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## **Why the U.S. Shouldn't Sit Out the Belt and Road Initiative**

Cui Tiankai

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Imagine the potential of China and the United States, the world's two largest, most vibrant economies collaborating on the most ambitious development project in history. The scenario is no fantasy: China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which kicked off almost six years ago, will eventually connect a vast swath of the world, creating huge yields in economic activity, and wiring the world together as never before. However, the United States remains on the sidelines, and this has implications not only in terms of missed opportunities for growth in the U.S., but for the cause of global development which needs the ingenuity and the industry of the U.S.

The BRI, which echoes the geographic footprint and spirit of the ancient land and maritime Silk Roads that linked Asia, Africa, and Europe, has indeed become a massive platform for cooperation and an engine of growth, with 126 Countries and 29 international organizations having signed BRI cooperation documents with China. Total trade between China and other Belt and Road

countries has exceeded \$6 trillion, and China's investment in these countries has surpassed \$80 billion, with Chinese companies generating over \$2 billion in tax revenue and 300,000 jobs for locals.

In six short years, the BRI is already proving its value to our partners. Consider the example of Kazakhstan. As the world's largest landlocked country, Kazakhstan has-as a direct result of the BRI-gained access to the Pacific Ocean through the Lianyungang port in China. Regular China-Europe Railway Express freight services have created more than 6,000 jobs in Duisburg, Germany's logistics sector. Through BRI cooperation, countries such as Jamaica, Montenegro, and Uganda now have their first expressways, Belarus has developed its own car industry, and Sri Lanka has seen an end to its longstanding power shortages.

The key to BRI's success and popularity is that it focuses on addressing the development issue. The Chinese know too well that development holds the master key to all problems. As the Chinese saying goes, building the road is the first step to become prosperous. Therefore, learning from our own experience, we are ready to help others improve infrastructure and connectivity.

Naturally, there is no sense in building roads where there is no traffic. Indeed, once roads, bridges, ports, railways, electricity, and the like are in place, new waves of commerce shall follow. So, in addition to being a massive infrastructure project, the BRI is a force for development that will boost trade and investment with our partners, create more job opportunities for local citizens, and improve stability and quality of life.

Since financial bottleneck often proves to be a major challenge, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the Silk Road Fund have been established to complement organizations such as the World Bank and help narrow the funding gap.

Furthermore, Belt and Road countries have enhanced the coordination of development strategies and people-to-people amity, because hardware connectivity alone, short of software connectivity, is inadequate to ensure the resilience of the BRI.

Critics say that the BRI must have an underlying strategic aim or agenda. If so, then building a community with a shared future for mankind is the agenda, as first and foremost, the BRI aims to promote connectivity. The BRI is open,

inclusive and transparent. It is not a geopolitical tool, nor is it designed to form an exclusive clique or impose any terms on others.

Some people have errantly characterized the BRI as a potential debt trap. But countries who have participated in and benefited from the BRI have debunked such assertions. Finance Secretary of the Philippines Carlos Dominguez publicly stated that debts owed to China accounts for only 0.65% of the country's total debt. And Dr. Karunasena Kodituwakku, Sri Lanka's ambassador to Beijing, dismissed the idea of "debt-trap diplomacy."

Decisions made through the BRI framework, from project selection to investment and financing cooperation, are all based on full consultation between all parties involved, and backed by arduous risk assessment and investment feasibility studies. As a matter of fact, no country has become trapped in a debt crisis since its participation in the BRI. Quite the contrary, it is through participating in BRI cooperation that many countries have emerged from the trap of underdevelopment or no development. Consider the example of Kenya: Philip Mainga, acting managing director of Kenya Railways Corporation, said that the Kenyan economy and citizens have benefited from China's contribution to the expansion and upgrading of transport infrastructure in the country.

Traditional Chinese wisdom states that a man of virtue will seek to establish others while establishing himself. In this sense, as we are currently moving China's economy from a phase of rapid growth to a stage of high-quality development, we also pursue quality development in BRI cooperation. The projects are designed to conform with international laws and norms governing international relations and meet international business practices and operating models.

So where is the U.S. amid all of this winning? There are countless opportunities to U.S. corporations available through BRI projects. Honeywell International is already working with partners to further oil and gas development along the Belt and Road. General Electric has signed a number of deals with partners of the BRI which will help to provide reliable power and energy to critical regions across the world. Caterpillar is working with China's initiative to help solve Pakistan's severe power shortages. Meanwhile, Citibank is actively providing financing for projects through the markets along the Belt and Road. We certainly welcome more taking part.

In a few days, the second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (BRF) will be held in China, gathering representatives from around the world to draw up a blueprint for future cooperation. Looking forward, we will continue to progress towards high-quality development through global pragmatic cooperation. We will enhance trilateral cooperation and encourage cooperation among all participating countries in third markets, achieving win-win results for all.

My suggestion is that the U.S. embrace this opportunity.

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**Embassy of the People's Republic of China**  
3505, International Place, NW Washington DC, 20008  
chineseembassyspokesperson@gmail.com

*Your comments are welcome.*