8   **How to understand the peacebuilding potential of the Belt and Road Initiative**

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Introduction

In his keynote speech at the Belt and Road International Forum in May 2017, President Xi Jinping proposed to build the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) into a “road for peace”. The World Bank and the United Nations also put forward a joint report on the *Pathways for Peace* in 2018, and emphasized that violence and conflict are big obstacles to reaching the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030. Their report argues that conflict prevention is a decisive factor for development and economic cooperation, and indeed central to reducing poverty and achieving shared prosperity (World Bank and United Nations). This report reflects an increasing trend to strengthen the interaction between the peace and development agendas, and to promote cooperation between both sets of actors.

In this context, this chapter explores the peacebuilding potential of BRI and how to understand the possible connection between BRI and UN peacebuilding. BRI has peacebuilding potential in many aspects, but these potentials are limited at the current stage and uncertain in the future. International efforts are a necessary condition for promoting BRI to contribute more to peacebuilding. The chapter consists of three main sections. First, it explains the core of BRI, which is an economic cooperation–focused initiative, not a peacebuilding initiative; second, it interprets the peace connection and peacebuilding potential of BRI; third, it analyzes the limitations and uncertainties of the peacebuilding potential of BRI, and tries to predict the possible scenarios.

The Belt and Road: an economic cooperation initiative

There are different interpretations and expectations for BRI both internationally and domestically. In China, the mainstream view suggests

that BRI should be an economic cooperation initiative, because economic cooperation is easier to carry out. If BRI involves security and peace issues, it will potentially become more complicated or sensitive. BRI is the abbreviation of the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and “21st Century Maritime Silk Road”. Considering that the countries along the “Belt and Road” have different resources and strong economic complementarity, there is great potential for economic cooperation. The main contents of BRI are the connectivity in five areas: policy, infrastructure, trade, finance, and people-to-people relations. In the five areas, infrastructure is emphasized first, including investment in factories, roads, bridges, ports, airports, and power grids, as well as communication networks and oil and gas pipeline networks. It is very clear that economic cooperation is the core content of the Belt and Road (*Vision and Actions*).

The mainstream view in China believes that China’s advantage lies in economic and development cooperation, so BRI should focus on cooperation in both the economic and development fields:

The Belt and Road Initiative is an economic behavior, and it is a platform for economic cooperation. It does not involve politics, security, and other fields. Such a choice may help eliminate the external worries about the expansion of China’s political and military power and will be beneficial to international co-operation and strategic mutual trust.

(Li Ziguo “Belt and Road Initiative”)

According to the official documents, BRI will be promoted by bilateral or multilateral economic cooperation, with special emphasis on the role of both international and domestic markets. In May 2017, the Joint Communiqué of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation put forward the basic principles of the Belt and Road, and one of the principles is “market-led behavior”, that is “recognizing the role of the market and that of business as key players, while ensuring that the government performs its proper role and highlighting the importance of open, transparent, and non-discriminatory procurement procedures” (“Joint Communiqué”).

The Communiqué emphasized the need to fully understand the role of the market and the status of enterprise as the main body of BRI. This means that the driving force of BRI is not government, but enterprise, and the role of the government is to build the platform for enterprise to flourish. Therefore, the mainstream view sees BRI as separate from peace and security cooperation initiatives, as BRI is a series of

market-led economic cooperation projects, themselves distinct from China's foreign aid projects.

The Belt and Road: a road for peace

According to the official definition, BRI is an economic cooperation initiative, aimed at building an economic cooperation platform, and focusing on infrastructure connectivity. But on the other hand, this initiative has an intrinsic and extendable UN peacebuilding link. BRI depends on a peaceful environment. Consolidating peace and sustaining peace are the needs of BRI itself. To this end, BRI economic cooperation can be a driving force for China to promote peace.

Along with the advancement of BRI, the connections between BRI and the United Nations global agendas, including the 2030 Agenda, the refugee, and the migration agendas, as well as the UN peace agenda, are getting closer. Existing research points out the security risks and challenges facing the Belt and Road, noting that along with the continued advancement of BRI, peace and security issues will be more prominent. The three elements of economy, politics, and security are closely interlinked and complementary (Wu 17–22).

