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**China's Belt and Road
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by Isabel Hilton / April 19, 2019 / [Leave a comment](#)

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China's Belt and Road Could Have Been Great but Now Threatens to Be Disastrous

Is it too late to salvage something good from
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Take-Aways

- The EU is raising objections to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for a variety of reasons.
- China's official rationales for the BRI include promoting prosperity, cooperation, understanding and world peace.
- The BRI sponsors giant investments in coal-fired power generation that undermine global efforts against climate change.
- Asia needs massive investments in infrastructure.
- In early 2019, Italy became the BRI's first OECD member.

Recommendation

China's mammoth Belt and Road Initiative promises to build energy, transport and digital infrastructure across Asia – and to reach as far west as Rotterdam. Just six years in, the project has already partnered with more than 100 countries; estimates of its eventual size run as high as \$1.3 trillion. But Western critics, including the EU and the International Monetary Fund, are pushing back. In a succinct article for *Prospect*, British journalist Isabel Hilton outlines Western objections to Beijing's agenda and identifies the West's best point of leverage.

Summary

The EU has objections to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) – Beijing's mammoth, continent-spanning plan to build transport, energy and digital infrastructure. In 2018, EU members signed a statement of sharp criticism, and in 2019 the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security filed a scathing report. The UK House of Commons followed suit after Prime Minister Theresa May failed to endorse the BRI, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) issued warnings. Some BRI partner countries have withdrawn from or reworked their contracts. In 2019, Italy became the BRI's first OECD member.

“When China says win-win, it means China wins twice.” (unidentified Japanese ambassador)

Officially, China claims to be pursuing economic cooperation, prosperity and peace among BRI participants. But critics point to an array of problems: the lack of transparency, the inadequate risk assessment, the creation of unsustainable levels of debt among partner countries and the fact that Chinese entities reap most of the benefits. The initiative's climate change impacts have ignited particular concern: Despite China's lip service in support of efforts to fight climate change, Chinese companies are constructing new coal-fired power-generating stations in other countries under the aegis of the BRI. Finally, critics question Beijing's motives, given that the BRI – already in place in 123 countries, according to official Chinese sources – will give China economic and political heft across the hemisphere. Through the BRI, China has already gained control of strategic ports in Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Greece, and locations in the Pacific – as well as a military base in Djibouti.

“It is reasonable to interrogate what China's ‘shared future for humanity’ means.”

Asia needs massive infrastructure investment – \$26 trillion by 2030. But BRI opponents argue that deals struck under the BRI could run counter to Western standards and goals and that resulting debt levels could threaten stability. Pakistan, an important BRI partner, is currently seeking a bailout package from the IMF. In the 1990s, Japan – facing demographic and economic challenges similar to China's today – undertook an analogous initiative. But Japan didn't aim to build a sphere of influence: It shared benefits more fairly and practiced greater transparency. Instead, President Xi Jinping's China has earned suspicion rather than trust. In effect, China is seeking to export its corruption and climate-damaging practices, while building influence globally. Fortunately, China can't supply all its own capital needs – giving Western leaders an opening to influence the BRI in positive ways.

About the Author

Isabel Hilton is a writer, broadcaster and visiting professor at King's College London.



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