

Green Belt and Road Initiative: Progress, Challenges and Pathways

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After the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, globalization began to derail, whereas regional integration and multilateral economic and trade cooperation driven by inter-state politics became the main trend. In the face of climate risks, the pandemic, trade frictions and other severe man-made or non-man-made “black swan” events, wide cracks have opened in the global system of labor division and cooperation, plunging globalization into further grave uncertainty. Meanwhile the United Nations has repeatedly pointed to the climate emergency, calling for international cooperation to respond to the triple planetary emergencies of climate change, biodiversity and pollution.¹ The sustainable development of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) requires a coordinated approach to deal with different factors such as cleaner air, water, food and energy. This is not only significant for high-quality Belt and Road construction, but also for the new development paradigm of domestic and international circulations reinforcing each other. As global green governance steps up, the green BRI may correct the current global governance deficit and boost a green recovery in the post COVID-19 era, making up for the lack of sufficient green public goods² while facilitating the establishment of a global ecological civilization.

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1 “UN Environment Assembly Concludes with an Urgent Call for Action to Solve Planetary Emergencies,” February 23, 2021, <https://www.unep.org/news-and-stories/press-release/un-environment-assembly-concludes-urgent-call-action-solve-planetary>.

2 Huang He and Dai Liting, “Belt and Road Public Goods and Major-Country Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics,” *Pacific Journal*, No.8, 2018, pp.50-61.

What Is the Green Belt and Road Initiative?

Addressing climate change and protecting the ecological environment have become top priorities on the global governance agenda. They are also crucially affecting the economy, society, security, stability and the future development of the regions along Belt and Road routes. While the internal policies of major developed countries have been making a U-turn, which may lead to a vacuum in global environmental governance, the green Belt and Road cooperation underlines ecological civilization and green development and enhances China's influence on the global development agenda. In the Guidance on Promoting Green Belt and Road published in 2017 by the Ministry of Environmental Protection, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the National Development and Reform Commission and the Ministry of Commerce, the idea of green BRI was officially put forward and specified for the first time.³ Significant progress has been made in the cooperation for sustainable development, provision of green public goods and global environmental governance, all having contributed to deepening and enriching Belt and Road cooperation.

First, the green BRI is blue-printed in documents such as the Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road, the Guidance on Promoting Green Belt and Road, and the Belt and Road Ecological and Environmental Cooperation Plan, which outline the philosophy, experience and practice of ecological civilization in economic, political, cultural and social aspects. Essentially, the green BRI aims to support, serve and secure high-quality Belt and Road cooperation through green development. In other words, guided by the philosophy of ecological civilization and green development, the green BRI will uplift the green level of policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration and closer people-to-people ties, while it will also

3 Ministry of Environmental Protection, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, National Development and Reform Commission, and Ministry of Commerce, "Guidance on Promoting Green Belt and Road Development," *China Environment News*, May 9, 2017, p.3.

integrate ecological conservation and environmental protection into all aspects and throughout the whole process of the initiative.⁴ In terms of its objectives, the green BRI facilitates international cooperation in ecological conservation, environmental protection and green development, and it aims to bring global governance in line with the vision of a community with a shared future for mankind. In terms of its functions, the green BRI strengthens development partnerships among participating countries and provides green public goods for all. Through the implementation of the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Paris Agreement on climate change, the green BRI will gradually become integrated into the global environmental governance system.

Second, the green BRI was born as a response to the global trend of moving towards green and low-carbon development. In recent years, the international order has been undergoing a profound and complex transformation, especially in the field of global environmental governance and sustainable development. With the establishment of a series of new international institutions and rules which aim to ensure global green development, restrictions on carbon emissions and environmental capacity requirements are further tightened. Competition and cooperation in global green development are both becoming increasingly predominant, as green development has become a consensus upon which the interests of all countries are converging. The green BRI for the purpose of ecological civilization responds to the needs of all countries for ecology-friendly development, particularly the desire for green modernization, and has provided useful references for developing countries in search for sustainable and high-quality modernization.

