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Topic Guide

The Silk Road Initiative; Reconnecting the World

General Assembly



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Topic Overview

The Silk Road Initiative, more commonly referred to as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is a monumental global infrastructure project spearheaded by China. Drawing inspiration from the ancient Silk Road, which facilitated trade and cultural exchange between East and West for centuries, the modern BRI seeks to recreate and expand upon these historic trade routes.

Launched in 2013 by China's President Xi Jinping, the BRI was initially conceived to enhance connectivity between East Asia and Europe. However, its scope has since broadened to encompass regions such as Africa, Oceania, and Latin America. The overarching aim of the BRI is to foster economic growth, regional integration, and increased trade by establishing a vast network of railways, highways, energy pipelines, ports, and other infrastructural projects.

The BRI is a strategy initiated by the People's Republic of China to connect Asia with Africa and Europe via land and maritime networks. This initiative is not just about physical connectivity; it also emphasizes policy coordination, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds. The BRI has been associated with significant investments in infrastructure development, including ports, roads, railways, power plants, and telecommunications networks.

While the BRI promises economic growth and development, it has not been without its critics. Concerns have been raised regarding China's underlying intentions, the potential for debt burdens on participating countries, environmental impacts, and the overall cost of the projects. Some view the BRI as a means for China to expand its geopolitical influence, leading to apprehensions about the initiative's long-term implications.

Topic Background

Over the past decade, the BRI has significantly expanded China's economic and political influence on a global scale. As of March 2020, 138 countries have joined the Belt and Road Initiative by signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with China. This vast network seeks to break the bottleneck in Asian connectivity and promote the international use of the Chinese currency, the renminbi.

Environmental concerns have also been raised in connection with the BRI. Although China announced its commitment to halt the construction of coal-fired power plants abroad in 2021, nonrenewable energy investments have constituted nearly half of all BRI spending. There remains ambiguity regarding whether this commitment applies only to new projects or also to those already in progress.

Over two-thirds of European Union (EU) member countries have formally joined the BRI, with significant Chinese infrastructure investments seen in projects like the renovated port of Piraeus in Greece and the Budapest-Belgrade railway in Hungary. These investments have made it challenging for the EU to adopt a unified approach to China. Some countries, like Greece and Hungary, have hindered EU-wide efforts to criticize China. On the other hand, French President Emmanuel Macron has expressed caution, suggesting that the BRI could turn partner countries into "vassal states." In December 2021, the EU announced the Global Gateway, a \$300 billion infrastructure investment program intended to rival the BRI.

Points of Debate

1. Debt Sustainability:

- Is the BRI leading countries into a debt trap?
- How can countries ensure that they do not take on unsustainable levels of debt?

2. Transparency and Accountability:

- How can transparency in BRI projects be improved?
- What mechanisms can be established to ensure accountability and prevent corruption?

3. Geopolitical Influence:

- Is the BRI purely a commercial initiative or a tool for China's geopolitical ambitions?
 - How can countries ensure that their participation in the BRI does not compromise their sovereignty or national interests?
4. **Competition with Other Initiatives:**
- How do other initiatives like the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework and the EU's Global Gateway compare with the BRI?
 - How can cooperation between different initiatives be promoted?
5. **Human Rights and Labor Standards:**
- Should BRI projects have attached human rights and labor standards?
 - How can participating countries ensure that BRI projects do not lead to human rights violations?
6. **Local Economic Impact:**
- Are local communities benefiting from BRI projects?
 - How can the negative economic impacts of BRI projects on local economies be mitigated?
7. **Infrastructure Gaps:**
- Is there a significant gap between the funding required for BRI projects and the actual investment made?
 - What measures can be taken to ensure the feasibility and sustainability of BRI projects?
8. **Strategic Alliances:**
- What are the implications of the strategic alliances formed due to BRI participation?
 - How do these alliances impact regional stability and global power dynamics?
 - Are these alliances leading to a shift in global geopolitical alignments?

References

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