

China' s belt and road initiative : a perception survey of Asian opinion leaders

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CHINA'S BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE A PERCEPTION SURVEY OF ASIAN OPINION LEADERS

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Abstract

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), officially unveiled in 2013, is China's landmark foreign and economic policy initiative to achieve improved connectivity, regional cooperation, and economic development on a trans-continental scale. China has promoted the BRI as a cooperative initiative that will lead to a win-win situation for both China and BRI partner countries. However, there are many different views and pushbacks against the BRI and suspicions of China's underlying intentions. Impacts of the BRI can be assessed either through a model-based quantitative study or through a broadly representative survey. Our paper used the latter approach as we were not aware of any such study in the past. We implemented an online survey from 20 June to 19 July 2019 which over 1,200 Asian opinion leaders responded to. Asian opinion leaders were defined as policy makers, academics, businesses, and media practitioners from 26 Asian countries that have signed a BRI agreement with China. Stakeholders' perspectives on the following issues were solicited: (i) why China might have been interested in launching the BRI; (ii) perceived benefits and risks to countries participating in the BRI; and (iii) policies that the stakeholders would like to recommend both to China and their own governments. Though mixed views on the specifics of the BRI emerged, respondents generally felt that the BRI was a positive development facilitating international economic cooperation and development. The recommendations of this survey should be of some use in making the BRI a truly win-win initiative for all.

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Introduction

China launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013. China has promoted the BRI as a win-win proposition but six years on, there are still mixed views on the initiative itself and China's underlying intentions. This working paper presents the results of a perception survey that was conducted. The purpose of the survey was to assess the views of the stakeholders in Asia on the BRI. Specifically, we wanted to get the stakeholders' perspectives on: (i) why China was interested in launching the BRI; (ii) components of the BRI that would be of interest to the stakeholders; (iii) perceived benefits and risks of the BRI; and (iv) policy actions that stakeholders would like to recommend both to China and their own governments in order to enhance the effectiveness of the BRI.

In the past, a number of survey studies of the BRI have been conducted, but their scope has been relatively narrow. These include the Economist Corporate Network survey which focused on 77 business leaders¹ and two annual surveys conducted by the International Financial Forum in 2017 and 2018 which focused on central bankers from 25 BRI countries mainly from Europe.² Moreover, these surveys did not focus on deriving policy implications.

In contrast to the above surveys which focused on the perspectives of only the business leaders and central bankers from selected countries, as explained below, the scope of our survey is much wider. Our survey captures the views of government officials, academics, businesses, and media from 26 stake-holding countries on not only the economic front of the BRI but also the geo-political and geo-strategic dimensions. Our survey also aimed to derive perception-based policy recommendations for both Beijing and the BRI recipient countries on how to improve the BRI for the mutual benefit of both parties. To our knowledge, therefore, this survey is the first of its kind.

Survey methodology

In conducting the survey, we focused on opinion leaders (defined as government officials and international civil servants, academics, business leaders, media, and representatives of the civil society and non-governmental organisations [NGO]) from Asian countries that have either signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) or joint communique with China. Other Asian countries (e.g., India, Japan, and Australia) were excluded from our sample because we wanted to capture the views of the BRI stakeholders. Our sample, therefore, comprised 26 countries from three Asian sub-regions: East and Southeast Asia (13 countries), South Asia (six countries) and Central Asia (seven countries).

¹ ECN. 2017. Up and running? Opportunity and risk along China's Belt and Road Initiative. Singapore: Economist Corporate Network.

² IFF. 2018. "A route to economic growth – The Belt and Road Initiative 2018 survey." In *The IFF China Report 2018*. Beijing: International Finance Forum; and IFF. 2019. "The Belt and Road Initiative 2019 Survey – A new driver for globalisation?" In *The IFF China Report 2019*. Beijing: International Finance Forum.

We developed a questionnaire comprising 12 questions that were divided into four parts. The first part aimed to sketch out the respondents' profile by asking about their institutional affiliation and nationality. The second part explored the motivations behind China's launch of the BRI. Part three consisted of questions pertaining to the benefits and risks of BRI projects. And in part four, respondents were asked what policy recommendations they would offer to Chinese and home country policymakers to enhance the prospect of a win-win BRI. Under each question and at the end of the survey, respondents were at liberty to provide any additional comments and feedback.

We performed a test run of the survey among several doctoral students and researchers from Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Following the attainment of the research ethics clearance from the university's institutional review board,³ we conducted the survey between 20 June and 19 July 2019. Using the purposive sampling technique, we sent out email invitations along with informed consent forms to 16,069 opinion leaders from Asian BRI countries.

At the end of the four weeks we received a total of 1,230 responses (627 responses from East and Southeast Asia, 393 responses from South Asia, and 74 responses from Central Asia; see Table 1), corresponding to 7.7 per cent of the sample. This response rate is reasonable for an online perception survey and is higher than our early earlier survey on East Asia-South Asia connectivity.⁴ The response rate could possibly have been higher had we used a professional survey firm followed by off-line interviews, or translated the questionnaire into national languages. The budget for the study, however, restricted us from such an approach.

The highest survey responses were from Pakistan (11.2%), Singapore (10.0%), Bangladesh (9.2%), the Philippines (8.2%) followed by Malaysia (7.6%), Nepal (7.1%), Thailand (5.9%), Indonesia (4.6%), Sri Lanka (3.5%), South Korea (2.6%), New Zealand (2.5%), Cambodia (2.4%), Vietnam (2.4%), Myanmar (2.0%) and Georgia (1.9%). The number of responses collected from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Laos, Mongolia, Armenia, Afghanistan, Brunei, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, the Maldives, and Tajikistan were fewer than 20 each.

The academic and think-tank community made up the largest respondent group at 56.0 per cent.⁵ More than a fifth of the respondents (22.5%) were working at various central government agencies and departments (e.g., monetary authorities and ministries of finance, national planning, economy, trade, industry, foreign affairs, infrastructure, and transport) and regional and international organisations (e.g., United Nations, Asian Development Bank, Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations). The business and consultancy cluster (7.9%), the civil society and NGOs (6.1%), and the media (5.7%) made up the bulk of the remaining 21.5 per cent

³ The IRB reference number is IRB-2019-04-006.

⁴ Rana, Pradumna B., Wai-Mun Chia, and Yothin Jinjarak. 2012. "Monetary integration in ASEAN+3: A perception survey of opinion leaders." *Journal of Asian Economics* 23 (1):1-21.

⁵ For the purpose of readability, the figures in this working paper are rounded to the one decimal point.

respondents. A small percentage (1.8%) was from “Other” sectors, primarily consisting of retired government officials and experts who straddle multiple affiliations.