The proposal for green BRI also has a domestic policy background. Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, General Secretary Xi Jinping has put forward a series of new ideas concerning the construction of an ecological civilization and the upgrading of environmental governance. He started several new initiatives to prioritize ecological

4 Zhou Guomei, "What Kind of Green Silk Road Will We Build? Contents, Progress and Prospects of Green Belt and Road Development," *Journal of Ecological Civilization of China*, No.3 2017, pp. 20-22.

conservation and follow green development pathways for a new paradigm of a harmonious human-nature relationship. As part of this development, the Xi Jinping Thought on Ecological Civilization spells out important guidelines for China's ecological conservation and environmental protection as well as for relevant international cooperation.⁵ In recent years, China has been actively participating in global environmental governance, organizing an international cooperative response to climate change and promoting the construction of a global ecological civilization. The green BRI has met general expectations of the international community that China is going to contribute more to environmental protection and sustainable development.

Finally, the substance of green BRI is dynamic and undergoes continuous progress. In his keynote speech at the opening of the first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in 2017, President Xi Jinping emphasized that “we should pursue the new vision of green development and a way of life and work that is green, low-carbon, circular and sustainable. Efforts should be made to strengthen cooperation in ecological and environmental protection and build a sound ecosystem so as to realize the goals set by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.”⁶ In 2019, at the second Belt and Road Forum, President Xi again stressed the need to pursue open, green and clean cooperation. In his remarks he stated: “[I]t aims to promote green development. We may launch green infrastructure projects, make green investment and provide green financing to protect the earth which we all call home.”⁷ In September 2020, President Xi announced at the general debate of the 75th session of the United Nations General Assembly, that “China will scale up its Intended Nationally Determined

5 Party Literature Research Office of the CPC Central Committee, *A Selection of Xi Jinping Works on the Construction of Socialist Ecological Civilization*, CCCPC Party Literature Publishing House, 2017.

6 Xi Jinping, “Work Together to Build the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road - Keynote Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the First Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation,” *Xinhua*, May 14, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/14/c_136282982.htm.

7 Xi Jinping, “Working Together to Deliver a Brighter Future for Belt and Road Cooperation - Keynote Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, April 26, 2019, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1658424.shtml.

Contributions by adopting more vigorous policies and measures. We aim to have CO₂ emissions peak before 2030 and achieve carbon neutrality before 2060.”⁸ The success of China’s green BRI proves that Chinese wisdom and the Chinese approach are key to improving global governance, tackling current world problems and preventing chaos. It has become a vital channel for China to participate in global governance and reform the system, as well as an institutional platform to enhance development and cooperation.⁹ Ecological conservation is one of the main focal points in the green BRI to enhance global governance reform and achieve economic recovery in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. It will be a major challenge to balance between socio-economic development and climate and environmental governance, as well as to achieve a green transformation after the pandemic. It is also key to bringing more substance to green Belt and Road cooperation.

Progress in the Green BRI

China has been working closely with countries along the Belt and Road routes for green development in recent years. As the BRI continuously advances and improves its institutional foundation, the green BRI is also making great headway in several aspects, playing a linking role in building the Belt and Road into a road of peace, prosperity, opening-up, innovation and civilization.

First, the green BRI has developed multi-dimensional and diversified partnerships. China has signed 201 Belt and Road cooperation documents with 138 countries and 31 international organizations as of November 2020.¹⁰ At the global multilateral level, China has consolidated its cooperation with international organizations or mechanisms such as the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), the United Nations

8 “Statement by H.E. Xi Jinping, President of the People’s Republic of China, at the General Debate of the 75th Session of the United Nations General Assembly,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, September 23, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1817098.shtml.

9 “Green Belt and Road Development to Build a Shared Future for Mankind,” October 9, 2020, http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/hqwg/2020-10/09/c_1126585854.htm.

10 “China Has Signed 201 Belt and Road Cooperation Documents with 138 Countries and 31 International Organizations,” November 17, 2020, http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2020-11/17/content_5562132.htm.

Environment Program (UNEP), the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the World Bank, the G20 and the BRICS countries, through joint research projects, personnel exchange and training, international cooperation in environmental protection and through academic interactions. Extensive multilateral activities have helped to create a global network for environmental protection cooperation. At the bilateral level, China has forged environmental cooperation models with France, Germany, Italy, Russia, Mongolia, Singapore and Cambodia by synergizing national strategies for ecological protection and climate change, and promoting cooperation on green infrastructure, international trade and financial services.

