

B3W: Growing Multilateralism or Increased Power Struggle?

Nafiz Farhan

Introduction

In an age of globalization, isolation and lack of connectivity are no longer ideal for any country willing to exist in the multidimensional world order. We live in an era of connectivity and cooperation, primarily earthed by the very phenomenon of globalization. However, the factor that dictates the global power dynamic has changed from raging arms race and tension to ensuring congruence, correspondence, and affinity in the multifaceted world. As a result, significant powers, hegemons, and aspiring hegemons have launched various platforms through which they can further their foreign policy. The most prominent of the 21st century is the “Belt and Road Initiative” launched by China. The “Belt and Road Initiative”, or BRI, has been pole least. It has garnered both praise and questions, predominantly criticisms. The most critique it gathered has to be from the west. Although, it has to be said that the complaint significantly highlights that the west views the growing acceptance towards BRI amidst the exponential growth of China in all facets to be a major deterrent towards its dominance in the global arena. Thus, in the most recent G7 summit, the major western powers, alongside their eastern allies, have rallied under the same umbrella to introduce a platform of their own towards ensuring horizontal infrastructural growth worldwide. The more than ambitious project is called B3W or “Build Back Better World”, which according to western leaders, has been introduced as a direct measure to counter ‘Chinese Aggression’ all across the world. The introduction of this brings forth many questions regarding the overall power dynamic and what kind of complexities the B3W brings to the table.¹

¹ Latest Asian, Middle-East, EurAsian, Indian News. 2021. *China's Dream Project 'BRI' Has An Official Challenger - Build Back Better World (B3W Project)*. [online] Available at: <<https://eurasianimes.com/chinas-dream-project-bri-has-an-official-challenger-build-back-better-world-b3w-project/>> [Accessed 7 July 2021].

B3W at a Glance

It is first necessary for us to know what precisely the B3W is. What is this Pandora's box which, according to leaders of global democracies, will solve all of the world's problems and give everyone the equal opportunity to grow? The initiative vouches to provide a "value-driven, transparent" partnership to ensure the infrastructural growth of prominently low-income countries.² At the crux of this initiative is the push to ensure better cooperation and connectivity. The initiative will entail several enterprises and schemes to mobilise private sector capital in the most relevant areas globally such as gender equity and equality, climate, health and health security, digital technology and others. Participation in the initiative, claimed by the G7 members, will ensure a high quality and ambiguity free infrastructural opportunity, which is somewhat necessary for narrowing the US \$40 trillion by the most promising developing nations worldwide.³

Nature of the B3W

Unlike the BRI and the significant criticisms associated with it, such as 'debt traps', 'dishonesty' and its 'Chinese interest above all', the B3W is trying to garner a far softer and more positive image. B3W is very much susceptible to accountability and plans to ensure the enlistment and establishment of infrastructure that will also provide benefits to children and the elderly, believed to be mirroring the mindset of President Joe Biden himself and his willingness to strengthen upon these aspects⁴. The B3W, very much like the BRI, will be pushing to address one of the major concerns of the hour: mitigating the effects of climate change and ensuring more sustainable alternatives to the exhaustive developmental practices. The financial aspects of the two projects are broadly different since the BRI's financing mechanisms are inclined within the bilateral systems, heavily relying on state-owned banks to fund the multi-million-dollar projects, and often failing to engage and utilize private investments. There have been considerable alterations with

² South China Morning Post. 2021. *G7 adopts infrastructure plan to rival China's belt and road strategy*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.scmp.com/news/world/europe/article/3137097/g7-leaders-adopt-build-back-better-world-plan-rival-chinas-belt>> [Accessed 6 July 2021].

³ Ibid

⁴ Zhu, K., 2021. *'Build Back Better World' and the Belt and Road Are Not Necessarily at Odds*. [online] TheDiplomat.com. Available at: <<https://thediplomat.com/2021/06/build-back-better-world-and-the-belt-and-road-are-not-necessarily-at-odds/>> [Accessed 7 July 2021].

the heavy engagement of the Asian Development Bank. However, there hasn't been a substantial change regarding private sector mobilization. The B3W, however, plans to ensure both public and private sector mobilization into its financial mechanisms to ensure a very sustainable infrastructural growth.⁵