Table 1: Survey respondents' profile

		Government	Business	Academia	NGO	Media	Other	Total
East and Southeast Asia	Brunei	2	2	4	1	0	0	9
	Cambodia	0	1	15	14	0	0	30
	Indonesia	12	2	35	6	2	0	57
	Korea	2	0	30	0	0	0	32
	Laos	9	0	3	0	0	0	12
	Malaysia	29	3	47	6	8	1	94
	Mongolia	0	1	10	0	1	0	12
	Myanmar	11	0	10	4	0	0	25
	New Zealand	2	4	25	0	0	0	31
	Philippines	45	3	27	10	15	1	101
	Singapore	18	15	74	1	15	0	123
	Thailand	17	3	50	0	1	1	72
	Vietnam	5	0	24	0	0	0	29
	Subtotal	152	34	354	42	42	3	627
South Asia	Afghanistan	2	0	7	0	0	0	9
	Bangladesh	35	11	51	7	2	7	113
	Maldives	1	0	1	0	1	0	3
	Nepal	8	28	30	11	5	5	87
	Pakistan	32	11	85	4	2	4	138
	Sri Lanka	22	2	15	3	1	0	43
	Subtotal	100	52	189	25	11	16	393
Central Asia	Armenia	2	0	6	1	1	0	10
	Azerbaijan	1	0	1	0	1	0	3
	Georgia	0	0	21	1	0	1	23
	Kazakhstan	3	0	12	1	1	0	17
	Kyrgyzstan	1	0	12	0	2	0	15
	Tajikistan	0	0	1	0	0	0	1
	Uzbekistan	2	0	3	0	0	0	5
	Subtotal	9	0	56	3	5	1	74
Others		16	11	90	5	12	2	136
Grand total		277	97	689	75	70	22	1230

Note: Respondents who identified themselves as citizens of "other" countries were mainly expatriates based in Asian institutions. Source: Data compiled by authors from survey responses.

Survey results

China's motives

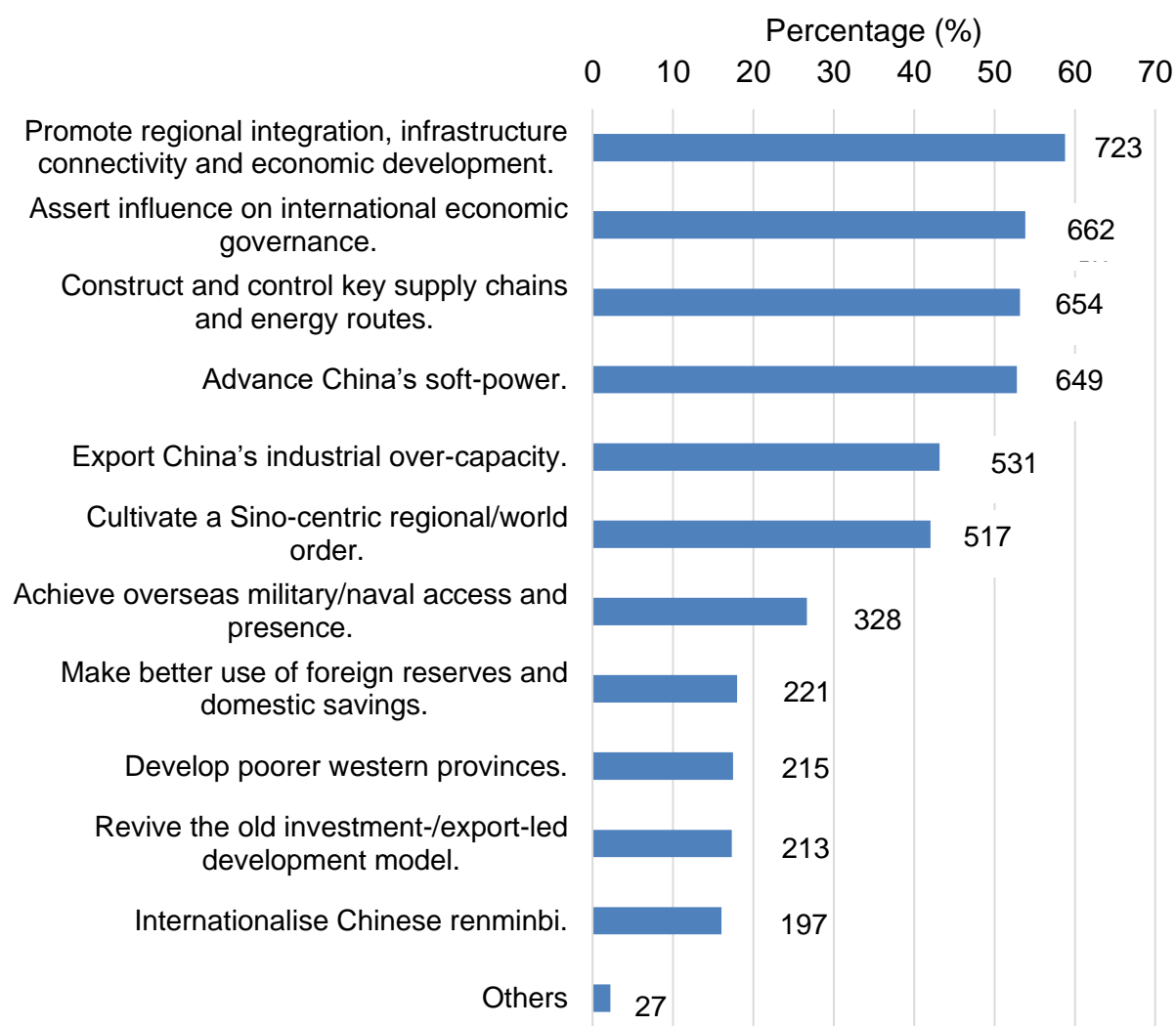
Understanding China's motives in launching the BRI is essential to developing an appropriate characterisation of the initiative. The survey provided eleven options (see Figure 1⁶) for the respondents to identify the top five motives that they think China attaches to the BRI. Four options received more than half of the responses: the BRI helps China "promote regional integration, infrastructure connectivity and economic development" (58.8%); "assert influence on international economic governance" (53.8%); "construct and control key supply chains and energy routes" (53.2%); and "advance China's soft-power" (52.8%). To lesser degrees, respondents also believed that Beijing aims to leverage the BRI to 'export China's industrial over-capacity' (43.2%); "cultivate a Sino-centric regional/world order" (42.0%); and "achieve overseas military/naval access and presence" (26.7%). In comparison, less important in the views of respondents were internal motives (e.g., developing impoverished inland provinces and reviving the old investment-led development model) or purely financial reasons (e.g., internationalising the Chinese currency and making better use of domestic savings and foreign reserves). In other words, the respondents by and large saw the BRI as more of a geopolitical and geo-economic initiative of China rather than something that China is doing for purely domestic, economic, and financial reasons.⁷

⁶ In all the figures in this working paper, no answer responses are not plotted.

⁷ Additional driving factors suggested by respondents (i.e. "others" in Figure 1) include "staying off environmental pollution in China", overtaking the United States as the world's preeminent power, rebalancing trade relations from the United States to Asian next-door neighbours, resuscitating the "good old days" of the Chinese tributary system, achieving "digital dominance", setting global technical standards (e.g. railway), and "building new visions for domestic politics to legitimise CCP's rule at the new stage of development".

Figure 1: China's motives behind the BRI. The BRI helps China...