There are three major categories of security risks. The first category of risk is the problem of political and social unrest resulting from both domestic and international causes such as slow economic development, serious social injustice, ethnic and religious conflicts, as well as regional power struggles. For example, countries such as Myanmar, Pakistan, and Kyrgyzstan face political instability. The West Asian and North African countries like Libya, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, and Yemen are suffering serious domestic unrest and conflict. The second category of risk is from the “three forces”: extremism, terrorism, and separatism. The areas and countries along the Belt and Road are the areas with most active “three forces” caused by ethnic and religious strife. In these areas, terrorism and transnational crime are particularly serious. The third category of risk is geopolitical risk, including the tensions between major powers and the tensions between regional countries. Eurasia is also a conflict-prone area with many disputes in territorial and territorial water disputes (Wu 20–22; Xue “Diplomatic Risks” 68–79).

In China, BRI risk studies increasingly realize that, in addition to conflicts between countries, conflict risks are also emerging from the relations between actors at different levels including governmental actors and non-governmental actors. BRI is a multi-actor project involving the central government, local governments, enterprises and different interest groups both in China and in BRI countries. Due to different

interests, there are contradictions and conflicts between different actors, and China is facing increasing tensions in international economic cooperation. For example, Chinese companies in Pakistan and some African countries have been frequently attacked; China's infrastructure projects in Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam are protested against by anti-government factions, businessmen, and NGOs in these countries. China's economic cooperation with Myanmar is a typical case that reflects mixed and intertwined conflicts, including the conflict between the central government of Myanmar and local armed forces, the conflict between Chinese businessmen and Myanmar businessmen, as well as the conflict between local NGOs and Chinese companies. This situation suggests that BRI requires risk prevention.

BRI places great emphasis on the importance of establishing and maintaining a peaceful environment. In his keynote speech at the Belt and Road International Forum in May 2017, Xi Jinping proposed building the Belt and Road into "five roads", the first of the "five roads" being "a road for peace". President Xi emphasized that "the ancient silk routes thrived in times of peace, but lost vigor in times of war. The pursuit of the Belt and Road Initiative requires a peaceful and stable environment" ("Full Text of President Xi's Speech"). For the first time, China officially linked the Belt and Road to peace. This means that China needs a peaceful environment in order to achieve the development of BRI and that China is willing to promote world peace through the Belt and Road (Xu 173–174). In 2017, the Joint Communiqué of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation reiterated the principle of peace and made a commitment to promoting peace and mutually beneficial cooperation.

For building the road for peace, the following principles have been put forward: (1) foster a common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security; (2) create a security environment shared by all; (3) resolve hotspot issues through political means, and promote mediation; (4) enhance counter-terrorism; (5) strive to eradicate poverty and social injustice; and (6) build a new type of international relations based on win-win cooperation (Full Text of President Xi's Speech). Based on these principles, it is possible to put forward some specific actions and measures to build the "road for peace" in the process of BRI.

Obviously, China's statements and commitments cannot eliminate the view of a "China threat". Both within and outside China, there are different interpretations and understandings of the Belt and Road. One of the popular arguments is that the purpose of China's Belt and Road is to expand China's political and military power globally (Bowen). However, despite these critical dismissals, we cannot deny the

possibilities that BRI can bring about opportunities for peace, and we cannot deny the possibilities of strengthening the links between BRI and peacebuilding. China expresses the political will for peace promotion, and there is also a strong motivation for China to promote and sustain peace in the Belt and Road countries. Therefore, a positive approach is to promote the Belt and Road to contribute to conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

The peacebuilding potential of the Belt and Road

With regard to concepts, UN peacebuilding is a part of UN peace operations. According to the UN resolutions on the establishment of the Peacebuilding Commission, peacebuilding activities are aimed at assisting countries emerging from conflict, reducing the risk of relapsing into conflict, and laying the foundation for sustainable peace and development (*Peacebuilding Commission*). There are four core elements of peacebuilding.

