

The Belt and Road Forum: China's New Silk Road

What Message Can We Get from the Participants?

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The two-day Forum on the Belt and Road, held in Beijing on May 14 and 15, which attracted much attention of the world has come to an end. This forum has the highest level as well as largest scale among all the China-initiated meetings so far, according to Li Baodong, China's Vice Foreign Minister.[1] For such a big event, China gave it top priority and mobilized as much resource as it can to guarantee a "success". The outcome of this forum released by Chinese government to date looks more generalized than concrete, except for China's 100 billion RMB additional investment to Silk Road Fund and 60 billion RMB aid to the developing countries along the Belt and Road. In the meantime, the joint declaration is basically reiteration of the principles and the approaches of this initiative and little significant change can be found.

Nevertheless, the evaluation of this forum is not determined by the joint declaration released or letter of intent on cooperation signed only, but to a great extent the list of the participants, especially for Chinese government, the host of this forum. It will be quite meaningful to study how many countries sent representatives to the forum, which countries they are and what level official were present and explore why. This may help us understand both the achievement that this initiative has made and challenges facing it.

29 heads of state or government, together with the leaders of UN, World Bank and IMF attended the round table session of this forum and about 1,500 guests of more than 130 countries attended other sessions.[2] To make clear the exact meaning of "guests", *The Diplomat* did some research and confirmed that at least 57 countries sent governmental delegates to the forum, most of which were at minister level or higher.[3] But the final list of participants was still slightly different from what *The Diplomat* provided. For example, Pamela Goldsmith-Jones, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of International Trade attended the forum on behalf of Canadian government but was not shown on the list provided by *The Diplomat* due to the late decision.[4]



The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China characterized the participation as “unprecedented”.^[5] It is not surprising that the Chinese governmental media also covered this topic in a very positive way, with the most frequently used expression “the circle of friends became bigger and bigger”. However, unlike the simple and unified comments from these governmental media, further analysis to the list of participants can disclose more detailed and complicated information.

First, China did have good reason to be optimistic, judging from the number of participating countries. According to the initial plan of the Belt and Road initiative, about 60 countries are in the scope geographically, most of them are from Asia or Europe and some are from North Africa.^[6] We notice that vast majority of the countries concerned dispatched high level governmental representatives and many of them are the heads of state or government. This shows that the nature as well as the principle of this initiative have been largely recognized by most of the countries along the Belt and Road. To be specific, they came to realize that this initiative is more about economic cooperation than geopolitical calculation, and obviously the former one is the sphere that different countries can find common interest most easily. Also, these countries were more inclined to endorse the cooperation based on mutual benefit and win-win solution, or at least have some hope on it.



Admittedly, the motives of each country were distinct when they decided to attend this forum. It could be influenced by various factors, which were beyond pure support to this initiative or the calculation of direct gains from it. For example, Putin's attendance is viewed as strong support to China, which is also highly valued by China. But the real benefit that Russia can get and has got from the Belt and Road initiative seems limited. In fact, the progress of relevant cooperation between the two countries was rather slow and some projects were even experiencing stagnation.[7] Hence, Putin's attendance should be interpreted as a result of political consideration: Russia needs support of China when facing pressure from the West, and Russia has to support China in return, especially in such important occasion. After all, no high price is required if Putin only shows up physically in the forum.

Second, the distribution of the participating countries indicates that not only Asia, Europe and Africa have their presence in this forum, but also some countries from North America, Latin America and Oceania are interested in this initiative, such as Chili, Argentina and Fiji. On the one hand, since this initiative was proposed in 2013, Chinese government spared no effort to promote it and its influence has gradually expanded. The cooperation between China and other countries in the scope of the Belt and Road, though different from one to another and still faces various challenges, did set some kind of example for the countries outside the region. If they can see some countries in the scope benefit from this initiative, they will probably become interested in joining it, in the hope that they can follow suit and get benefit, too. On the other hand, this trend witnessed how the spirit of the Belt and Road proposed by China in 2014 has been put into practice. This spirit highlighted that

“this initiative is by its nature open and inclusive. It is not an entity, nor it restricts the geographic location of the participating country – any country with interest can join.” [8]

Eventually, this idea made the initiative go beyond the geographic boundary and became more internationalized.



Third, developing countries constitute the majority of the attendees while developed countries also have considerable presence. But obviously, the level of officials they sent and the time they made the decision are quite different. Among the 29 heads of state and government, most are from developing countries and only Italian Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni is from G7. Most of other Western countries only sent ministers level officials or below to the forum. It is also worth noting that vast majority of the heads of state and government from developing countries (excluding Kyrgyzstan) confirmed their attendance before Apr 18, while the US confirmed on May 11 and Canada on May 12. [9][10][11] This clearly shows the different importance attached to the Belt and Road initiative by the developing countries and the West. Of course, such varying attitude is derived from the different expectation of benefit they can get from this initiative. It is without a doubt that huge investment and construction on infrastructure, cooperation on capacity transfer, which are the core of this initiative suit the developing countries much better. For most Western countries, trade and investment facilitation is also attractive, but is not a pressing need. Not to mention the significant divergence on political and economic institution, value and even culture between the West and China made it almost impossible for the two parties get very close.

