

FROM «PROJECTS OF THE CENTURY» TO «SMALL YET BEAUTIFUL» PROJECTS: NEW TRENDS OF THE BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE

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China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is currently undergoing a transformation from «projects of the century» to «small yet beautiful» projects prioritized by China for international cooperation. In general, these projects are characterized by smaller investments, faster returns and a focus on meeting community and livelihood needs. There is now a greater diversity of Chinese participants, with priority being given to green and digital redevelopment projects.

Keywords: China; Belt and Road Initiative; «Small yet beautiful» projects; Cooperative development.

ОТ «ПРОЕКТОВ ВЕКА» ДО «МАЛЕНЬКИХ, НО КРАСИВЫХ» ПРОЕКТОВ: НОВЫЕ ТЕНДЕНЦИИ ИНИЦИАТИВЫ «ОДИН ПОЯС, ОДИН ПУТЬ»

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Китайская инициатива «Один пояс, один путь» в настоящее время переживает трансформацию из «проектов века» в «маленькие, но красивые» проекты, которые Китай считает приоритетными для международного сотрудничества. В целом, эти проекты характеризуются меньшими инвестициями, более быстрой окупаемостью и фокусом на удовлетворении потребностей сообщества и средств к существованию. Сейчас наблюдается большее разнообразие китайских участников, причем приоритет отдается проектам зеленой и цифровой реконструкции.

Ключевые слова: Китай; инициатива «Один пояс, один путь»; «маленькие, но красивые» проекты; кооперативное развитие.

More than a decade since the implementation of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), this massive China-led global infrastructure and foreign policy strategy spanning Eurasia, Africa and even Latin America has spawned some new trends. However, the initiative has often been met with criticism and attack from Western media and institutions. For example, in an article for Foreign Policy, Lu explicitly claims that China's BRI has "lost steam" and has become a "shadow of its former self" [1]. However, it seems premature to declare that the Belt and Road Initiative is over. As argued in this article, the significant strategic ambiguity of China's BRI provides China with considerable flexibility in the formulation and implementation of its policies, facilitating

experimentation and adaptation through relentless attempts. Furthermore, this ambiguity allows various participants, whether China or other countries, to set and pursue their own agendas under the broad, undefined umbrella of the official policy. The Belt and Road Initiative had an inherent vagueness from its inception, which enabled its continuous evolution, including changes to the initiative's naming. One of the BRI's original stated goals was to close the serious financing gap for large infrastructure projects in low-income countries. However, a decade later, the new Belt and Road are being significantly scaled down as China's focus shifts from oil and gas to areas such as public health, green development, science and technology education, culture and arts, etc. Health care, with an ongoing Transition from large projects to smaller ones.

With this new approach to international cooperation — known as the “small yet beautiful” model — the scope, financing system, key players and geographical focus of the BRI will also change. What factors led to these changes in China's BRI? What goals does China want to achieve with the “Small but mighty” model? As the BRI enters its second decade, its reformed mission and the various actions government agencies are taking in response can make a significant difference in how sustainable cooperative development can be achieved in the future. For Belarus, understanding this new trend in the BRI plays an essential role in promoting cooperative development and more efficient implementation of specific projects.

Current Progress. Above all, the BRI should improve China's connection to international markets while strengthening its global influence and position as an economic and geopolitical power. Through the BRI, Chinese state and private companies have invested a total of around 1 trln USD to finance infrastructure projects in Africa, Asia and South America. In this context, China has become the largest creditor of developing countries, prompting criticism from Western governments of China for its involvement in “debt trap diplomacy.” Concerns about the environmental impact of the BRI and its potential impact on so-called democratic values such as transparency and human rights have always been the focus of Western media. Nevertheless, as of 2023, around 151 countries were involved in the BRI [2].