(Answered: 1,230; Skipped: 0)



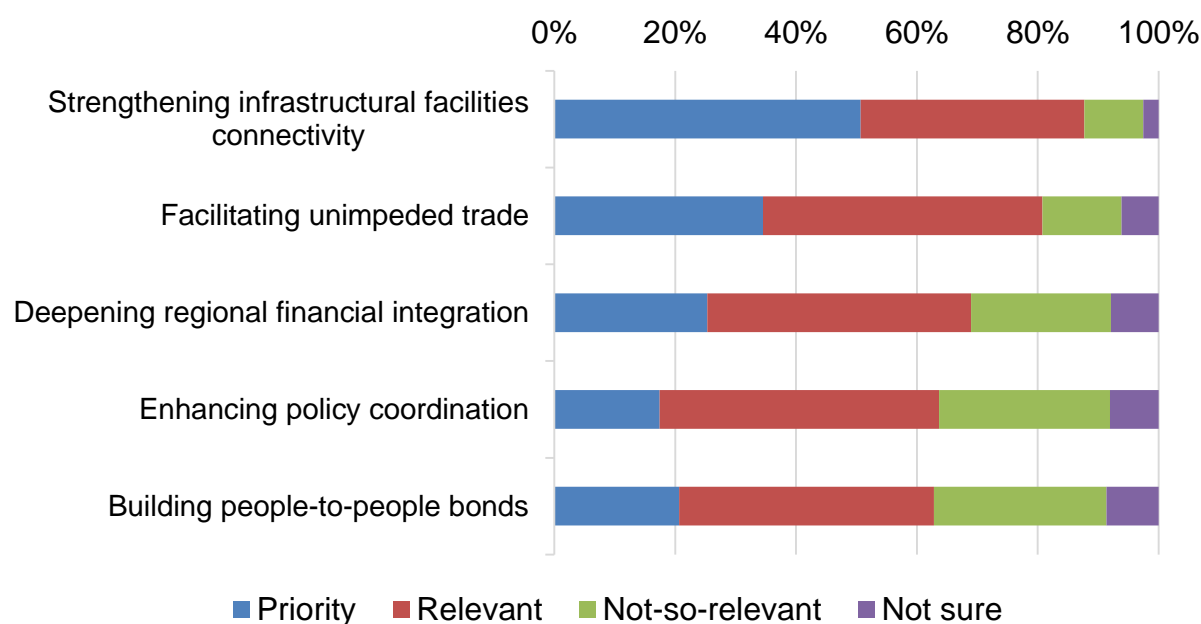
Source: Authors

Benefits and risks of the BRI

China has, since 2015, outlined the so-called 'Five Connectivity' goals of the BRI, namely, policy coordination, connectivity of infrastructure, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and closer people-to-people ties. The survey findings (Figure 2) show that not all dimensions of connectivity were viewed as equally important in partner countries.

Figure 2: Relevance of BRI's five stated connectivity goals to your country

(Answered: 1,205; Skipped: 25)



Source: Authors

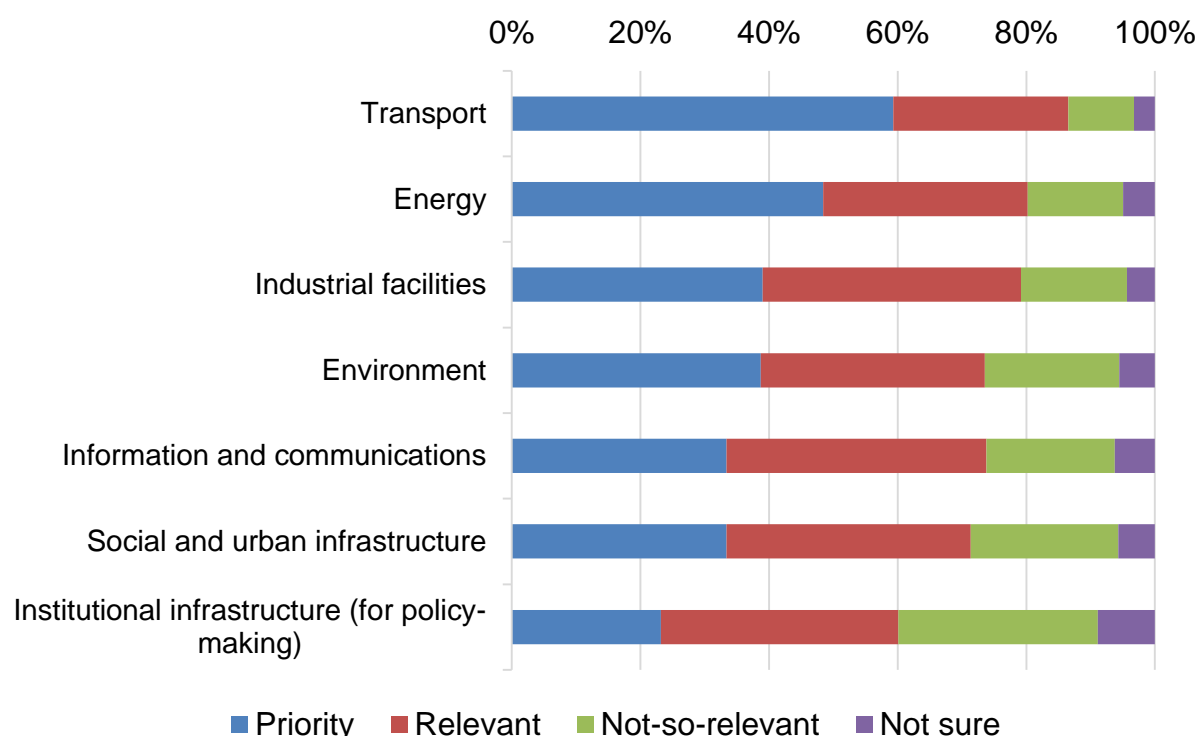
The respondents felt that strengthening connectivity and infrastructure is the most relevant component of the BRI (87.7% rated as priority plus relevant). This finding echoes the Asian Development Bank's assessment that the infrastructure in developing Asia remains inadequate and needs \$1.7 trillion per year in new investment to sustain growth and combat climate change.⁸

Trade facilitation was seen as the second most important goal under the BRI. Over four-fifths (80.7%) of all survey respondents rated the BRI's trade agenda as either "priority" or "relevant". By contrast, "enhancing policy coordination", "deepening financial integration", and "building people-to-people bonds" ranked relatively lower in terms of relevance from the perspective of Asian partner countries.

⁸ ADB. 2017. Meeting Asia's infrastructure needs. Manila: Asian Development Bank.

Figure 3: Which infrastructure sectors should the BRI focus on in your country?