1. Peacebuilding activities are aimed at post-conflict countries rather than the building of broad-based international peace.
2. The purposes of peacebuilding are preventing post-conflict countries from falling into conflict again and laying a foundation for sustainable peace and development.
3. Peacebuilding emphasizes the interaction of institutional reform, development, human rights, and peace, with broad missions including reintegrating former combatants into civilian society, strengthening the rule of law, improving human rights, assisting elections, promoting conflict resolution, and reconciliation techniques (*Report of the Panel*).
4. Peacebuilding emphasizes the multi-actor partnerships among governments, international organizations, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector, with special emphasis on the role of civil society organizations and women's participation (*Peacebuilding Commission*).

The nature of BRI is different from UN peacebuilding and the “Pathway for Peace” proposed by the United Nations and the World Bank. BRI is solely an initiative of China, not part of the agenda of international organizations. BRI adopts a cooperative approach based on voluntary and equal consultation, not a third-party intervention approach, and non-interference remains a major principle of China. As an economic cooperation initiative, BRI does not include the

peacebuilding missions like institution building and elections assistance. However, from a Chinese perspective, there are three overlaps between BRI and UN peacebuilding.

First, many of the countries covered by peacebuilding projects, such as Kyrgyzstan, Lebanon, Myanmar, Philippines, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan, and Yemen, are also participating countries of BRI. Second, UN peacebuilding activities are very broad and there is room for cooperation with Belt and Road. One of Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali's peacebuilding projects is to bring states together in joint programmes to develop agriculture, improve transportation, or utilize resources such as water or electricity that they need to share. He believed that this would be a way to reduce hostile perception and promote reconciliation (*Agenda for Peace*). In defining the concept of peacebuilding, the Brahimi Report believes that peacebuilding also includes the implementation of humanitarian demining programmes, emphasis on HIV/AIDS education and control, and action against other infectious diseases. In these respects, BRI has the possibility of cooperation with UN peacebuilding (*Report of the Panel*). Third, some BRI countries face serious conflict risks, and China's efforts to promote peace in these countries will contribute to UN peacebuilding.

The peacebuilding potential of the Belt and Road is prominent in the following aspects.

An inclusive platform that can be used to promote peacebuilding

BRI aims to provide a broad platform for economic cooperation with many layers and possibilities for participation. President Xi Jinping emphasized that China would build more cooperation platforms, and allow all sectors of societies and groups to participate in BRI cooperation, including international organizations, regional organizations, non-governmental organizations, civil society organizations, and think tanks. Since BRI was proposed, China has established Belt and Road cooperation with many international organizations, including UNDP, UNICEF, the Human Settlements Programme, the World Health Organization, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and the International Criminal Police Organization ("Outcome List"). These organizations are also partner organizations related to UN peacebuilding.

Strengthening the exchanges between the people along the Belt and Road is one of the important contents of the Belt and Road Initiative. On the initiative of the Chinese Association of Civil Organizations for Promotion of International Exchanges, a cooperation network of

civil society organizations along the Silk Road was established, with more than 160 Chinese and foreign civil organizations now part of this cooperation network. In 2017, this Association, with more than 90 Chinese social organizations, formally launched the Chinese Social Organizations' Action Plan to Promote the Belt and Road Initiative (2017–2020).

Such an inclusive platform for the Belt and Road cooperation can be used as a platform for peacebuilding, especially as a “people for peace” platform. This kind of cooperation network is also a model encouraged by the UN peacebuilding. If the Belt and Road is progressing smoothly, it is very likely to establish partnerships with more peacebuilding-related organizations and agencies, promoting future cooperation between peacebuilding actors and the Belt and Road actors.

Economic and development cooperation for peace

Promoting peace and security through economic and development cooperation is China's consistent notion based on the “China experience”. China attaches importance to development and peace and actively supports the 2030 Agenda, and emphasizes the high degree of connectivity between BRI and the 2030 Agenda. The Joint Communiqué of the Belt and Road International Forum mentioned that the 2030 Agenda with the set of Sustainable Development Goals provided a new blueprint of international cooperation. While emphasizing the decisive role of conflict prevention for economic development, UN peacebuilding reports also emphasized the interlinked relations between peace, development, and human rights. Development is obviously a relevant element of peacebuilding. One realistic approach for China's “development for peace” is to establish a closer interconnection between BRI and the sixteenth goal of the 2030 Agenda – to promote peaceful and inclusive societies – as well as the interconnection between the Belt and Road and UN peacebuilding. Strengthening the cooperation between development actors and peacebuilding actors is a possible direction of China “development for peace” and the BRI “road for peace”. For example, youth and women's employment is included in UN peacebuilding, and China can provide support for youth and women's employment in Belt and Road countries through BRI projects.