Green projects have made extensive and positive headway in the construction of Belt and Road economic corridors. For the China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor, in accordance with the China-ASEAN Environmental Cooperation Strategy (2016-2020) and the China-ASEAN Environmental Cooperation Action Plan (2016-2020), China and ASEAN countries have launched a partnership for ecology-friendly urban development and have set up an environmental information sharing platform. This has led to positive progress in the fields of environmental policy research, biodiversity protection, and environmental technology exchange.¹¹ China has also worked with the Lancang-Mekong states in formulating and implementing the Lancang-Mekong Environmental Cooperation Strategy (2018-2022), aimed at building a sustainable Lancang-Mekong environmental cooperation network and promote a green Lancang-Mekong Economic Development Belt.¹² For the China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and other major platforms have implemented multilateral green cooperation. The Development Strategy of the SCO Until 2025, adopted in 2015, emphasizes “the cooperation in environmental protection, ecological safety, and prevention of the negative

11 “China and ASEAN to Further Deepen and Expand Environmental Cooperation,” *Xinhua*, September 13, 2017, http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2017-09/13/c_1121659262.htm.

12 “Lancang-Mekong Environmental Cooperation Strategy (2018-2022),” Foreign Economic Cooperation Office of the Ministry of Environmental Protection, March 2019, <http://www.mepfeco.org.cn/dtxx/xwdt/201904/P020190410555200697035.pdf>.

effects of climate change.”¹³ In 2018, the SCO’s Council of Heads of States adopted the SCO Concept on Environmental Protection,¹⁴ the first guideline document on ecological and environmental cooperation under the SCO framework to improve environmental governance capacity and enhance the level of cooperation in the region. In the cooperation between China and Central and Eastern European countries (CEECs), the China-CEEC ministerial meeting on environmental protection cooperation in 2018 adopted the China-CEEC Framework Document on Environmental Protection Cooperation, which put in place a mechanism to strengthen policy coordination in climate change and environmental protection, and to work together on green growth.¹⁵ In Africa, China has joined forces with Kenya and the United Nations, establishing the China-Africa Environmental Cooperation Center to strengthen the Sino-African environmental partnership. This initiative aims to increase the capacity of developing countries in environmental governance and green development, to implement the sustainable development goals (SDGs) and the African Union’s Agenda 2063, and to achieve green Belt and Road cooperation.¹⁶

Apart from inter-state cooperation on global environmental issues, climate change and green development, multiple players such as local governments, cities, companies and think tanks have participated at various levels in the green Belt and Road cooperation under the principle of extensive consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits. Extensive green cooperation networks have been established and have achieved positive effects in enhancing policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration and closer people-to-people ties, while the green

13 “The Development Strategy of the SCO until 2025,” website of Shanghai Cooperation Organization, July 10, 2015, <http://eng.sectsc.org/load/200162/>.

14 “Press Bulletin of the meeting of the Council of the Heads of the SCO Member States,” *Xinhua*, June 10, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2018-06/10/c_1122964631.htm.

15 “China and CEE Countries Establish ‘16+1’ Environmental Protection Cooperation Mechanism,” *Xinhua*, September 21, 2018, http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2018-09/21/c_1123465183.htm.

16 “China-Africa Environmental Cooperation Center Inaugurated in Beijing,” Ministry of Ecology and Environment of China, November 24, 2020, http://www.mee.gov.cn/xxgk2018/xxgk/xxgk15/202011/t20201124_809612.html.

competitiveness of the participants rises continuously. Companies of all sizes are using all forms of business cooperation and government-business partnerships to play their roles in this process and fulfill their due responsibility of environmental protection while improving their green competitiveness. A win-win outcome has become the most desirable objective to achieve both economic development and environmental protection.¹⁷ More than ever, the participants in green Belt and Road cooperation are diverse, extensive and organized at different levels. They are forging an open and inclusive partnership featuring wide consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits.

