

The Belt and Road Initiative and the Theoretical Innovation of International Cooperation: Culture, Philosophy and Practice

Sun Jisheng

Diplomatic practice, in most cases, provides the basis of diplomatic theory. Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (CPC), China has made constant innovations in its diplomatic practice. New concepts, new ideas, and new policies have been put forward, among which the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is a typical example. After the BRI was put forward, it quickly became the most important platform and mechanism for China to promote cooperation with other countries, and gradually became a characteristic of Chinese discourse.¹ The Belt and Road international cooperation not only follows some basic rules of international cooperation, but also introduces new concepts in international cooperation and exhibits the uniquely Chinese manner in cooperation and social practice, which reflects the Chinese way of thinking and behavior, and cannot be entirely ignored nor fully explained by the traditional Western theories of international relations. To this end, the theoretical thinking behind the Belt and Road international cooperation and its refinement in time can not only better clarify the Belt and Road practice itself, but also enrich the theory of international cooperation and help transform China's practice through its theoretical elaboration into a more universal model of cooperation.

Sun Jisheng is Vice President and Professor of China Foreign Affairs University, and Chief Expert of the Research Center for Beijing International Exchanges and Foreign Affairs Administration.

1 "Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road," March 2015, https://en.ndrc.gov.cn/newsrelease_8232/201503/t20150330_1193900.html.

Three Main Factors Affecting the Development and Innovation of International Relations Theory

The theory of international cooperation has always been an important subset for international relations theory. Reviewing the overall development of the theory of international relations, we find that traditional culture concepts, diplomatic practices, and major changes in the world situation are the three key factors which have influenced the overall development of the theory of international relations and have introduced innovation in different schools of thought.

First, traditional culture is an important resource for the development and innovation of international relations theories. Culture is accumulated and formed in the history of a country, and reflected in the traditions and customs of the nations. It not only shapes ideas, norms, and habits, but also influences behavior and thinking. In this sense, the emergence and development of theories, on the one hand, is influenced by traditional culture, and on the other hand, reflects local characteristics and imprints the theories with local influence.

Culture is part of the social structure and shapes social habits. People's behavior and actions in most cases are habits without deliberate thinking. This is why, theoretically, there are both a logic of consequence and appropriateness,² and a logic of habit and practice.³ In fact, both the logic of habit and the logic of practice reflect the influence of culture. Culture directly shapes the background knowledge, and at the same time reflects it. According to John R. Searle, an American philosopher, people usually behave unconsciously, but follow certain rules with which they are too familiar to be aware of their observance, which makes their behavior appear

2 Peter Katzenstein, Robert Keohane, and Stephen Krasner, *Exploration and Contestation in the Study of World Politics*, translated by Qin Yaqing, et al., Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2006, pp.367-371.

3 Ted Hopf, "The Logic of Habit," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol.16, No.4, 2010, pp.539-561.

unconscious. This kind of “unconscious” behavior is actually influenced by the background knowledge.⁴ Similarly, the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu believes that “habit” is a specific tendency and preference system for individuals to perceive and react to the surrounding social world, which represents the way the community culture and personal history shape the body and the soul, and directly influences social behavior. The French philosopher Michel Foucault holds that the influence of historical a priori knowledge, which is based on historical experience, is inevitable, and that is why people with similar cultural backgrounds generally hold a similar understanding with regard to specific words and actions, and vice versa. In practice, people often unconsciously comprehend or judge the behavior or actions of others by their own standards. What one country thinks is normal may be considered abnormal by other countries. Lacking sufficient understanding of the history and culture of other countries and without the appropriate background knowledge, misunderstanding is likely to occur in the process of communicating, affecting the effectiveness of communication.

The theorizing process itself is a special practice influenced by culture. Because theorists live in a specific temporal and cultural space, the theories they develop will also reflect the influence of time and space.⁵ For example, democracy and freedom are core values of the United States. From the very beginning of its founding, the concept of “God’s elect” was formed, the belief that the US shoulders the responsibility of exporting the ideal of freedom, the democratic system and related values to other countries. This is reflected in the United States’ shaping of the world order and its design of the international system after World War II. Because of the hegemony of the English language and the overriding predominance of Western concepts in academic discourse, these theories have been generalized and

4 John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*, New York: The Free Press, 1995. Chapter Six of the book analyzes in detail how background knowledge influences the construction and understanding of social phenomena.