The new trends shown by China's BRI have been around for some time. Due to the global political and economic challenges that have arisen since the COVID-19 pandemic, China is beginning to rethink its foreign strategy proposed in the BRI. Therefore, since 2021, China has been promoting a new model for BRI investment, the so-called “small yet beautiful new model”, with the aim of ensuring that the newly launched BRI projects are smaller, greener and financially less risky than previous commitments. Three main trends stand out, including a shift towards smaller projects, increasing diversity among Chinese participants to meet needs in new focus areas, and a focus on green and digital projects.

Small yet Beautiful: The term “small yet beautiful” refers to projects that require relatively small investments, deliver quick results and bring benefits to people's livelihoods, and not just on a small scale. Given a global economic

downturn, a rising dollar and some developing countries' shrinking fiscal space for large-scale projects, it is necessary to be cautious in assessing the environmental and financial sustainability of projects implemented in BRI partner countries in the future. In an idealized scenario, projects are said to fall into the sectors with higher profitability and greater scalability, such as technology, energy and healthcare, to ensure the ability to self-finance. To drive this change, the Chinese government and state-owned enterprises are increasingly encouraging the private sector, which has more flexibility in financing (such as CATL and Alibaba), as well as local governments to play a more important role in financing.

More Diverse Chinese Participants: In contrast to the “big and impressive” projects that the public often refers to, “small yet beautiful” projects have a greater diversity of participants, including government agencies, outbound companies, civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations. As Wang Yiwei, director of the Institute of International Affairs at Renmin University of China, points out, it is worth noting that the BRI calls on all market participants to fulfill their corporate social responsibility. In addition, a relevant foreign aid monitoring and evaluation system has been established by the China International Development Cooperation Agency (CIDCA). These project-specific monitoring and impact assessment processes are often practiced by international institutions and developed countries [3].

Greening and Digitization: As BRI partner countries expand their scope of cooperation by leveraging their respective advantages, positive progress made in the “small yet beautiful” projects being undertaken to grow the digital economy and promote green development. According to the Lowy Institute in Australia, the BRI will further promote the development of transport infrastructure and the construction of logistics corridors, prioritizing the promotion of “small yet beautiful” projects and the promotion of environmentally friendly development [4]. Judging from the latest results of the China-Africa Cooperation Forum, China is now primarily considering new development projects in the field of digital and green infrastructure. At the 2024 China-Africa Cooperation Forum Summit in Beijing, China announced plans for the next three years, including ten “Luban Workshops”, thirty clean energy projects, and the implementation of a thousand “small yet beautiful” projects.

Prospects for China-Belarus Cooperation Through “Small yet beautiful” Projects. Belarus is one of the most active European countries involved in the implementation of the BRI. The motives of high-quality China-Belarus cooperation under the BRI include alignment of national interests, consistency of diplomatic principles, leadership reflected in head-of-state diplomacy, efficient policy coordination, and the similarity in traditional cultures [5]. The two countries jointly signed a number of documents, including the List of Measures for Joint Promotion of the Belt and Road Construction, the Protocol on Cooperation in the Silk Road Economic Belt, and the Memorandum of Understanding on the Alignment of the Medium- and Long-Term Strategic Planning for Joint Development. In March 2023,

the heads of state of China and Belarus signed the Joint Statement on Further Developing the All-Weather Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in the New Era, along with several bilateral cooperation documents concerning agriculture, economic trade, and other sectors. Both countries have pledged to deepen the comprehensive cooperation under the framework of the BRI and to maintain economic stability and promote economic development in the BRI region. On August 14, 2024, Luo Zhaohui, director of the CIDCA, met with Belarusian First Deputy Prime Minister Nikolai Snopkov. Luo laid emphasized the need to focus on implementing the consensus reached by the heads of state, advance high-quality BRI construction, and expand practical cooperation in areas such as the China-Belarus Industrial Park with more “small yet beautiful” projects within the framework of Global Development Initiative.

As the new trends in BRI show, despite the shift from “projects of the century” to “small yet beautiful” projects, China is still able to contribute to the development of BRI countries. Belarus has significant development opportunities, as demonstrated by the China-Belarus Industrial Park.

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