However, the attitude of the West is still worth ruminating. When this initiative was proposed three and a half years ago, the feedback from the West was basically skepticism and indifference. But since UK made a iconic decision in Mar 2015 to join Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), which was also initiated by China and had close relations with the Belt and Road initiative, the situation gradually changed. [12] Other Western countries in Europe and Oceania also began to show some interest as well as the political will to cooperate. To date some projects have been implemented, such as Sino-European freight trains. Nonetheless, the US and Japan never followed suit mainly due to their direct rivalry relations with China.

Surprisingly, Trump's inauguration brought an unexpected opportunity to the Belt and Road initiative. On the one hand, his isolationism, which led to the US withdrawal from TPP split the West camp and pushed some members in favor of free trade to seek cooperation with China, in which the cooperation via the Belt and Road initiative was also included. On the other hand, Trump's unconventional pragmatism made some "basic principles" of Obama era negotiable or even changeable, as long as Trump thinks it may bring tangible benefit to the US. As a result, the US government finally changed its previous indifference and decided to send delegation to this forum. Sino-Japanese has been at bay for a long time, but Japan also showed a positive stance with regard to this initiative recently and attended the forum. Therefore, all the G7 countries have their presence in this forum. Though it doesn't mean that the West has a positive attitude towards the Belt and Road initiative now, it at least shows that the door of dialogue has been opened. The significance of such change is that, even though China's gain from this initiative relies primarily on the cooperation with developing countries, the position of Western countries who own the discourse can greatly

sway the the rest of the world, which may eventually influence the implementation of this initiative.



Fourth, when we examine the list of participants, we care about not only who are on it, but also who are not. The most eye-catching absent country is India because it is the only big power along the Belt and Road that was invited but refused to send governmental officials to this forum. The proximate cause was its concerns and objections over the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) passing through Pakistan-Occupied Kashmir (PoK).[13] But the root cause lies in India's the deep seated skepticism and distrust of China, which come from the almost unresolvable territorial dispute with China, China's relations with Pakistan and to some extent, the rivalry Sino-Indian relations. It is without a doubt that India's absence to this forum is not what China expected because this initiative will definitely face more challenges, especially in South Asia without the support of the big power in this region. But it seems not very likely that China terminates the implementation of this initiative in the surrounding countries of India even if facing big pressure. In the meantime, India's boycott is also a double-edged sword in that it may also miss some potential opportunities of sharing the outcome of development when bringing difficulties to China.

Fifth, the delegates from both South Korea and North Korea also attracted much attention. In the last several months, the tension in Korean peninsula has almost reached a tipping point. During this period, China's relations with North and South Korea seriously deteriorated due to the nuclear test in the North and the deployment of THAAD in the South respectively. But China's invitation and North and South Korea's acceptance reflect that all of them seek to mitigate the tension and reduce the risk of war. Clearly, the significance of the participation of the two Koreas is not about economy, but politics. This further shows that this forum has also been mixed with much political implication, though the main focus is still economic cooperation.

Three and a half years have passed but the Road and Belt initiative is still on the way, which is far from destination and the final result is to be tested. Admittedly, neither the number of participants of this forum, nor the level of those officials can guarantee the success of this initiative in the future. But still, this forum can be viewed as a meaningful step towards its destination. Also, it did mean that no one should overlook this initiative now.

Notes

1. http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjbxw_673019/t1460705.shtml
2. http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1460783.shtml
3. <http://thediplomat.com/2017/05/belt-and-road-attendeess-list/>
4. https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2017/05/parliamentary_secretarytoministerofinternationltradetoattendbel.html
5. http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1460783.shtml
6. http://www.ciis.org.cn/chinese/2014-12/11/content_7436854.htm
7. <http://www.ftchinese.com/story/001072576>

8. http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2014-11/08/c_127190337.htm
9. http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjbz_673089/zyjh_673099/t1454490.shtml
10. <https://www.commerce.gov/news/press-releases/2017/05/joint-release-initial-results-100-day-action-plan-us-china-comprehensive>
11. https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2017/05/parliamentary_secretarytoministerofinternationaltradetoattendbel.html
12. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-announces-plans-to-join-asian-infrastructure-investment-bank>
13. <http://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/india-the-elephant-at-china-s-grand-belt-and-road-forum/story-LED5b2tXRFBF6XpVSiG5gL.html>

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