5 Qin Yaqing, *Relations and Process: The Cultural Construction of China’s International Relations Theory*, Shanghai People’s Publishing House, 2012, pp.12-25.

used to explain the diplomatic practice of the entire world. In fact, they are far from being universal theories, and cannot explain the overall picture of international relations practice. In recent years, with the growing awareness of non-Western countries in developing their own schools of international relations, there have been more and more voices opposed to this Western dominance in theoretical parlance. For example, many Russian scholars have emphasized the uniqueness of Russia, arguing that Russian diplomatic practices follow a different and rather unique set of rules of conduct and cannot be understood by applying the Western theories of international relations.⁶ Based on its own culture, India has also developed academic schools with national characteristics. Similarly, Chinese culture has shaped China's unique world view, values, and way of thinking and behaving. The Chinese people cherish peace, respect difference and diversity, advocate tolerance and mutual learning, view the world as a whole, and discern no clear line between "self" and "the others." Chinese civilization has rarely embraced the concept of expansion, and will not actively seek to change others and take upon itself additional burdens, which is in sharp contrast to the expansionist tendency of Western civilizations.⁷ After years of accumulation, China's international relations theory has made great progress. For example, Qin Yaqing's "relational theory," Zhao Tingyang's "tianxia (all under Heaven) system," and Yan Xuetong's "moral realism" are all closely connected with China's traditional culture and history.⁸ This shows that the different cultural backgrounds between countries or regions can lead to different preferences and norms, which will affect the development of theories.

Second, the development and innovation of theories is influenced by a country's foreign policy and diplomatic practice. For instance,

6 Maria Y. Omelicheva and Lidiya Zubytka, "An Unending Quest for Russia's Place in the World: The Discursive Co-evolution of the Study and Practice of International Relations in Russia," *New Perspective*, Vol.24, No.1, 2016, pp.19–51.

7 Mark Mancall, *China at the Center: 300 Years of Foreign Policy*, New York: The Free Press, 1984, p.11.

8 Qin Yaqing, *A Relational Theory of World Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018; Zhao Tingyang, *The Tianxia System*, Jiangsu Education Press, 2005; Yan Xuetong, *The Transfer of World Power: Political Leadership and Strategic Competition*, Peking University Press, 2015

many concepts and theories proposed and developed by American scholars, such as power transfer, structural conflicts, tragedies of great-power politics, hegemonic stability, and liberal institutionalism are mostly based on American practical experience after World War II. The British School represented by Barry Buzan has proposed the core concept of “world society” based on European history and practice. Similarly, Russia’s foreign policy is associated with its great-power identity, derived from its material capabilities as well as its intellectual, cultural, and spiritual potential.⁹ This identity influences its perception and response to international events.¹⁰ On the Ukraine issue, Russia sees itself as a heroic nation that shoulders a mission of safeguarding the Russian world and restoring “fairness” in international relations, which were long abused by the West.¹¹ Based on its rich geopolitical experience, Russia has developed relatively mature geopolitical theories. As for China, its reluctance to impose its own ideas and systems on or export them to other countries¹² reflects its national characteristics of introversion and non-expansion. These ideas have also influenced China’s foreign policy and diplomatic practice. The diplomatic practice, in turn, has provided the basis for China’s diplomatic theory which takes peaceful development as its basic approach and win-win cooperation as its core principle,¹³ and highlights peaceful coexistence, mutually beneficial cooperation, non-expansion, and non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries. Similarly, Chinese scholars have also conducted theoretical studies on “developmental peace” and “developmental governance.”¹⁴ India has also developed its theory with

9 Maria Y. Omelicheva and Lidiya Zubytka, “An Unending Quest for Russia’s Place in the World: The Discursive Co-evolution of the Study and Practice of International Relations in Russia,” p.36.

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Ibid.*

12 Daniel McCarthy, “Whose Civilization? Which Clash?” *Modern Age*, Vol.60, No.4, 2018, p.10.

13 “Theory and Practice of Major-Country Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics since the 18th CPC National Congress,” March 17, 2016, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0317/c40531-28207116.html>.

14 He Yin, “Developmental Peace: A Chinese Plan for UN Peacekeeping and Peace Building,” *The Journal of International Studies*, No.4, 2017, pp.10-32; Sun Jisheng, “Global Governance from the Perspective of Community with a Shared Future for Mankind: Conceptual and Practical Innovation,” *China Social Science Review*, No.3, 2019, pp.121-130.

strong national characteristics, such as the theory of non-alignment and the theory of “Asian values.”