Second, with the deepening of global consensus, the vision of green BRI has increasingly become a valuable asset for international development and cooperation. China has actively promoted a green vision of the Belt and Road Initiative for South-South cooperation, boosting best practices in environmental protection and development, showcasing demonstration projects to disseminate ideas for wider application, and injecting new vitality into the innovation of global environmental governance and cooperation patterns. In September 2020, UN Secretary-General António Guterres expressed support for “China in promoting the joint building of a Silk Road of Green Development.”¹⁸ Green Belt and Road cooperation speaks directly to the pursuit of a global ecological civilization. The rising international influence of green supply-chain cooperation platform under the Belt and Road Initiative has given impetus to green investment in infrastructure. Meanwhile, through frequent dialogues and extensive interactions, the Belt and Road Think Tank Cooperation Alliance and the Belt and Road Studies Network have shared experience and best practices in environmental governance. They not only advise on green Belt and Road cooperation, but also support countries along the routes and encourage more investment in green development.

17 Zhu Qiaoqiao and Sun Jiuwen, “The Belt and Road Initiative and Green Innovation of Chinese Enterprises”, *Nanjing Journal of Social Sciences*, No.11, 2020, pp.33-40.

18 “Xi Jinping Meets with United Nations (UN) Secretary-General Antonio Guterres,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, September 23, 2020, https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1817874.shtml.

Third, the provision of international public goods through the green BRI is increasingly institutionalized. These include enhancing policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration and closer people-to-people ties, all of which have made noticeable and sustained progress. In terms of infrastructure, China has scaled up ecological and environmental protection services for major Belt and Road infrastructure projects. Chinese stakeholders have been working with sustainable development planning departments in countries or regions along the BRI routes to accelerate the construction of green energy infrastructure such as solar, wind, hydropower and other renewable energy projects. In terms of sharing knowledge, big data platforms for environmental protection services and publications have been set up to offer information about policies, standards and technologies on environmental and development issues to government departments, enterprises, think tanks and the general public. This has greatly enhanced the possibilities of sharing green Belt and Road information, knowledge, technology and related services. The BRI International Green Development Coalition, which was jointly initiated by China and international partners during the second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation,¹⁹ published the BRI Green Development Report and the BRI Green Development Case Study Report. These reports showcase green development demonstration projects of various countries and industries in the fields of clean energy, ecosystem management and conservation, climate change response and corporate social responsibility,²⁰ thereby offering important reference for global green development practices. In terms of personnel training, China has launched the Green Silk Road Envoys Program, held training programs for foreign aid in environmental management,

19 As of February 2021, the BRI International Green Development Coalition had more than 150 Chinese and foreign partners including the environmental authorities of Italy, Singapore, Russia, Laos, Kenya and others, as well as the United Nations Environment Program, the UN Industrial Development Organization, the UN Office for South-South Cooperation, the Green Climate Fund and other international organizations, plus some prominent think tanks and companies. See the website of the BRI International Green Development Coalition for more information, <http://www.brigc.net>.

20 “BRI Green Development Case Study Report Released in Beijing,” Ministry of Ecology and Environment of China, September 25, 2019, http://www.mee.gov.cn/ywdt/hjnews/201909/t20190925_735433.shtml.

and implemented the Belt and Road South-South Cooperation Initiative on Climate Change.

Fourth, the green BRI has achieved remarkable results that complement the implementation of UN 2030 Agenda. Green initiatives not only support high-quality collaboration within the BRI framework which consists of six corridors, six connectivity routes and multiple countries and ports, but they also help prevent ecological and environmental risks and empower green development of the countries along Belt and Road routes. The Jakarta-Bandung High-Speed Railway, the China-Laos Railway, the Gwadar Port and a large number of other major projects have made tangible progress in recent years, thus giving rise to sustainable development in these countries, advancing the concept of a global ecological civilization and expanding green pathways for coordinating high-quality development with environmental protection. Apart from Chinese investment, some green BRI development projects have been initiated by host countries and constructed by Chinese companies, or launched jointly by China and a third-party country. The green BRI is undertaking a series of pragmatic activities to optimize green infrastructure construction, green trade, green technology, clean energy, green finance, green development and relevant personnel training. Consequently, it has accelerated the implementation of the UN's 2030 Agenda and raised the SDG Index in countries along Belt and Road routes,²¹ particularly in the environmental treatment and sustainable development of the Lancang-Mekong region.²² Additionally, the green development of the BRI has exerted a strong effect on the transition towards greener economy in the countries along the routes, and has facilitated the implementation of the 2030 Agenda through capacity-building, technological assistance and mutual learning on ecological conservation. Empowered by joint green development programs of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, the Silk Road Fund and the