(Answered: 1,173; Skipped: 57)



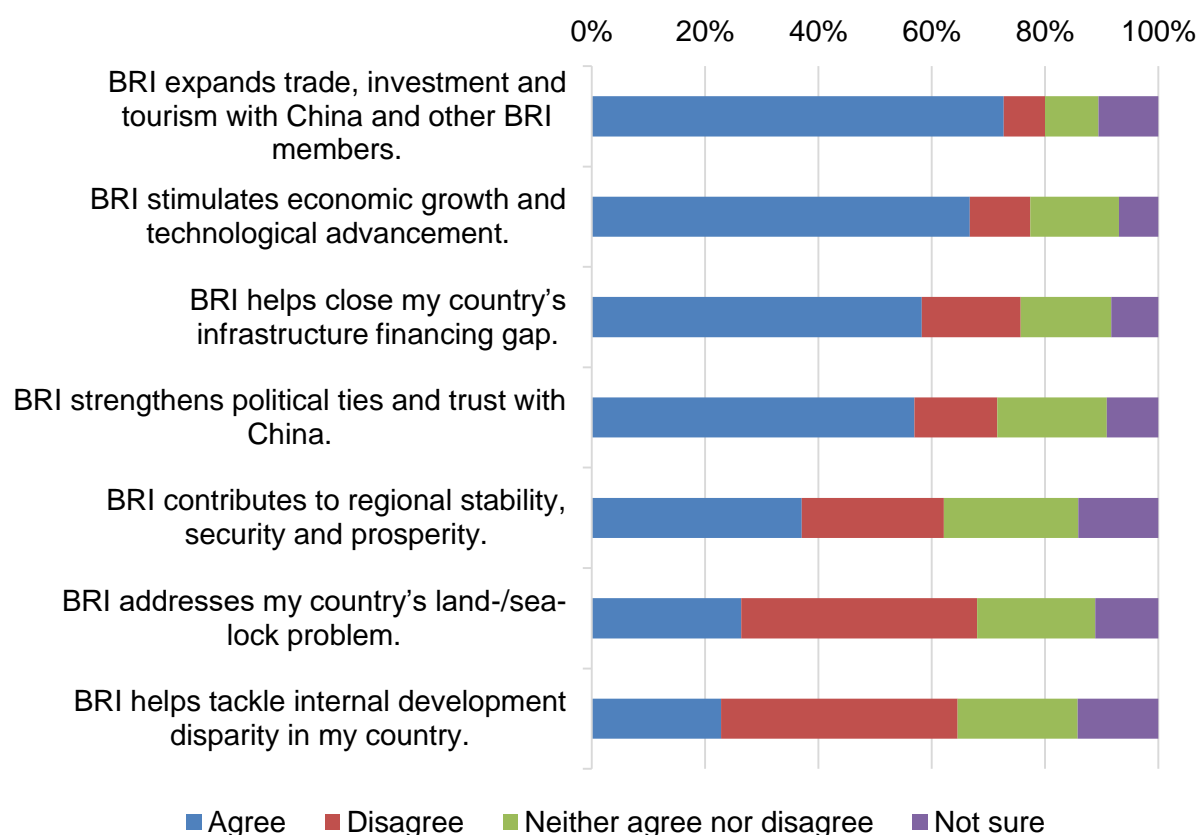
Source: Authors

In terms of which specific types of hard as well as soft infrastructure the BRI should focus on, as Figure 3 illustrates, most respondents deemed transport infrastructure either as a priority (59.3%) or relevant (27.2%) sector for their country. Respondents also believed that the BRI should focus its operations on energy-related (i.e., power plants) and industrial infrastructure (i.e., industrial estates and special economic zones). In particular, Pakistani (99.2%) and Bangladeshi (95.5%) respondents almost unanimously perceived energy infrastructure as priority or relevant. This could be attributed to the World Bank statistics that there are on average 75 and 65 power outages a month in Pakistan and Bangladesh respectively,⁹ disrupting supply chains and hindering productivity growth on large scales. Environmental, digital, and social infrastructure trailed by a bit but not so much. Despite its importance, institutional infrastructure was given a low relevance rating as the BRI's role in enhancing partner countries' governance standards and policy-making capacity is not yet openly recognised by Asian respondents.

⁹ See <https://www.enterprisesurveys.org/data/exploretopics/infrastructure>

Figure 4: Likely benefits for BRI countries

(Answered: 1152; Skipped 78)



Source: Authors

When it comes to the key benefits that their countries could get from the BRI (Figure 4), a decisive majority (76.4%) of respondents felt that the initiative holds the potential to “expand trade, investment, and tourism with China and other BRI countries”. In addition, around two-thirds (66.8%) of respondents felt that the BRI could stimulate economic growth and help their countries move up the value chain. In light of the massive infrastructure financing gaps in Asia, 58.3 per cent of respondents were of the view that the BRI could offer funding to “close my country’s infrastructure financing gap”. A similar share (56.9%) of the respondents felt that the “BRI strengthens my country’s political ties and trust with China”.¹⁰

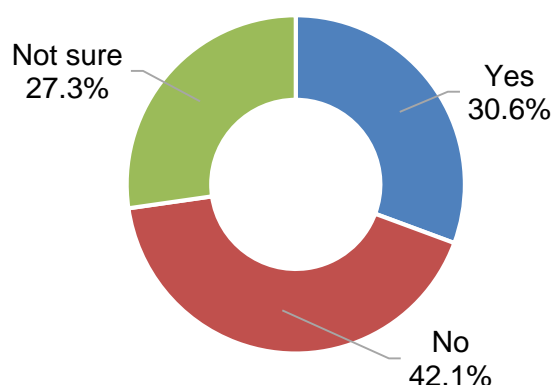
On the other hand, only 37.1 per cent of respondents felt that the BRI would contribute to regional security and stability. At the same time, respondents did not envisage a meaningful amelioration of internal development imbalances in their home countries just because of the BRI

¹⁰ In this regard, the highest degrees of scepticism of the BRI being an economic instrument to bolster political ties come from Korea and New Zealand (33.3% each).

(22.8%). Even fewer respondents expected the BRI to address their countries' sea- or land-lockedness problem (26.4%).¹¹

Figure 5: Do you think China is deliberately engaging in “debt-trap diplomacy” in your country in order to buy influence or seek dominance?

(Answered: 1,152; Skipped: 78)



Source: Authors

A common criticism against the BRI is that China deliberately engages in predatory lending practices, known popularly as “debt-trap diplomacy” (DTD), in order to buy influence or seek dominance in developing debtor countries. More than 42 per cent of the respondents, however, rejected such a narrative (Figure 5) although it is important to note that 30.6 per cent felt otherwise and that more than a quarter (27.3%) of the respondents had not made up their minds on this issue.¹²

A number of reasons were offered by respondents in their comments on why they disagreed with the DTD hypothesis. First, some respondents mentioned that domestic factors which were in the purview of the host government (e.g., reckless borrowing propensity, pre-existing macroeconomic vulnerabilities, and inherent governance deficiencies) should be blamed rather than Chinese financing per se when a country runs into debt predicaments. A Pakistani official remarked, “I do not think China is deliberately engaging in debt trap diplomacy but public sector corruption and poor governance at our end may lead to this result in Pakistan”. Second, others argued that the perceived DTD was not a national strategy but an unintended consequence of inappropriate project implementation – it could be the “newly internationalising” private Chinese companies striking lopsided deals that “maximise the

¹¹ This is mainly due to the fact that most respondents were from countries that are not sea-/land-locked. Examining specifically responses collected from Asian land-locked developing countries (LDDCs), the survey finds that close to 75% of respondents there agree the BRI could address their countries' geographical isolation problem. Asian LDDCs' economic structures traditionally rely on resource-intensive extractive industries to propel growth; thus, the BRI if done right is uniquely well positioned to help with their economic transformation and diversification efforts.