The International Committee of the Red Cross is one of the Belt and Road partners, and emphasizes the mutual benefits of social stability and development. Specific infrastructure construction and personnel training projects led by the ICRC have the potential to supplement the Belt and Road. For example, ICRC fixes and sets up water and

energy infrastructure, supports hospitals and orthopedic centers, trains locals to develop skills, and helps people start sustainable small businesses (Maurer). China supports the ICRC humanitarian cause, and encourages the Red Cross Society of China to enhance practical cooperation with the ICRC under the BRI framework (“Chinese Vice President”). The partnership between the ICRC and BRI can be the model for other peacebuilding actors.

Enhance capacity of peacebuilding

The cooperation between China and the countries along the Belt and Road has included items related to the enhancement of peacebuilding capacity: (1) economic and development capacity training; (2) peace education and peace training; (3) humanitarian assistance and medical and health training; (4) capacity building for protecting the basic rights of children and women. These are included in the goals of the *Chinese Social Organizations’ Action Plan for Closer People-to-People Bonds along the Belt and Road (2017–2020)* and can be expanded to more aspects related to peacebuilding (Chinese Social Organizations’ Action Plan). The Action Plan made a commitment to “maintaining peace and security in the regions along the Belt and Road”. The Action Plan also mentioned that Chinese social organizations would organize activities like international peace day, peace forum, and peace education, and make contact with the local peace organizations along the Belt and Road to jointly maintain the peaceful environment.

In July 2016, the Ministry of Education of China Issued the Belt and Road Education Action Plan, which involves different governmental and non-governmental actors as well as different aspects of education and training projects. For example, the Belt and Road Education Action Plan mentioned that “we will also boost implementation of youth exchange programs along the Silk Road”, and “we will deepen cooperation on cultivation and training of talent. Such multi-layered cooperation in vocational and technical education will help to cultivate the different kinds of talent that are much needed by the Belt and Road countries” (*Education Action Plan*). The Belt and Road Education Action Plan emphasized that “it is our shared responsibility to strengthen the pillars of regional peace through educational cooperation and exchange and thereby expanding people-to-people exchanges” (*Education Action Plan*).

Conflict prevention or peacebuilding is a broad concept, including issues like restoring economy, youth employment, and combating transnational crimes and counter-terrorism. BRI can provide some support

in these areas. One possibility is that BRI can provide “hard support” to “soft peacebuilding”, for example, the infrastructure support for peacebuilding-related training, education, and research.

Limitation and uncertainty

As mentioned above, in many aspects, BRI has potential for promoting peacebuilding, and it is possible to establish a complementary relationship between the Belt and Road actors and peacebuilding actors. However, the link between BRI and peacebuilding is still limited and uncertain, and BRI has not established official connection with UN peacebuilding.

Development for peace, not peace for development

Despite the recognition of the interactions between development and peace, the major peacebuilding potential of BRI is promoting peace through economic and development cooperation, rather than promoting development through peace operation or conflict prevention. Both UN peacebuilding and BRI have emphasized the interconnection between development and peace, but they each have a different focus and priority. UN peacebuilding is a broader concept, and pays great attention to political affairs, especially supporting national efforts to establish, redevelop, or reform institutions. Unlike the UN peacebuilding agenda, BRI puts economic and development cooperation first, and takes infrastructure as a priority. So BRI will choose peaceful and stable countries to promote economic cooperation. As an economic cooperation initiative, the peacebuilding contribution of BRI is limited.