21 China Council for International Cooperation on Environment and Development, *The Green BRI and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, August 30, 2019, <http://www.cciced.net/zcyj/yjbg/zcyjbg/2019/201908/P020200917144248341641.pdf>.

22 Yu Hongyuan and Wang Wanfa, "Implementation of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals in the Lancang-Mekong Region: Processes, Challenges and Pathways," *International Studies*, No.1, 2019, pp.75-84.

BRICS New Development Bank, the green BRI has significantly promoted global sustainable development and has become a new growth point in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

Challenges of Green BRI

In spite of the apparent progress, the green BRI is also facing many challenges, be it long-standing obstacles or new ones that have arisen during the process of development.

Disparities in green development levels

As most countries along Belt and Road routes are still developing countries, where the need for development overrides considerations for environmental conservation, ecological vulnerability remains high. Furthermore, green development of the BRI requires a stable international framework for development, cooperation and for the alignment of various existing national development strategies. However, governments, businesses and public stakeholders in these countries have some catching up to do in coordinating development goals for the economy, the environment and overall efficiency. Moreover, while investment from small and medium-sized enterprises is rising in these countries and regions, the companies, apart from their weak financial and technological strength, are less aware of sustainable development and less capable of protecting the environment. In addition, they have been long under attack by the US and other Western countries for deficits in the control of carbon emissions, and green Belt and Road cooperation is coming under pressure from higher “standards” demanded by developed countries and regional organizations as well as from increased international competition. For example, the European Green Deal published by the European Union is setting up stricter requirements for carbon neutrality by 2050 and proposing a carbon border tax,²³ while the EU-US New Transatlantic

23 European Commission, “European Green Deal,” December 11, 2019, https://ec.europa.eu/info/strategy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en.

Agenda for Global Change states that the EU and the US intend to strengthen transatlantic relations through cooperation on climate change and coordination of their positions on carbon tariffs.²⁴ China's core competitiveness in its environmental industry still lags behind that of the US and developed European countries in terms of technological level and global market share. As people gradually recognize environmental risks, and increase their awareness for the need of environmental protection, the green Belt and Road cooperation requires more innovative and up-to-date ideas and measures.

Inadequate influence in formulating standards on green development

Being the largest developing country, China is widely recognized and supported by the international community for its active promotion of global sustainable development and climate governance. However, China's influence in building the institutions for green development and global environmental governance does not yet match its position as the world's second largest economy. Green development ideas such as "circular carbon economy" and "carbon neutrality" were first put on the agenda by other countries and have evolved into central concepts on international platforms. In recent years, the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) and the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership Agreement (CPTPP) have even raised the standards and set new requirements for environmental governance. The USMCA, for example, now includes issues such as marine environment and biodiversity in trade regulations.²⁵ China has some catching up to do because of its long absence. Although some general principles of green governance are included in BRI bilateral cooperation agreements, they largely remain without specific arrangements, leaving China in an unfavorable position to exercise international influence and make its voice heard. Whereas the international

24 European Commission, "EU-US: A New Transatlantic Agenda for Global Change," December 2, 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_20_2279.

25 "Agreement between the United States of America, the United Mexican States, and Canada," July 1, 2020, <https://ustr.gov/trade-agreements/free-trade-agreements/united-states-mexico-canada-agreement/agreement-between>.

community has higher expectations for China and expects it to assume more responsibilities in global environmental governance, there still is a gap between these expectations and China's actual capabilities.

Gaps in project management capacity

Some countries do not have the necessary experience and are unable to mobilize the required capacity for steering and managing the projects of green BRI. Capabilities for green development are unevenly distributed and differ from country to country, which is most notably reflected in the plethora of potential problems, the difficulty of management and the weakness of governance.