¹² This is in part due to a lack of concrete evidence. A Filipino respondent from the Department of Trade and Industry for example explains: ‘This issue [DTD] has been proliferating [sic] in the media discussion for some time but I have not seen any document to support it’.

returns of their investment” according to a Malaysian trade official¹³ or the by-product of state-to-state “bargaining that occurs only on elite policy levels without proper consultation of other stakeholders”. To sum up, as a Singaporean journalist puts it most potently, the DTD “is not so much a cautionary tale of borrowing from China, but of what happens when weak governance is married with the unforgiving demands of international financial markets”.¹⁴ Some opinion leaders also argued that the DTD is purely a manufactured fear by biased western countries and is more a function of geopolitics than economic facts. For instance, a Nepalese diplomat-turned-scholar contended that the DTD “is propaganda of some western countries which are seeking to dissuade the countries which have already signed up or are preparing to sign [an MoU with China on the BRI].”

That said, a considerable proportion (30.6%) of respondents thought that China knowingly drowns BRI partner countries in unsustainably high levels of indebtedness with the aim of securing undue political or foreign policy gains. The strongest reservation in relation to the DTD came from Vietnam (65.4%), followed by the Philippines (60.6%) and Sri Lanka (48.7%). Respondents from the civil society (Yes: 45.8%; No: 26.4%) were most predisposed to agree with the DTD argument while respondents from business (Yes: 25.0%; No: 50.0%) and media (Yes: 25.4%; No: 47.6%) backgrounds were significantly less inclined to buy into the DTD thesis.

In the next question, we asked the respondents what they perceived to be the (up to five) most worrisome risks and challenges to their countries from involvement in the BRI (Figure 6). The greatest concern to Asian opinion leaders was the prospect that their countries could be susceptible to Chinese influence (48.8%). Such a fear of being drawn into China’s orbit against the sovereign will of a country was widely shared among respondents from New Zealand (69.0%), Singapore (64.3%), and Cambodia (60.7%). The second most significant uneasiness and risk was the influx of Chinese migrant workers (40.8%). For various reasons, Chinese companies prefer importing Chinese workers to do construction work. When those construction workers flock to foreign lands, they could create social and ethnic tensions and are seen as taking up jobs that could otherwise have been filled by local candidates.¹⁵ This sense of local disengagement was particularly acute in Southeast Asian countries like the Philippines (66.7%), Vietnam (64.0%), and Indonesia (62.3%) where youth unemployment rates are high, at 6.8 per cent, 6.9 per cent, and 15.8 per cent respectively (2018 World Bank figures¹⁶).

The concern of the BRI projects having negative environment and climate change impacts (37.3%) and the perceived risk that Chinese firms disregard labour, cultural, and property rights (36.3%) also worried the respondents. Both senses of foreboding could be attributed to the perceived “Chinese

¹³ Some make similar arguments and suggest calling the debt-stress-related phenomenon “crony diplomacy” rather than “debt-trap diplomacy”. See Akpaninyie, Mark. 2019. “China’s ‘Debt Diplomacy’ Is a Misnomer. Call It ‘Crony Diplomacy.’” *The Diplomat*, accessed 10 July 2019. <https://thedi diplomat.com/2019/03/chinas-debt-diplomacy-is-a-misnomer-call-it-crony-diplomacy/>.

¹⁴ Tan, Hui Yee. 2019. “Chinese debt trap? Host countries bear responsibility too.” *Straits Times*. <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/chinese-debt-trap-host-countries-bear-responsibility-too>.

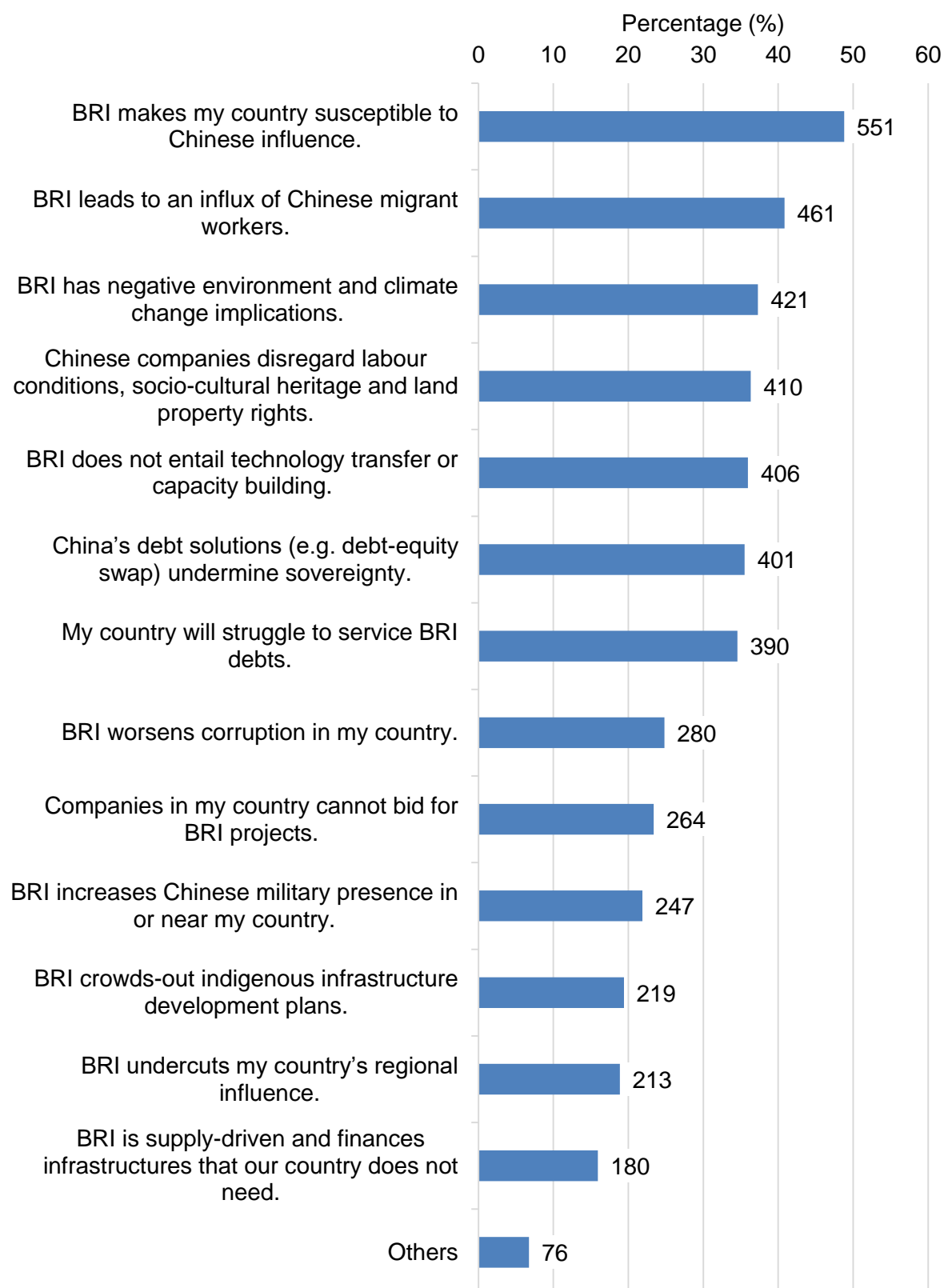
¹⁵ A Malaysian journalist observes, “Frankly having been to BRI nations like Cambodia, my personal observation is the jobs are given to Chinese companies and Chinese workers.”

