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a focus on current issues

SOUTH AFRICAN PERCEPTIONS OF CHINA'S BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE (BRI)

Global Insight aims to provide members of the policy community with concise but trenchant analyses of topical issues. Comments and suggestions are invited

The following policy brief is based on a broad perceptions study gauging to what extent China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is understood from a policy and practitioners' perspective. Undertaken in the period from late 2021 into 2022, the survey forms part of broader research by the Institute for Global Dialogue (IGD) that aims to assess the narrative and rationale behind the BRI in terms of the policy interpretation relating to the definition, communication and implementation of the BRI as South Africa's engagement with China deepens. Moreover the research project aims to assess the importance of the BRI in China's engagements with South Africa by exploring to what extent BRI projects have become a prominent feature in the bilateral relations between the two countries.

The initial research surveys perceptions of elite South African attitudes, with the following objectives:

- *Explore and measure elite perceptions of the BRI and China in South Africa.*
- *Determine how much is known about China and South Africa's strategic partnership.*
- *Explore what considerations and/or factors drive the BRI.*
- *Report how the Implementation, Measurement & Evaluations processes of the BRI projects interplay at various levels of the state.*

Some of the findings outlined in the policy brief formed part of discussions during a public seminar hosted by the IGD, through the China-Africa Joint Research and Exchange Programme, which took place on the 12th October, shortly before the 3rd Belt and Road Forum in Beijing. The research outcomes will continue to form part of discussions between the IGD and relevant stakeholders inside and outside of government.

Introduction

South Africa's and China's relations have deepened over the last 25 years. With the advent of the BRI gaining global popularity this research project explored how South Africa has engaged it as it was the first African partner to sign on. China and BRI partners have made considerable strides and the conclusion of the third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation denotes 10 years of the BRI and emphasised "shared development and prosperity", that the BRI is a public good and cooperation platform that contributes to peaceful solutions through development.

The first phase of the project was based on recording the perceptions of South African elites who actively engage (or have engaged) with China, and who demonstrate insights into the China-Africa relationship. Due to South Africa's complex history, elites have a closer engagement on policy shaping issues and hence a cross-section of significant stakeholders in policy decision-making processes, who articulate their understanding of the BRI were identified. This included government/public sector, multinational companies and other big businesses, academia including research institutions, and some civil society actors were engaged in the interview process.

Hence the focus of the study was based on the following set of objectives, namely to:

- Explore and measure elite perceptions of the BRI;
- Determine how much is known about China and South Africa's strategic partnership, and by implication the BRI;
- Assess what considerations and/or factors drive the BRI engagement; and
- Report how the Implementation, Measurement & Evaluations processes of the BRI projects interplay at various levels of the institutional architecture of the state.

Broad Observations

From the interviews conducted, the following broad observations can be made related to the perceptions of the BRI:

1. Defining the BRI

There is an overall sense amongst interviewees that the BRI does not have a static definition. From most of the interviews conducted the general sense was that the BRI is amorphous in nature, and thus open to different interpretations. Some interviewees highlighted that the fluid nature of the BRI allows it to be anything and everything. Other interviewees alluded to the far-reaching conceptualisation of the BRI as enabling China to organise the global value chain in terms of the way the framework is aligned to the following characterisations:

- The Infrastructure Silk Road
- The Digital-Technological Silk Road
- The Health Silk Road
- The Green Silk Road
- The Military- Strategic Assets Silk Road

The above framing of the BRI led one interviewee to conclude that the BRI was one *'big connectivity project on steroids'*. Perhaps the most illuminating observation from the interviews was that recipient countries needed to choose how they wanted to engage with the BRI and around which aspects of the BRI they felt most comfortable with. This led to the view that the Chinese were not prescribing or enforcing the BRI onto partner countries. The BRI remains part of China's central nervous system, especially regarding Beijing's overall geo-strategic trajectory in advancing its positioning in international affairs and the alignment this has in shaping the domestic political, economic, and social objectives. In short the BRI can be described as consisting of core political, economic, social, technological, environmental and civilizational/cultural dimensions of China's brand of globalisation.

