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Belt and Road Initiative and the Geopolitics of China's Pandemic Diplomacy

Hashan Wijesinghe and Arosh Martin*

The Belt and Road Initiative launched in 2013 is widely considered as the main intercontinental development program ever. As Haralambides & Merk have noted the BRI aims to achieve greater economic integration and development through better connectivity. While the perceptions on the real aims behind China's BRI remains widely divided, over 100 states have joined the project. The majority of the BRI projects take place regions suffer from a shortage of infrastructure investment funding. For example, the majority of the BRI projects take place in Asia and according to Asian Development Bank (ADB) statistics, US\$ 1.7 trillion per year should be invested to develop infrastructure in Asia until 2030 to maintain its growth momentum, tackle poverty, and respond to climate Change.

For China, the BRI plays a major role in ensuring uninterrupted trade, in terms of both securing the main trade routes as well as the international market. Moreover, as China remains a major energy importer ensuring free flowing trade becomes vital.

The outbreak of the COVID-19 has made an unprecedented impact on almost all the countries around the globe since its outbreak. Many of the countries are yet to come to terms with handling the pandemic as most of them continue to rely on lockdowns and travel restrictions. The world economy has been badly affected, particularly the developing countries and majority of the countries have recorded negative economic growth rates in 2020. Today, countries have identified vaccination as the most viable solution for the pandemic and some of the powerful countries including the USA, India, Russia, Britain, and Germany were competing to develop a vaccine against the virus. Among them, China's Sinopharm and Sinovac are two vaccines that gained greater worldwide attention. China has already distributed millions of doses of their vaccines to a number of countries and there has been a significant demand for these vaccines as well. Looking at today's situation, many countries have already approved the Sinopharm vaccine. In

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addition, addressing the Global Health Summit 2021, Chinese President Xi Jinping unveiled China's intentions to provide an additional US\$ 3 billion as international aid over the next three years to support COVID-19 response, economic and social recovery in other developing countries.

Against this backdrop, this research examines the geopolitics of China's pandemic diplomacy, with special reference to BRI. The study investigates the significance of China's pandemic diplomacy in ensuring smooth continuation of BRI. Looking at the available literature, it was observed that there is a dearth of literature on the link between China's pandemic diplomacy and BRI. However, it remains vital to examine these developments for the simple reason that the BRI is set to redefine global geopolitics and will have profound impact on global power politics. Its success will provide China an unprecedented global status while failure would not only affect China but also the countries engaged in the project.

This study is a qualitative research based on primary and secondary data. The main data collection sources include speeches of political leaders, annual reports, journal articles etc. This is a desk research and data were analyzed through thematic analysis technique.

The BRI is considered as the largest transcontinental infrastructure scheme in the history of economic development, and it is identified as the cornerstone of President Xi Jinping's foreign policy. As Chotzky and McBride have stated, the BRI remains a main plank of a bolder Chinese statecraft under Xi, alongside the 'Made in China 2025' economic development strategy. While there have been different and contradictory perspectives on the intentions of the BRI, it is no exaggeration that the BRI has become a vital aspect of interstate relations. With the outbreak of the pandemic, most of the countries have been adversely affected and many economies have experienced stagnant or negative economic growth rates. Poverty rates have risen. The developing world is at a risk of collapsing. Here the main concern is most of these countries are partners of the BRI. Thus, any collapse of these countries will have severe impact on the future of BRI

Keywords: BRI, China, COVID-19, Geopolitics, Pandemic Diplomacy