First is the lack of international environmental standards and related services. The construction of BRI infrastructure is usually environmentally sensitive, and the development and construction of some projects are associated with high environmental risks. Furthermore, China's own environmental protection standards may not be internationally recognized, making it difficult to align with standards and regulations in other countries, which poses a barrier for Chinese companies to do business abroad. Previously, Chinese companies tended to adapt to environmental standards on the international market instead of promoting Chinese standards, let alone actively participate in the formulation of international standards. In view of the current situation that most BRI projects are investments in foreign infrastructure, the lack of matching environmental protection measures and services may easily cause problems such as land misappropriation, water pollution and biodiversity loss, thereby exerting enormous pressure on the local ecology and environment and on the proper realization of the projects.

Second is the lack of environmental and social impact assessment. The Asia Society Policy Institute (ASPI) has pointed out that the lack of environmental and social impact assessment is one of the major reasons why BRI infrastructure projects are faced with huge challenges and why green standards for development projects are not strictly enforced in host

countries.²⁶ Objectively speaking, host countries with lax enforcement and surveillance usually have neither the financial nor the human resources to conduct project feasibility studies, and usually are incapable or unwilling to employ qualified international experts to assess project requirements, risks and long-term impact. If the early stages of project preparation already suffer from an inadequate environmental and social impact assessment, problems are exacerbated and become even more severe in later stages of a project. In some cases, if environmental standards in host countries are not strictly adhered to, project implementation is subject to dual pressure from the government and the society in host countries.

Last is the transparency deficit in the disclosure of environmental public policies and information. In the development phase of infrastructure projects, Chinese companies do not have sufficient communication with stakeholders in host countries, local NGOs and communities. Green BRI is also often disrupted by and under the pressure of Western countries which have all along accused China of alleged carbon emissions transfer and ecological destruction.

Systemic impact of COVID-19 on global sustainable development

Entering 2021, the world has witnessed more than one hundred million COVID-19 cases with the death toll having surpassed three million. As uncertainties in the global political and economic landscape are on the rise for the post-pandemic era, the global governance system has been undergoing stagnation, disintegration and restructuring under the combined effect of multiple factors.²⁷ The active unilateralist, protectionist and populist sentiments have all had a serious impact on global green development and environmental governance. According to the World Economic Outlook published by the International Monetary Fund in January 2021, the global

26 Asia Society Policy Institute, "Navigating the Belt and Road Initiative," June 20, 2019, <https://asiasociety.org/policy-institute/belt-and-road-initiative>.

27 Ren Lin, "Global Governance System in the Post-COVID Era and China's Response," *International Studies*, No.1, 2021, pp.111-122.

economy is estimated to contract by 3.5 percent in 2020.²⁸ According to the Sustainable Development Goals Report of 2020 issued by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the unprecedented novel coronavirus crisis has severely undermined the attainability of the 17 SDGs by 2030.²⁹

Under these circumstances, countries have been concentrating their efforts on epidemic response and economic recovery, which has had an adverse impact on the current consultations on environmental governance. This is reflected mainly in two aspects. First, the consultative meetings concerning environmental governance are being postponed while countries are busy dealing with the pandemic. And second, the consequences of the pandemic have magnified the difficulties of global environmental governance. In addition, economic recovery in the post-COVID era sets higher requirements for global environmental governance and green development. In particular, developed countries are putting forward stricter demands for environmental protection based on their own economic, technological and standard-setting advantages,³⁰ whereas the BRI may face higher green standards and stronger competition.

Pathways to Deepening Green Belt and Road Cooperation

President Xi Jinping stated in his keynote speech at the opening of the second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, “In the joint pursuit of the BRI, we must always take a development-oriented approach and see that the vision of sustainable development underpins project selection, implementation and management.”³¹ In the face of the impact of the pandemic on global sustainable development, a lot needs to be done to

28 International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook Update*, January 26, 2021, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2021/01/26/2021-world-economic-outlook-update>.

29 United Nations, *The Sustainable Development Goals Report 2020*, July 7, 2020, <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/report/2020/The-Sustainable-Development-Goals-Report-2020.pdf>.