For most respondents South Africa's engagement on the BRI needs to be clearly defined in terms of the country's strategic orientation towards the BRI. It is, however, noteworthy that the government identifies with the BRI based on the view that the BRI represents a deepening of the South-South Cooperation agenda. Based on the perspective of South-South cooperation and aligned to South Africa's interpretation of a changing global architecture, the BRI is conceptualised as one of the push and pull factors influencing the shifts in the power dynamics underpinning the international system i.e. that the current global power configuration needs to reflect the new centres of influence in the Global South. Nevertheless, some interviewees felt that despite the rhetorical support for the BRI, there remained unexplored areas that could bring even more value addition to the bilateral relationship between Beijing and Pretoria/Tshwane.

2. Communication around the BRI

Chinese policy makers have expressed that all who wish to engage and become involved in the BRI are welcome to do so, though this raised a number of questions when it came to the way communication around the BRI was structured. These included:

- Where are South African elites getting their information from? And is it important for ordinary people to know about the BRI?
- Whose responsibility is it to communicate the BRI? And
- Who creates a communications strategy around the BRI?

Communicating international relations to a domestic South African audience, in general, is difficult. This is because some may link this to South African inward-looking perspectives and exceptionalism. Moreover, when considering South African media reporting on South Africa's foreign policy engagements, this is generally associated with the government's lack of alignment with conventional global consensus. This can be seen in the context of South Africa's relationship with China where the narrative is predominantly focused on issues such as corruption surrounding state capture, labour misconduct, illegal immigration, and environmental malpractice.

While, on the other hand, the bigger contextual issue that becomes a recurring theme in mainstream local media is whether South Africa's non-alignment stance in its foreign policy orientation betrays the human rights centric approach to global affairs and the question of legitimacy in deepening relations with so-called non-democratic countries such as Russia and China. In addition to this, South African news on China (and international relations in general) is supplemented by international sources both western and eastern, though there is a stronger leaning towards western media houses like BBC, SkyNews, CNN, Reuters, Bloomberg etc, as opposed to English written or translated Eastern sources from China or other countries in Asia. As one respondent noted this disproportionate reliance on Western media outlets as sources of analysis of and interpretation on South Africa's foreign policy behaviour highlights a key weakness in developing an informed domestic foreign policy narrative.

Put more succinctly, the same respondent illustrated that in many instances the *domestication in understanding the country's foreign policy engagements is based on a syndication of opinions from international news agencies that are dominantly located in the West*. Therefore based on these competing dynamics in the media landscape and where often government finds itself on the backfoot in providing a coherent and cohesive foreign policy communication strategy, it is mostly those who have the potential to fall within an elite spectrum that are more likely to access news on international relations and shape the IR narrative.

Those engaging on South Africa-China relations from a policy, research or labour perspective, have access to a range of sources of information, but when aggregating responses, the majority of information on China comes from Western narratives. While elites are mostly able to discern what the aims of the sources of information are, analytically this poses a challenge to how South African perspectives can take shape and develop nuanced views. Some elites have the opportunity and professional or personal interest and resources to engage information on China and the BRI, but even then, not all elites have the capacity to be engaged consistently on China or the BRI.

Finally, the Memorandum Of Understanding (MOU) on the BRI signed between the governments of China and South Africa remains only accessible at a higher diplomatic level. Some respondents expressed frustration by this lack of engagement on the part of the SA government to interact with them on the BRI. Or to even make reference to it in platforms like the National Economic Development and Labor Council (NEDLAC) or the National Planning Commission (NPC) where stakeholders can have more substantive levels of discussions around formulating a concrete framework of participation in the BRI by identifying priority areas of cooperation and investment for the country's development agenda. Others suggested that the MOU does not have traction in moving the engagement forward on the BRI.