Unfavorable factors, uncertain outcomes

The progress of BRI is affected by both internal factors and international factors. Relations between big powers, cross-Taiwan strait relations, the South China Sea issue, and China's relations with neighboring countries are regarded as China's core security interests. These are major international and internal factors that may greatly influence BRI (Xue “Diplomatic Risks” 68–79). At present, relations between major powers remain tense. The tension between China and the US military alliance in the Asia-Pacific region is considered to be the most important factor in China's foreign policy. Instabilities in this region will contain China's investment in the Belt and Road Initiative and peacebuilding. China's

political will and capability to increase the investment in the Belt and Road and UN peacebuilding depend on these factors.

BRI will give priority to countries with good political relations and willingness to cooperate with China, as well as countries with a stable environment. A good international political relationship will lead to smooth progress of economic cooperation. In turn, smooth economic cooperation will contribute to peace and security cooperation, including further cooperation in non-traditional security issues, like the cooperation in the fields of combating and preventing transnational crime, human trafficking, corruption, as well as anti-terrorism. This is an ideal scenario of BRI cooperation. However, not all countries along the Belt and Road have such an ideal political environment and condition, and there are many unfavorable factors that will affect the progress of the Belt and Road. Officially, BRI is still an economic cooperation initiative without established goals and schedules. In the Chinese language, “initiative” is a word with more flexibility and ambiguity compared to words such as “strategy” or “agenda”. If the situation is unfavorable for economic cooperation, BRI will proceed with caution, shrinking in scope and adapting as necessary.

From infrastructure to peacebuilding: necessary conditions are required

The physical infrastructure projects of BRI, like railway construction, road construction, or oil pipeline construction, will not automatically make contributions to peacebuilding. On the one hand, the infrastructure projects can be used for peace purposes – such as election venues, media centers, or hospitals, which China has already done through its infrastructure projects under the flag of UN peacekeeping. On the other hand, infrastructure projects may even be the cause of domestic or international disputes, as mentioned above. In addition, Belt and Road projects themselves also face various security risks, including the threat from terrorism.

The current situation is that the enterprises lack peacebuilding awareness and knowledge, and infrastructure projects cannot automatically contribute to peacebuilding. Some necessary conditions are required for promoting BRI infrastructure projects to contribute to peacebuilding. The necessary conditions include: establishing a connection between the Belt and Road Initiative and UN peacebuilding, adding concrete peacebuilding arrangements to BRI, promoting cooperation between BRI and peacebuilding, and enhancing the active interaction between the Belt and Road actors and peacebuilding actors.

China's willingness is obviously a decisive factor, but the position of relevant countries and international organizations is also indispensable. With regard to peacebuilding, the influence of international factors is more prominent, the enhancement of the interconnection between the Belt and Road and peacebuilding depending mainly on the promotion of external factors, including the efforts of the United Nations and regional organization. If the Belt and Road goes smoothly, and the peacebuilding efforts of international organizations are strong enough, it is very likely that the Belt and Road will make a greater contribution to peacebuilding. If China's political will and enthusiasm decline, or the Belt and Road process slows down or shrinks, the peacebuilding potential of BRI will also decline.

The United Nations has its own intellectual advantages and practical experience in the areas of peacebuilding, supplementing gaps in the BRI. However, it remains necessary for UN agencies to take more active steps to cooperate with BRI in peacebuilding, and help to establish the interconnection between economic cooperation and peacebuilding. Joint projects between the United Nations, Chinese Belt and Road actors, and the Belt and Road countries should be promoted. These efforts could include training, research, and economic cooperation programs. UN agencies should do more to enhance cooperative relations between the UN Pathways for Peace and the Belt and Road for Peace.

Conclusion

Peacebuilding is a comprehensive concept including development-related issues. UN peacebuilding emphasizes the interlinkages between peace, development, and human rights, and calls for strengthening the cooperation between peace actors and development actors. According to the definition of the United Nations, conflict prevention is also a comprehensive prevention that requires an interaction of different measures and actors. From the perspective of UN peacebuilding, BRI, as an economic cooperation-led initiative, could and should make its contribution to UN peacebuilding and conflict prevention. However, at this stage, the BRI peacebuilding potential is still very limited. The BRI peacebuilding potential is constrained and affected by different factors, both "China factors" and "non-China factors", which interact and influence each other. Though BRI has potential for peacebuilding in many aspects, this potential remains conditional and uncertain. BRI is only likely to achieve a positive outcome of peacebuilding through active international cooperation.

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