Third, theoretical development and innovation is influenced by the international situation and major changes in it. Theory is a systematic and conceptualized set of ideas that explains, describes, and predicts reality.¹⁵ The world itself, and particularly major changes in international relations, are the most important sources of theoretical development and provide constant momentum for theorists to review and innovate theories. For example, in the 1970s, in a bipolar world dominated by the United States and the Soviet Union, Kenneth Waltz envisioned the international system as a market and developed a very simple structural realism,¹⁶ namely, predicting that the choice of a state’s behavior depended on the structure of the international system it is in, and the structure of the international system is mainly determined by the material strength of big powers. In the late 1980s, as mainstream theories such as neorealism and neoliberalism failed to predict the end of the Cold War, many new concepts and new perspectives have been incorporated into the research agenda of international relations, such as the concepts and theories of sociology, psychology, and linguistics. Culture, identity, gender, discourse, emotion, etc. have subsequently become the core content of some theoretical studies. The international relations theory thus entered a period of diversified development from the 1990s to the early 21st century.¹⁷

Amid the current world’s major changes unseen in a century, the international order and international system are experiencing profound adjustments, and the relative strength of developed countries and emerging powers has changed. Despite the constantly developing science and technology represented by artificial intelligence, the internet and big data,

15 Steve Smith, “Introduction: Diversity and Disciplinarity in International Relations Theory,” in Tim Dunne ed., *International Relations Theories: Disciplines and Diversity*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, pp.1-12.

16 Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, New York: McGraw Hill, 1979.

17 Sun Jisheng and He Wei, “Interdisciplinary Reference and the Development and Innovation of International Relations Theory,” *Journal of International Relations*, No.4, 2019, pp.55-56.

the global governance system is facing the challenge of governance deficit or even of governance failure. With the emergence of various sentiments across the globe, populism, anti-globalization, and nationalism are on the rise. While the United States, as the world hegemon, continues its strategic contraction and frequently withdraws from the international community, a development which has seriously undermined the current international order, China, as a rising power, has increasingly become an important force in preserving the current world order. All this presents new issues for theoretical research, which requires rethinking our conventional theories of international relations for development and renewal. Previously, when studying the international system, people focused mainly on the formation and design, the choice and evolution, and the influence of the system. Since the outbreak of the global financial crisis, with the profound changes in the world order this entailed and the China-US institutional competition in different fields, many studies on the international system began to turn instead to the relations between systems. Some scholars began to probe the international system competition and competitive multilateralism. Others began to discuss the possibility of cooperation without the United States, reflecting the distinctive characteristics of the times.¹⁸

International Cooperation from the Perspective of Western International Relations Theory

The core of the BRI is international cooperation, including cooperation among states, sub-regional cooperation, and interregional cooperation. The ability of current research on international cooperation to fully

18 Li Wei, "From Rules to Order: Logic of International Institutional Competition," *World Economics and Politics*, No.4, 2019, p.30; He Kai, "Institutional Balancing and Competitive Multilateralism in the Asia-Pacific," *World Economics and Politics*, No.12, 2018, pp.60-83; He Kai and Feng Huiyun, "Leadership Transition and Global Governance: Role Positioning, Institutional Balancing and the AIIB," *Quarterly Journal of International Politics*, No.3, 2019, pp.31-59. A paper submitted to the 2019 annual conference of China National Association for International Studies discussed cooperation without the US.

explain the Belt and Road cooperation is the premise for its theoretical refinement. Summing up the existing research, we find that the concept of international cooperation is present in different schools of international relations theory, including realism, liberalism, constructivism, functionalism, and regionalism. In general, Western scholars have done extensive and in-depth research on international cooperation, including both macroscopic studies at the system level, meso-level analysis at institutional and cultural levels, and microscopic studies at the individual level, specifically focusing on the following aspects.

First, paying attention to the influence of the power structure and power distribution on cooperation. This type of research is mainly focused on by the schools of realism and neorealism. Realism generally holds that the anarchy of international relations undermines national security. The insecure state of a country makes it unwilling to cooperate when faced with opportunities, because of concern over the other parties' use of their increased strength in such cooperation to harm its interests, instead of first thinking about whether it can itself benefit from cooperation.¹⁹ Realism believes that cooperation among states is possible when a hegemonic country provides public goods such as security and order, or when countries pursue a balance-of-power policy, and emphasizes that international cooperation should be dominated by hegemonic or major powers with other countries passively and even mandatorily participating in it. Major powers use their advantages to actively dominate the establishment of international mechanisms and organizations and stress the functional role of the international system, while monitoring and enforcing international rules to maintain their major-power status.