30 Wang Wanfa and Zhang Jianzhi, “Analysis of Policy Trends and Impact of International Green Recovery in COVID-19,” *Journal of Environmental Protection*, 2020, Vol.20, pp. 64-67.

31 Xi Jinping, “Working Together to Deliver a Brighter Future for Belt and Road Cooperation - Keynote Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation.”

explore pathways to deepening green Belt and Road cooperation on the basis of further consolidating and refining green development and environmental governance.

Enhancing international research and exchange to strengthen intellectual contributions to international ecological development

The BRI has become an exceptionally popular international public good and one of the largest platforms for international cooperation. Intellectual support, particularly more prospective studies, is urgently needed as the BRI progresses. Ideas and concepts that lead and guide forward also need to be implemented. For example, green development ideas should be embedded in legislative principles and considered a priority in judicial decisions. International joint research and exchange in the process of green Belt and Road cooperation also needs to be strengthened, where discussions should ensure openness to governance entities, sustainability of governance process, and sharing of governance results. The discussions on innovative approaches to environmental risk prevention and governance will also help deepen our understanding of the green BRI and build international consensus for a community of green development along the Belt and Road routes.³²

First, research needs to be conducted on environmental risk management for foreign investment and the go-global strategy of Chinese environmental protection ideas and practices. The platform to manage environmental risks of Chinese investment in foreign countries also needs to be upgraded. A technical framework that evaluates investment performance and manages environmental and social risks of Chinese foreign investment needs to be established to provide services for Chinese financial institutions and enterprises when they go global for green BRI projects. Once green investment and financing can be promoted through in-depth research and exchange engaging multiple partners, more investment will be made in

32 Yang Da and Li Chao, "Ecological and Environmental Risk Prevention in the BRI Green Governance Innovation: The Case of Lancang-Mekong Sub-region," *The Probe*, No.5, 2019, pp.184-193.

sustainable BRI projects and undertakings.

Second, priorities of green Belt and Road cooperation need to be defined based on consensus and existing international and regional cooperation mechanisms. With the focus of cooperation identified, the support for green BRI projects and trust in the developers from local communities and the general public will be increased, which will help contractors, companies and other stakeholders in host countries to work together and share benefits. Policy research cooperation and exchange with countries along Belt and Road routes need to be strengthened to reinforce research capabilities, build stronger consensus on green development, and guide the environment and development agenda. In particular, medium- to long-term strategic research is necessary to better address the challenges facing green BRI development, while important practical concerns and hotspot issues should be analyzed in an in-depth manner to facilitate constructive suggestions. Besides, the BRI International Green Development Coalition should be further promoted through more exchange activities under the framework, such as the thematic partnership coordination meetings, roundtables and BRI green innovation conferences.

Third, multilateral investment and financing platforms such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Silk Road Fund can be introduced to mobilize international green investment and promote green financial systems in relevant countries.³³

Strengthening international development and management capacity with focus on project sustainability and personnel training

In terms of financial markets, research on overall green finance demand in countries along Belt and Road routes needs to be carried out.³⁴ In addition,

33 Tsinghua University Center for Finance and Development, Vivid Economics, and Climateworks Foundation, “Decarbonizing the Belt and Road Initiative: A Green Finance Roadmap,” September 2019, https://www.climateworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Decarbonizing-the-Belt-and-Road_report_final_lo-res.pdf.

34 Global Capital, “One Belt One Road: The Future for Infrastructure and Sustainable Financing,” December 2015, <https://www.globalcapital.com/Media/documents/euroweek/pdfs/OBOR%20Low%20res%20with%20FW.pdf>.

it is necessary to conduct in-depth analysis on the comprehensive legal support system and coordination mechanisms for green financial development in Belt and Road countries, the coordination mechanisms for advancing such development at the regional level, and a roadmap for China to promote green finance under the BRI framework. The development of “environmental infrastructure” such as the methods, technologies and data for green finance and investment should also be advanced.