In this regard the issue raised is whether the responsibility of communication rests solely with the Department of International Relations and Cooperation (DIRCO). And if so, what should inform the communication strategy? Should DIRCO be the overarching ministry in overseeing the entire communication framework in relation to the BRI both inside and outside of government? Furthermore, questions were raised regarding the role of the Presidency in playing a strategic role in ensuring how South Africa's international relations and being a signatory in frameworks like the BRI are better coordinated from a communication and implementation context.

3. Governance and National Interests in operationalising the BRI

The common theme in engagements on the BRI is governance in its various facets. Governance in this case refers to decision making, monitoring and evaluation of implementation, all in the national interest and the execution of a strategic agenda. This includes issues such as decision making on the choice of financing vehicles for projects, public private partnerships (PPPs), legislation such as on BBBEE and labour. It also includes issues such as decision making on which silk road of the possible five and which projects on each road to pursue a role in. What seems to enjoy a semblance of broad support or consensus is the need for strategic vision, policy cohesion and effective program coordination at the South African state level.

While South Africa appears to enjoy an advantage by way of strong governance infrastructure such as its independent judiciary for dispute resolutions, independent and strong tax authority, legislation, NEDLAC and oversight instruments all demanding of transparency, respondents expressed that the country's national interest in the BRI remains muted. Based on the latter some respondents asked: 'does South Africa know exactly what it wants from the BRI? And how does engaging in the BRI enhance new capacities while improving existing capabilities?'

Perhaps the bigger structural question was for what purpose(s) SA should engage in the BRI? Should it be to act as a catalyst in driving the government's domestic macroeconomic policy growth programmes? In answering the latter question some interviewees felt that South Africa was not necessarily dependent on Chinese development finance under the BRI financial mechanisms such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) or the Silk Road Fund. It was noted that South Africa was flush with financing options ranging from the private sector to tapping into pension funds. Others felt that the BRI offered the South African government an opportunity to tap into the global value chain of production and manufacturing while also using the BRI to extend into regional markets in Asia, the Indo Pacific, and Africa.

It also became apparent that part of the dilemma in disaggregating South Africa's positioning in relation to the BRI had to do with the way the institutional architecture and bureaucratic nature of the state is organized, particularly the way it shapes and impacts on South Africa's China policy. This has to do with the purpose of alignment and having the requisite diplomatic skills set to advance South Africa's engagement with China broadly and specifically on the BRI. Finally, there was a sense that a strategic (re)calculus in South Africa's foreign policy orientation would provide clarity in discerning the intersection between the country's national interests and engagement in frameworks like the BRI and the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC).

Conclusion

An overarching finding from the perceptions study was that the South African government has not been able to create its own strategy for how it wants to engage the BRI based on the following areas of interest:

- Strategic Alignment to the country's foreign policy priorities and strengthening the bilateral engagement with China;
- Defining a coherent and cohesive communication engagement on the significance and value proposition of the BRI in the country's national interest and development objectives; and

- Capacity to coordinate and develop an implementation framework on BRI projects that are being initiated, those that are being undertaken and an assessment of completed projects.

The above three areas are critical issues of consideration based on the recent White Paper published by the Chinese government outlining their current thinking on how the BRI is seen as a key component in Beijing's expansion of its developmental philosophy on strengthening the Global Community through a Shared Future approach. The commitment made at the 3rd BRI Forum hosted in October 2023 reinforces President Xi Jinping's view that infrastructure development is pivotal in delivering Common Development and Prosperity, which can only be achieved collectively. Clearly, then, from the 3rd BRI Forum expanding on cooperation in the following areas: Trade Connectivity, Maritime Cooperation, Clean Silk Road, Think Tank Exchanges, People-to-People Bonds, and Subnational Cooperation are seen as significant levers of engagement that the future trajectory of the BRI will be advancing based on cooperation that is practical, innovative and evolving between China and its BRI partners.