The seeds of this infrastructural growth are rooted in an idea and a concept coined in 2019. The "Blue Dot Network", launched by the US, Japan and Australia, is believed to be inspired concept idea of the image of earth from space as a mere "Blue Dot". The initiative has the underlying goal of encouraging development by certifying public-private investments in global infrastructure that are transparent and high-quality. By establishing shared standards for infrastructure development, BDN aims to improve connectivity, strengthen the economy, increase employment opportunities, and contribute to a cleaner environment. The concept of BDN seems to be the backbone behind the overall implementation and rollout of the trillion-dollar mega project.⁶

Concerns

Thus far, the project of B3W seems like a Godsend in contrast to that of BRI, the alleged beacon of hope against China's push for 'geopolitical leverage' and its tendency to entrap countries to further their benefits. The B3W project seems to answer everyone's prayers, a project to ensure everyone's equal growth and benefits. The reality, notwithstanding, is far more complicated and greyer than one can comprehend. The task of B3W, although very ambitious and optimistic, is still in its very infancy, whereas the BRI has already begun its infrastructural development all across the world. The road itself is missing on how the whole project will be rolled out and how it will be funded. This does beg to raise the questions on how much the major democracies of the world will be able to entice growing economics to take part in their venture towards ensuring synergy and mutual growth. Another significant aspect of the project is ensuring health security globally, especially following the pandemic, as they have decided to form a coalition over an international

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Arha, K., 2021. *A hidden key to the G7's infrastructure ambitions: Blue Dot Network*. [online] Atlantic Council. Available at: <<https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/a-hidden-key-to-the-g7s-infrastructure-ambitions-blue-dot-network/>> [Accessed 7 July 2021].

health maintenance agreement to build resilience and strengthen relevant infrastructure in preventing the next crisis.

Nevertheless, they might have failed to consider that a pandemic affects every country. It is vital to know if other nations are ready to cooperate in an emergency-based collaborative health system reconstruction. Furthermore, the focus of the infrastructural development will primarily encompass the low-middle income countries across the world, predominantly in Asia, Africa, Central, and South America. These are also regions where China has set its eyes on extending its influence through infrastructural development; the major region is Africa. This does pose itself to become a modern-day mirror image of the “Scramble for Africa”, which can yield both positive and negative results. However, this shows the strong possibility that the countries in concern face the threat of losing their strategic autonomy. Thus, the biggest challenge for the countries in trouble, primarily low-income countries, is facing the possibility of getting stranded at the crossfire of strategic competition.

Implications

Nonetheless, the overall implications of the induction of B3W can also introduce very beneficial outcomes for both the major powers (considerably the USA and China) and the other relevant parties involved. Both the projects are rooted in building connectivity and cooperation. China has stressed the inclusivity of the BRI and always welcomed the prospect of mutual benefits through collaboration. The B3W can fall within the same mold, and the potential of a joint venture between BRI and B3W can eventually lure both parties into engaging in a collaboration. The idea of collaboration with B3W will legitimize China’s role in global leadership. All factors considered, there might even be a strategic competition between the major parties.

Be that as it may, the collaboration between China and the US is still an unlikely possibility, especially considering the regime change in the U.S. Joe Biden and the prominent G7 leaders have been less than considerate while highlighting Chinese activities worldwide. They have emphasized that it being push only to serve China’s geopolitical interests and undermines the autonomy of lower-income countries who have been a part of the BRI. The introduction of the B3W had the

sole purpose of showing the world a supposed better alternative to BRI and curb the extent of growing Chinese influence. The Chinese response to the smearing of BRI and Chinese in the G7 summit had not been well-received by Beijing, with Beijing claiming the allegations to be wholly false and the small club of nations no longer rules that world. This statement right here not only showcases the resilience of China but a growing hostility between what is being considered now to the US and its' significant allies and China and other concerning actors. Moreover, China has on time and time shown the world that there are better alternatives to democracy when it comes to ensuring growth and development. This begs the question of whether the targeted audience of both these projects (low-income countries) will be able to hedge their bets on the U. S's assurance, or whether they will be a part of China's promise of growth who have showcased success in these regards time and time again.

Conclusion

The introduction of BRI and the emergence of B3W can introduce a very complicated global strategic competition or garner outcomes that can swing both ways. The mindset of the major powers towards China and its growing influence is evident, with apparent outlooks of "Autocracy vs Democracy". This, in plain view, might seem harmless. However, the implications go much further as it highlights the underlying brewing tension and hostility between two entities engaged in strategic competition, illustrating the characteristics of a newer "Cold War" or "Cold War 2.0", with the same intense animosity, albeit through different avenues such as projects like BRI and The B3W.

Nafiz Farhan is currently working as a Research Assistant at BIPSS