Regarding the Belt and Road economic and trade cooperation, China needs to integrate higher environmental standards with broader economic and trade cooperation. While observing and improving existing green investment and trade rules, efforts should be made to promote Chinese green standards worldwide. In order to enhance international trust in the BRI, China needs to set up public BRI information centers with access to project cases, data, rules and methodologies, and disclose in a timely manner the information about environmental standards and the results of environmental and social impact assessment of BRI projects. With a stress on the role of basic research, comprehensive and transparent environmental and social impact assessment and tracking needs to be conducted to help project stakeholders in China and host countries avoid or better mitigate risks.

In terms of technological cooperation, China needs to strengthen its participation in and management of green technologies and value chains. Green technology will not only add more value and public support to BRI projects, but it can also improve the international atmosphere in multilateral cooperation to take global environmental governance to a new stage. The Green Silk Road Envoys Program can serve as a basic vehicle to express China’s support for talented researchers specialized in green BRI environmental policies, foreign affairs experts skilled at international environmental cooperation, and public relations specialists capable of communicating the philosophy of a global ecological civilization. This will be the springboard for cultivating global talents and capacity for green Belt and Road development.

Improving layout and coordination for green Belt and Road development

First, China needs to deepen cooperation with neighboring countries in ecological conservation, and make more joint investments in environmental protection, low-carbon industries and green finance. Second, it needs to enhance people-to-people diplomacy under multilateral frameworks such as China-ASEAN cooperation, Lancang-Mekong cooperation and the Boao Forum for Asia, to nurture elements of ecological civilization in Lancang-Mekong, China-ASEAN and Asia-Pacific communities. Third, China needs to customize green BRI environmental protection cooperation according to the natural characteristics, ecological resources, and the economic and energy sector conditions of each individual country. Specific local environmental capacity should well be taken into consideration, and host countries should be assisted in scaling up their environmental governance capacity. In crucial fields such as environmental monitoring, information-based environmental management and ecological restoration, China needs to offer help for the improvement of governance infrastructure, and consider providing financial and training support for key projects. When managing cross-border environmental risks, forecasts should be made and precautionary measures taken to prevent small-scale and local risks from turning into major challenges and environmental risks from spilling over into political and security fields.

As the green BRI is making headway in building a larger environmental protection framework based on extensive consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits, China should mainly focus on cooperation with neighboring countries and South-South cooperation in creating global green development partnerships. Under the China-ASEAN environmental cooperation mechanism, cooperation in building a green maritime silk road can be made a priority, specifically by strengthening marine environmental protection, policy communication, as well as technological, industrial and capacity-building cooperation between the two sides. Under the SCO framework and in collaboration with the Eurasian Economic Union, the SCO Concept on

Environmental Protection should be implemented speedily and integrated into the BRI's green development standards. In the environmental protection cooperation of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the BRI ecological and environmental cooperation should be closely aligned with the efforts to build the Asia-Pacific Free Trade Zone, to promote trade and investment in environment-related products and services based on a regional green supply chain platform. Within the framework of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), China can deepen green finance partnerships, and facilitate concerted green development by taking green infrastructure, green finance and green energy as key industrial chains in the Asia-Pacific.

Prioritizing green development in people-to-people exchanges

One of the five key areas of connectivity in the BRI is closer people-to-people ties. It serves as both a means and an objective for Belt and Road cooperation. It is also the lubricant and the societal foundation for green development and cooperation. Therefore, to accelerate the dynamics of green development, China needs to do more to encourage exchange and cooperation between governments, cities, businesses, think tanks, non-governmental organizations and the media. People-to-people diplomacy, underpinned by ideas of “benefit, affection and righteousness,” is not only fundamental to the friendship between peoples and to national development, but it is also a vital component of China's overall diplomacy. As people-to-people diplomacy advances in the new era and China engages itself more deeply in globalization and global governance, China needs to strengthen policy coordination and people-to-people exchanges and build partnerships between governments, businesses, societies and other stakeholders, thus laying sound foundations for closer ties. Going into the future, the green BRI needs to relate international environmental cooperation further to public diplomacy and people-to-people exchanges, and specifically establish an extensive partnership network with the UNEP and the UNDP. This certainly would enhance the global influence and appeal of green development partnerships and enable a green recovery of the world economy in the post-COVID era. 