not*

The Belt and Road Initiative is fundamentally different from the Marshall Plan. The former emphasizes the realization of mutual benefit and win-win situation, and is to achieve the economic recovery and development of Asia and the world. However, the latter is to seek hegemony and often attach political conditions to the support of other countries. Financial Times pointed out that the spirit of the Belt and Road Initiative has been strengthening the values of building a human community with a shared future, embracing all civilizations. It is more inclusive than the Marshall Plan. At the same time, the Belt and Road Initiative has no potential impact on security and military affairs. According to the Chinese government, there are five areas that China emphasizes in the development of the BRI: policy communication, road connectivity, unimpeded trade, monetary circulation, and understanding among the people. Within the framework, connectivity, especially the hardware connectivity through transportation infrastructure development, occupies a central position in China's strategic plan [20]. On the contrary, the Marshall Plan gave birth to NATO [21].

C. *Doubt About the Belt and Road Initiative: a "Debt Trap" or Not*

The Belt and Road Initiative is for the development of peace and economic cooperation. It is committed to planning together, building together, and sharing together. It is necessary to adhere to the principle of mutual benefit and win-win, and strive to create an open platform for cooperation to promote the formation of an open world economy. As mentioned above, some people have trumpeted the Belt and Road Initiative as an elaborately designed "debt trap" by China. However, other scholars and personages have refuted the point by the basis of data and facts. For example, in 2016, Deborah Brautigam pointed out that the risks of the Belt and Road Initiative are often overstated or misrepresented. There is no factual basis for accusing the Chinese government of strategically issuing debt for its own benefit [22]. In April 2019, Rhodium Group investigated 40

cases involving renegotiation of loans by state-owned banks in China. Among them, 16 cases had debt cancelled, 11 cases had repayment terms extended, and the two parties in 4 cases agreed to refinance, renegotiate or terminate the payment. These data and facts prove that the so-called "debt trap" in China is simply untenable [23]. It can be seen that the allegation that participation in the Belt and Road Initiative has caused the participating countries to fall into the "debt trap" is only a confirmed "pseudo-proposition" [24].

VI. CONCLUSION

The Belt and Road Initiative originates from China and belongs to the world; it is rooted in history and is more future-oriented. By analyzing the debates among international Sinologists and pundits on the purpose, essence and influence of the Belt and Road Initiative, it is found that research positions, national interests, ideology, cultural traditions and other factors are important factors influencing the differences of standpoints between different scholars and personages. Therefore, China should eliminate and respond to the international community's misunderstandings, misinterpretations and challenges in the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative by strengthening communication and dialogue, formulating appropriate policies and innovating cooperation methods to promote the construction and development of the Belt and Road Initiative around world.

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