The typical model for this is the hegemonic cooperation, which asserts that the hegemonic country establishes the international mechanisms, and benefits itself from maintaining the stability of the system, forming a kind of hegemonic cooperation in good faith. Other countries may

19 Guo Guanyu, "A Theoretical Review of Neorealism, Neoliberalism and Constructivism on the Conditions of International Cooperation," *Studies on Socialism*, No.6, 2005, p.113.

cooperate under the mechanism dominated by the hegemonic country and thereby obtain a large number of public goods.²⁰ According to Charles Kindleberger, because public goods are difficult to obtain through collective action, they must be provided by economically capable and willing hegemonic countries.²¹ Robert Gilpin and Stephen Krasner hold that the cooperation model dominated by hegemonic countries is malicious hegemonic cooperation, the purpose of which is to increase the hegemon's own profits. In their opinion, hegemonic countries only establish international mechanisms that are beneficial to themselves. Other countries have to join the unequal system due to the power and pressure of the hegemon and cooperate within that framework.²² The cooperation model dominated by hegemonic countries promotes rules favorable to themselves, and at the same time helps maintain their own hegemony and forces small countries that participate in cooperation to pay a certain price.²³ Joanne Gowa explicitly defined the cooperation dominated by hegemonic countries as mandatory cooperation,²⁴ where the strong forces the weak to change their policies. However, Gowa also pointed out that the function of hegemonic countries, acting as the authority recognized by the international community, can promote cooperation, and other participating countries are not passive recipients, as they can rein in the hegemon's exploitation through cooperation among themselves; after all hegemonic countries also need to abide by their own rules and maintain the legitimacy of their authority.

The offensive realists, represented by John Mearsheimer, are more pessimistic about international cooperation. Mearsheimer believes that the

20 Charles P. Kindleberger, "Dominance and Leadership in the International Economy: Exploitation, Public Goods, and Free Rides," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol.25, No.2, January 1981, pp.242-254.

21 Charles P. Kindleberger, *The World Depression, 1929-1939*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973, pp.18-30.

22 Stephen Krasner, "State Power and the Structure of International Trade," *World Politics*, Vol.28, No.3, 1976, pp.317-347.

23 Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

24 Joanne Gowa, "Anarchy, Egoism, and Third Images: The Evolution of Cooperation and International Relations," *International Organization*, Vol.40, No.1, 1986, pp.167-186.

state, in consideration of its own relative gains and deception strategies from other actors, will not maintain real long-term cooperation. The mode of cooperation between countries is a speculative endeavor under the dominance of maintaining safety in competition and is a kind of cooperation under the control of a balance-of-power system.²⁵ In an anarchic condition, balance of power is the most ideal state, second only to the scenario where one is stronger than others. Since it is extremely difficult for a country to achieve hegemony, the most realistic choice for a country is balance of power, to maintain which international cooperation is one of the basic means. Once a country is in a weaker position, it will choose to cooperate with other countries in order to enhance its international status. If the strengths of several big powers are equal, in order to maintain the balance of power, they will each seek allies. This kind of balance of power cooperation can be carried out between large and small countries, and even between allies and enemies. Once the balance of power shifts, the cooperation will quickly collapse.

Second, the international regime is an important factor in promoting cooperation and ensuring its success. Neoliberalism is the theory which places great emphasis on the importance of international regimes for cooperation. According to neoliberalism, the anarchy of international relations is not the main factor hindering cooperation. What hinders cooperation is information, deception, and other intermediate links, such as the expectation of cooperation results, information and communication barriers, transaction costs, and the uncertainty of environment, etc.²⁶ If these factors can be resolved, countries can cooperate, and the main solution to these problems is the international regime. In the late 1970s, Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye put forward the concept of interdependence. With the continuous development of

25 John J. Mearsheimer, "The False Promise of International Institutions," *International Security*, Vol.19, No.3, 1994-1995, pp.5-49.

