

"Realising The Inclusiveness & Symbiotic Ideals Of BRI"

Given that BRI is vastly encompassing near 70 nations of diverse cultures and levels of development across the globe, it is indeed a tall order to render it both inclusive and symbiotic in the local perspective of the participating countries.

Fearing the ever growing geopolitical and economic influence of China wielded through the BRI implementation, the adverse propaganda spearheaded by the US and its allies has visibly escalated since 2018. The repeated portrayal of BRI projects as the debt traps set up by China is no mere coincidence but a global schematic move designed to drive wedge between China and the BRI participating countries by exploiting some of the coherent weaknesses found in the BRI project implementation. The mounting adverse offensives seemed to have gained traction as the onslaught has so far been left unchecked.

To counter this , China has to prove with deeds its commitment to both ideals of “inclusiveness” and “symbiosis” in pursuit of shared destiny through the BRI implementation.

Both words are no mere rhetoric enshrined in the BRI Charter, but must be steadfastly and consistently translated into deeds that are well woven into the local social fabric of the host countries.

INCLUSIVENESS

BRI project implementation should not be narrowly viewed as an avenue for exporting China's hard expertise and engineering might in infrastructural development abroad. More importantly, China, through its SOEs undertaking the BRI projects, has to endeavour in winning the hearts and minds of the populace in the participating countries before success stories of BRI could ever be shaped and anticipated. The SOE personnel assigned abroad are undoubtedly the front line flag bearers. They have to be well equipped with an in depth understanding of the local social norms, sensitivities and prevailing mindsets for effective social outreach and public communication.

In so doing, collaboration with local people-oriented NGOs and think-tanks is absolutely necessary. Their proactive engagement with the local community through well targeted Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives would sow the goodwill and hence enhance the positive perception of China and its

SOEs locally. This should in no way be made synonymous with the foreign aid rendered in the name of the nation and government.

In inculcating the desired inclusiveness in the host countries, the following missteps are to be avoided :

(1) Only the ruling elite of the host countries are engaged with.

It would be unwise for China to be beholden to any specific sitting leader or ruling party only as the possibility of change-of-guards can never be ruled out in any multi-party election in the host countries.

(2) embracing only the local ethnic Chinese community in the host countries simply due to linguistic convenience in communication and sharing of ethnic ancestral root.

This would inevitably alienate the local indigenous community or the main stream society constituted by the dominant/major race.

(3) Reaching out to only the ethnic Chinese community leaders.

This would only buttress the public perception that they are the selected few beneficiaries of any BRI projects.

In short, such deed is nothing more than a PR disservice to the BRI implementation.

SYMBIOSIS:

Symbiosis or "beneficial for all" as was phrased by the organiser is the right direction pursued but it needs clear manifestation through deeds. A balanced narrative of the benefits reaped by both China and the host countries must be clearly analysed and disseminated in the objective perspective.

BRI is by no means an altruistic move by China. Any narrative in the altruistic perspective of such nature would only raise more suspicions on China's motive, more so in face of concerted hostile offensive aimed at discrediting, if not demonising BRI comprehensively.

Hence China needs to embark on an extensive yet wide encompassing public communication exercise in enlightening the people and government of the host countries on benefits anticipated by both sides. In doing so, transparency of BRI project implementation would help preempt and debunk ample malicious and unfounded allegations hurled against BRI. A classic case in point familiar to me is none other than the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) in Malaysia where the project was initiated by the Malaysian government and

was in dire need of project financing. It is not a project peddled by China with any evil debt trap conceived as was depicted by certain media.

Amidst the escalating bad publicity for BRI with deliberate focus on and magnification of certain setbacks confronting some specific BRI projects, it is all the more relevant for China to share her side of the success stories with the world.

Indeed this is going to be a real litmus test to China's soft power and soft skill in the immediate future.

By ONG TEE KEAT 翁诗杰 (Malaysia)
Chairman, Centre for New Inclusive Asia (CNIA)
April 2019 @ Beijing