¹⁶ See <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS?locations=ID-VN-PH>

way” of racing to make quick deals without adequate due diligence or community engagement and dealing with problems only as and when they arise down the road. Meanwhile, 36.0 per cent of respondents worried that the BRI might not entail technology transfer opportunities or up-skilling programmes.

Figure 6: Likely risks associated with the BRI

(Answered: 1129; Skipped: 101)

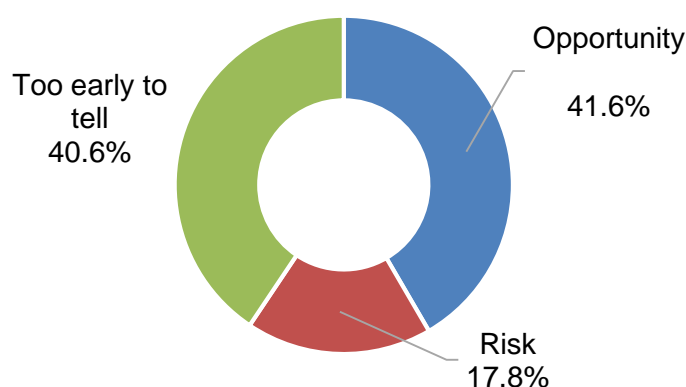


Source: Authors

Two inter-related misgivings that surround the debt implications of the BRI ranked in the sixth and seventh places. 35.5 per cent of the respondents felt that possible debt solutions in the event of a default on Chinese BRI loans (e.g., debt-equity swap) could undermine their countries' sovereignty. Presumably the respondents had Hambantota Port in mind when answering this question and indeed 44.7 per cent of Sri Lankan respondents thought that the BRI's potential sovereignty-eroding effect is a deeply troubling risk. More generally, over a third (34.5%) of the respondents suspected that their countries could struggle to make payments to Chinese financiers. Sri Lankan (63.2%) and Malaysian (59.1%) respondents on average were more wary of this risk. In both countries, the new government had moved towards renegotiating financial terms with China or scaling back BRI projects. Malaysia had managed to cut the cost of the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) contract by a third and sought to cancel the Trans-Sabah Gas Pipeline and the Multi-Product Pipeline¹⁷. Respondents on the whole were noticeably less bothered by other risks we listed for them to choose.¹⁸

Figure 7: In your opinion, on balance for your country, the BRI represents a net...

(Answered: 1,128; Skipped: 102)



Source: Authors

On balance, 41.6 per cent of the respondents, after adding up all the likely economic and political benefits and subtracting potential fallouts, thought that the BRI represented a net opportunity for their countries (Figure 7).¹⁹ The strongest endorsements of the BRI came from Georgia (69.6%), Bangladesh (64.5%), Pakistan (59.7%), and Nepal (58.8%) whereas respondents in the Philippines (opportunity: 21.2%; risk: 47.5%) were among the least receptive to the proposition that the BRI is an opportunity to be embraced. Korean (62.1%), Myanmar (60.0%), and Vietnamese (60.0%) respondents tended to take a more neutral stance, saying it was too early to ascertain if the BRI presents an opportunity or a

¹⁷ As such, a Malaysian diplomat comments that “I’m confident that the country’s new leadership [Mahathir administration] will be able to ensure a win-win situation”. Another trade official from Malaysia agrees, saying “We already have a win-win agreement worked out on the renegotiated ECRL project. We must ensure it is implemented well.”

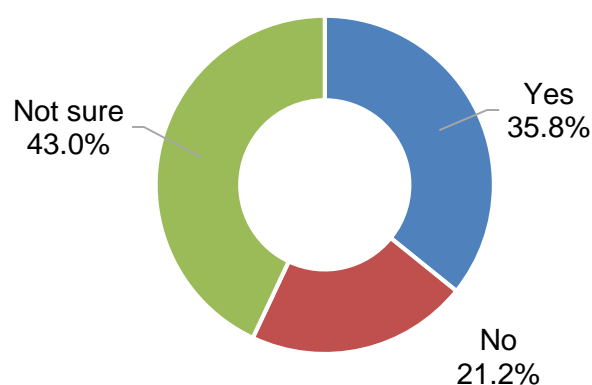
¹⁸ In the comments, a few respondents mention additional sensitivities about Chinese companies growing genetically modified crops in foreign countries and the BRI putting their countries’ relationship with other great powers, mostly the United States and India, under strain.

¹⁹ This finding must be interpreted with caution as 40.6% noted that it was too early to tell.

risk for their respective countries. In terms of affiliation breakdown, respondents from business communities (opportunity: 50.6%), and government agencies and international institutions (opportunity: 46.4%) were more bullish on the BRI, while approximately 40 per cent of surveyed academics, think tankers, and civil society stakeholders were on the fence. Meanwhile, Central Asian respondents (61.4%) were more positively inclined towards the BRI. Somewhat fewer but still a majority in South Asia (58.8%) concurred. Such optimism did not carry through to East and Southeast Asia though. There, respondents were less upbeat with 44.8 per cent harbouring the view that it was still too soon to make a definitive judgement on whether their countries stood to win or lose out from the BRI.

Figure 8: Are you confident that the BRI will ultimately lead to win-win situations?

(Answered: 1,128; Skipped: 102)



Source: Authors

Looking forward, 35.8 per cent of the respondents felt that they were confident that the BRI would ultimately result in win-win situations benefiting both China itself and partner countries while 21.2 per cent thought otherwise (Figure 8). 43 per cent of the respondents were, however, unsure. At the country level, the more positive views on the BRI's long-term promise were found in South Asian nations such as Nepal (57.5%), Bangladesh (57.0%), and Pakistan (51.2%) while the lack of faith in the eventuality of the BRI being a win-win initiative was most pronounced in New Zealand (no: 48.3%), Vietnam (no: 44.0%), and the Philippines (no: 40.4%).

Policies to improve the BRI

The BRI is a work in progress and needs to be improved. To obtain additional insights into what policy measures should be adopted to enhance the success of the BRI, the respondents were presented with a list of twelve policy recommendations that we thought could be helpful and asked which ones they would endorse. Each respondent was allowed to choose a maximum of five options.

Figure 9 summarises the respondents' views on policies that should be implemented by the Chinese government. The six policy recommendations that topped the list were:

- i. China should enhance transparency²⁰ (61.7%)
- ii. Offer more employment, capacity-building, and technology transfer opportunities (56.3%)
- iii. Be attentive to national sensitivities and adapt the BRI to each partner's specific needs (49.5%)
- iv. Allow local contractors to bid for BRI projects and treat foreign companies fairly (43.7%)
- v. Refrain from supporting corrupt governments and political parties (38.4%)
- vi. Move towards a rules-based system of infrastructure financing (35.4%)

Other policy options listed in the survey also seem to be appropriate as they were selected by over 200 stakeholders.