Thus for South Africa to ensure that its BRI membership remains relevant and of interest to all stakeholders, the government has to move beyond the rhetoric that being a signatory to the BRI framework is sufficient. There needs to be concrete and pragmatic shifts in policy thinking and implementation of what is South Africa's national interest in the BRI. Moreover, extracting the optimal benefits from the BRI engagement requires that government recognise that the process is competitive and hence must continuously evaluate the country's foreign policy objectives and their alignment to BRI goals. Therefore in moving forward the overall view was that there needs to be decisive approach to the BRI by South Africa which is currently weak and non-distinguishable.

Recommendations

From the study the following recommendations emerged:

- 1) There should be an official policy framework document outlining the government's BRI strategy including short, medium and long term objectives, key priority areas of cooperation, an evaluation mechanism illustrating the timeframe in the implementation of projects as well as developing indicators in assessing the criteria in measuring the impact of BRI led programmes.
- 2) The proposed BRI strategy and national framework document should align to the continuous updating of the country's strategic framework documents on foreign policy goals and objectives.

- 3) The professionalisation of the Foreign Service and in particular the development of an expert knowledge hub and personnel in DIRCO will assist in strengthening the implementation of BRI outcomes.
- 4) The relationship between Government and non-government stakeholder should be strengthened by more active forums on BRI in order for information on the BRI to be actively disseminated.
- 5) Government should seek greater synergy between the application of the national interest framework and the National Development Plan (NDP). This will enable greater cohesion and linkages with broader continental and global agendas such as Agenda 2063 and Agenda 2030 of the SDGs.
- 6) Academia and the policy think tank community should collaborate with Chinese and other partners in undertaking in-depth research studies on the evolving nature of the BRI, especially areas of cooperation and priority issues that will assist in deepening South Africa's engagements in the BRI.
- 7) The think tank community should use their convening power to host an annual BRI forum that can serve as a critical platform for bringing together government and other important stakeholders together to assess, monitor, and evaluate the impact of the BRI domestically and globally.
- 8) The IGD should consider developing an online BRI Lab that maps, tracks and collates project information, links to policy documents and updates on last developments relating to the BRI framework

Next Steps

The project experienced a number of disruptions brought on by the COVID-19 Pandemic, particularly the first and second waves, and the operationalisation of Phase 1 of the research had to be adjusted to accommodate COVID-19 regulations and hybrid models relating to the new modalities of work. Participants expressed an overall interest in the BRI and its potential for linkages to South African infrastructure in the various phases of the BRI; transport infrastructure and its development in the health and tech silk roads. The next phase of the project will be to survey SADC elite views of the BRI. This will allow for extrapolations to be made in assessing whether similar patterns and trends can be discerned with elites from the region. This will also assist in understanding China's footprint in Southern Africa when it comes to the BRI and the implications this has for South Africa's regional political and economic engagements and overall presence.

Research Team

Ms. Arina Muresan – Senior Researcher, Institute for Global Dialogue, associated with UNISA

Ms. Sanusha Naidu – Senior Research Fellow, Institute for Global Dialogue, associated with UNISA

Mr. Mikatekiso Kubayi – Researcher, Institute for Global Dialogue, associated with UNISA



The IGD is an independent foreign policy think tank dedicated to the analysis of and dialogue on the evolving international political and economic environment, and the role of Africa and South Africa. It advances a balanced, relevant and policy-oriented analysis, debate and documentation of South Africa's role in international relations and diplomacy.

The IGD strives for a prosperous and peaceful Africa in a progressive global order through cutting edge policy research and analysis, catalytic dialogue and stakeholder interface on global dynamics that have an impact on South Africa and Africa.

3rd Floor Robert Sobukwe Building
263 Nana Sita Street
Pretoria South Africa

Tel: +27123376082

info@igd.org.za
www.igd.org.za

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