A Filipino journalist suggested that China institute appropriate dispute resolution and grievance mechanisms to address local concerns, noting that “[i]f there's something wrong with these projects, countries and their citizens should have a grievance mechanism where they can air out their concerns. In short, the BRI should have a safeguards policy.”

Among the policy recommendations that should be implemented by the host countries (Figure 10), responses showed that the most important one was to put a high priority on good governance, rule of law, anti-corruption, and democracy at home (60.2%) as the best way forward.²¹ The recommendation that gathered the second highest number of responses was to “negotiate hard and smartly with China for best possible terms” (55.4%). Here, Malaysia's East Coast Rail Link renegotiation experience as mentioned above can be instructive. Rounding up the top three recommendations was the advice for BRI countries to “prepare a national infrastructure development strategy” so that they could engage China in a more organised way (52.0%). Notably, nearly eight in ten respondents from Sri Lanka (78.9%) and Nepal (77.5%) thought that this was important advice. A regional strategy for infrastructure development could also be useful. A Malaysian analyst suggested regional countries to “[u]se complementary regional governance mechanisms to improve BRI prospects where available, e.g., matching BRI projects to priority infrastructure projects identified in ASEAN's upcoming database.”

The value of communicating with the public objectively about the BRI's pros and cons was identified by 47.0 per cent of the respondents as being useful. Perhaps worth mentioning is that respondents tended to think it was primarily the host governments' responsibility to inform their citizens on BRI-related matters, as in comparison only 27.8 per cent of the respondents in the previous question encourage China to proactively shape public opinions in their countries. Performing due diligence and investing in only financially viable and bankable projects and insisting that local companies be allowed

²⁰ For example, China should enhance transparency in relation to procurement practice, contract-awarding mechanism and financing terms and conditions.

²¹ One exception is Georgia where only around a third (34.8%) of respondents hold this view.

to bid for projects were also chosen by 44.5 per cent and 41.2 per cent of the respondents respectively as pivotal to the success of the BRI. The rest of the suggestions that we listed were seen as comparatively less important.

Figure 9: Policy recommendations for China. China should...

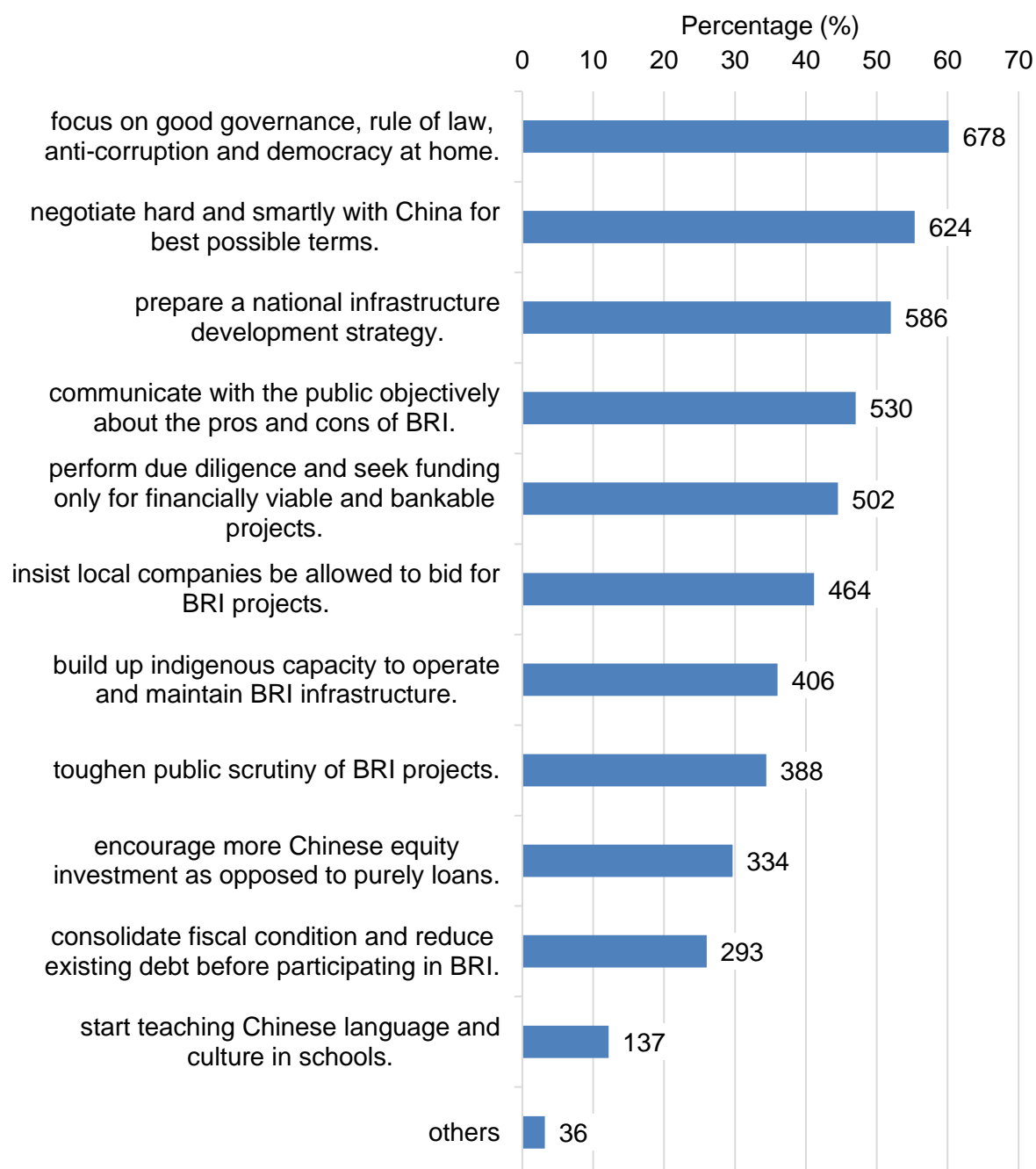
(Answered: 1,127; Skipped: 103)



Source: Authors

Figure 10: Policy recommendations for BRI countries. My country should...

(Answered: 1,127; Skipped: 103)



Source: Authors

Additional Comments

At the end of our survey, respondents were invited to offer some comments, if they chose to. Below are some of them:

- "[The] BRI is a mission for public good. All sides should minimise misuse and undue politicking. This can be done through more transparency and public exchange of information and mutual learning." – a Singaporean scholar-cum-diplomat
- "At first [the] BRI should connect all the countries of SAARC & ASEAN then move to the Middle-east." – a Bangladeshi lobbyist
- "There is a hope for better cooperation between Indonesia and China. But, there should be a road map with clear and concrete output and outcome, time scheduling, financial scheme, and cost-profit sharing. In addition, there should be more involvement of [...] local people on the management of the BRI projects." – an Indonesia official
- "While criticism about the BRI has been increasing, there is need for more constructive criticism and cautious optimism about the benefits and opportunities that it brings to countries participating in the BRI. The need for transparency is high and [it] is necessary for the public to appreciate the BRI." – a Filipino scholar
- "A sustainable and credible BRI has to go along with China's internal structural reforms and opening, including those in financial sector and capital account." – a Malaysian scholar
- "[The] BRI is a very good initiative but it always started [sic] on the 'wrong footing' in each country due [to] Chinese companies' lack of the local social & political understanding." – a Cambodian civil society respondent
- "Some misunderstandings about the BRI arise because of the tendency to include every China-associated overseas project into the BRI umbrella. A more robust and strict clarification of what a BRI project entail would reduce such misconceptions." – a Singaporean policy analyst
- "Perhaps the BRI is net benefit to my country in individual country terms, but I would not want my neighbouring countries to be compromised even if it was not China's intention [...] Perhaps a regional view of net benefit or risk is also relevant." – a Singaporean policy analyst
- "The BRI offers an opportunity for Asia and the non-West for alternative development but the program lacks local interest and participation to make it a mutually sustainable project." – a Thai scholar
- "[...] the major interest of Nepal is [to] build connectivity through infrastructure development being a landlocked country. Connectivity to both China and India is [of] high importance for Nepal." – a Nepalese scholar
- "When US plays hardball on trade, [the] BRI does not seem like an unfriendly alternative, as long as governments participate with stronger internal governance, due diligence, and a proper strategy on the investments and projects that would most benefit the nation." – a Malaysian official
- "[The] BRI can be one of the major means for our country to move for [sic] forward to achieve a

better and developed life, at the same time it can be the important tool for our country to negotiate with our neighbors." – a Bangladeshi official

- "New Zealand's enthusiasm for [the] BRI will be determined by the extent to which it is consistent with the country's core goal of maintaining an independent foreign policy." – a New Zealand scholar
- "China needs to find a way to progress the BRI project while negotiating with the US. Ignoring the US is not the solution." – a New Zealand scholar
- "There needs to be an element where 'poverty alleviation' a key priority in BRI projects across the regions to be connected." – a Sri Lanka civil society respondent
- "[The] BRI has to [be communicated with in] local languages of the relevant countries to make awareness about the project to local people." – a Sri Lankan diplomat
- "Most suspicions about the BRI stems [sic] from a lack of transparency [in] China's political system. Hence, countries can't be quite sure how much BRI [will be] a tool for promoting economic development and political influence." – a Singaporean official
- "[The] BRI aims for future generations. So, use [the] BRI effectively in seeking friendships with other regional countries and work together for the betterment of our younger generations with the noble aim of creating a better, more prosperous and peaceful world in the future." – a Myanmar scholar
- "It is an ambitious, exciting and challenging endeavour. It is a very long-term initiative and therefore expectations about the results and benefits have to be managed well. Some mechanisms have to be developed to ensure long-term success despite change of governments in the participating countries." – a Singaporean scholar
- "Walk the ground more to sense the effects of whatever projects are planned to be in touch with people[s] sentiments. It's [sic] top-down at this stage." – a Singaporean businessperson
- "China has surplus dollars. Economics is the basis for [the] BRI for the time being. History tells things do not proceed as originally planned. Trump's knee jerk reactions, Narendra Modi, Indian prime minister's Pakistan fixation, and some other factors will force [the] BRI to become more [of] a strategic initiative than an economic initiative [...]" – a Pakistani newspaper columnist
- "Implementation of [the] BRI is certainly fraught with difficulties and challenges. Additional risks are laid in the complex reality of current geopolitical confrontation. That is why China needs to reach consensus with key actors on a number of issues." – an Azerbaijani official
- "I think that the BRI is an opportunity, and policy-makers should take advantage of it. Before doing so, they should first learn how the 'game' is played, especially in understanding the dynamics of China's economy, exchange and interest rates, in order to identify win-win joint ventures [...]" – a Filipino policy analyst
- "There is great hope that [the] BRI will bring Central Asia the same prosperity as the Silk [Road] in the past." – a Kazakh scholar
- "(1) China should incentivise and support its think tanks to collaborate with local think tanks in BRI countries. They can undertake joint research and organise dialogues. (2) Short videos may be made to show progress in connection with the BRI and dispel the misgivings and contrary propaganda. (3) Many are trying to use Debt Trap as a propaganda tool against BRI. There is a

need to develop a counter narrative based on evidence." – a Bangladeshi think tanker

- "It is clearly a catalytic initiative, but my country should be more equipped with a better understanding of the specific projects promised by China's [BRI]. What are the benefits and the risks? For the PH [Philippines], we may be able to gain given the current administration's infrastructure agenda. However, [the] government must also remain vigilant and ensure an inclusive process (involving the private sector, CSOs [civil society organisations], academia)." – a Filipino official
- "I think China inappropriately applies its success model to other developing countries without due consideration of their real needs and limitations." – a Thai think tanker
- "In fact, a western research study found that none of the BRI projects have created any such intended debt traps for the governments which in the first place, had no other financing options other than the IMF [sic] or World Bank-debt trap loans available. That is the irony of western-led financial institutions like the IMF and World Bank which has [sic] entrapped so many developing nations in Africa in a vicious perpetual cycle of more loans & poverty aggravation. Please read history of economic development more carefully [before] calling the other kettle black." – a Singaporean businessperson
- "China offers loans with few of the usual conditionalities. The big issue is for the government to be transparent, accountable, in borrowing from China even though China does make this a condition of its loans." – a Kyrgyz scholar

Conclusion

Survey results present a fairly positive yet mixed assessment of China's BRI from the perspectives of Asian opinion leaders. Over half of the respondents believed that China pursues the BRI with an eye to promoting regional integration and connectivity, asserting influence on global economic governance, constructing key supply chain and energy routes, and advancing Chinese soft power.

Among the BRI's five objectives, respondents generally felt that achieving infrastructure connectivity and unimpeded trade are more relevant to their countries than financial integration, policy coordination, and people-to-people relations. On infrastructure types, respondents were of the opinion that energy, transport, and industrial infrastructure should be the ones which the BRI needs to focus in Asia.

A majority of the respondents felt that the BRI provides a platform for BRI countries to attract trade, investment, and tourists from China and elsewhere. They also expected the BRI to stimulate economic growth and technological advancement while closing infrastructure gaps. Better political relations with China due to the BRI was also highlighted by close to three-fifths of the respondents as a key benefit. On the other hand, respondents expressed concerns over potential downsides like

China's influence expansion, influx of Chinese migrant workers, BRI projects' environmental implications, lack of technology transfer opportunities, and risks related to debt overhang.

Overall, the respondents viewed the BRI favourably. The opinion leaders who categorised the BRI as a "net opportunity" significantly outnumbered those who saw the BRI as a "net risk". Similarly, the respondents were more confident than not that the BRI will lead to win-win outcomes eventually. More than two-fifths of the respondents also rejected the notion of malicious Chinese "debt-trap diplomacy". These findings, however, must be interpreted with caution as for each of the three questions a large chunk of respondents were undecided.

In terms of policy actions that should be taken to ensure a successful BRI, enhancing transparency, offering more capacity building and local employment, adapting the BRI to specific needs of foreign partners, and allowing non-Chinese contractors to bid for projects top the list of recommendations for Beijing to maximise developmental impact and inclusiveness of the BRI. As for their home governments, the respondents felt that they should focus on good governance, negotiate with China for best possible terms, make sure the BRI fits in a national infrastructure development strategy, perform due diligence, and be level with the general public about the pros and cons of the BRI if they were to make the most of the BRI.

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