26 Guo Guanyu, "A Theoretical Review of Neorealism, Neoliberalism and Constructivism on the Conditions of International Cooperation," p.113.

globalization, relations between countries have shown a tendency of complex interdependence, which increases the need for cooperation. Complex interdependence is regarded as the basic feature of international politics and serves as the background of international cooperation.²⁷ This view holds that a cooperative regime can help countries form common interests and solve common problems, while reducing deception during interactions and making the outcome of cooperation more predictable. This type of research focuses on explaining why international regimes can promote cooperation and under which conditions cooperation is easier to achieve.

Scholars often adopt rational assumptions of mainstream economics and mathematical models of game theory in their research. For example, starting from the dilemma of collective action, Mancur Olson proposed the K-group cooperation model, which reduces the number of cooperators and solves the problem of collective irrationality caused by individual rationality through the cooperation of small groups.²⁸ The smaller the number of cooperators, the lower the cost that each cooperator has to pay for public goods, and the easier it is to achieve cooperation. Robert Axelrod, in his modeling of repetitious games, proposed a pattern of mutually beneficial cooperation between countries. This cooperation model goes through three stages. First, under the cooperative game model, the identification and pursuit of common interests is the prerequisite for cooperation. However, as every rational actor will adopt a dominant strategy, this will lead to a combination of strategies that deviates from common interests. The second stage, therefore, requires the development of relevant strategies based on reciprocity. Finally, it is necessary to adopt a tit-for-tat strategy to prevent harm brought about by the withdrawal of cooperation by any of the parties, while responding to each other's

27 Robert O. Keohane and Joseph S. Nye, *Power and Interdependence: World Politics in Transition*, Boston: Little Brown, 1976.

28 Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965.

cooperative behavior, reducing betrayal in cooperation, and clarifying future expected returns, so as to continue the cooperation.²⁹ Keohane introduced the market failure theory into the study of international cooperation and put forward a cooperation model under international regimes. Regimes can effectively reduce the cost of cooperation transactions, clarify legal responsibilities, strengthen the connection of issues, provide reliable information, and reduce the risk of uncertainty. The international regime, which includes not only rules and regulations reached by international organizations and governments but also international practices, plays an alternative role in regulating international relations and promoting international cooperation.³⁰ The mode of cooperation under international regimes does not require the existence of a central authority. Even if the conditions under which the international regime was established have disappeared or the power of the hegemonic country has declined, cooperation can still continue in the post-hegemony era.³¹ For regional cooperation, an effective regime can reduce deception in the process of interaction and make the results of cooperation more predictable. Regional regimes can enhance information exchange, increase transparency among countries, and reduce the security dilemma, just like two businessmen who have clear expectations about the proceeds of a transaction after signing a commercial contract know that their opponents will expect the same. In short, the international regime is a means of international coordination. It weakens the negative effects of anarchy, and prevents various actors from acting on their own in disregard of universal principles, norms, rules, and procedures.

Third, social factors will also influence international cooperation.

In addition to power and regimes, some soft social factors are considered influencing international cooperation. Theories such as constructivism

29 Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation*, New York: Basic Books, 1984.

30 Song Xiuju, "Different Interpretations of the International Cooperation Theory by the Mainstream Western Theories of International Relations," *International Forum*, No.5, 2005, p.54.

31 Robert O. Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1984.

and the English school mainly focus their research on these factors. Constructivism especially underscores the role of culture and identity. From a constructivist perspective, the anarchy of international relations is shaped by the interaction among countries, which can change the intersubjective cognition among countries and give rise to different cultures, such as the Hobbesian culture, the Lockean culture, and the Kantian culture.³² In other words, the interaction among countries is also likely to shape a culture of cooperation. The interaction and negotiation process between countries in the process of cooperation and integration can gradually serve to change nation-states' preferences, identities, interests, mutual recognition, and shared knowledge, enhancing a sense of "we-ness" among them and changing the traditional habits or culture. ASEAN is a typical example of this. In the process of integration, the ASEAN member countries have gradually increased their sense of identity, and the methods and styles of regional integration have gradually taken shape. The ASEAN practice of mutual consultation, non-interference, and taking consideration of all parties is far different from the EU's strict institutionalism. In this case, what is important is not only the result, but also the process of cooperation. This process can play an important constructive role in shaping identity and interests, and thus influence the final action. In fact, under the influence of factors such as interdependence, common destiny, homogeneity and self-restraint, countries will form a collective identity. Robert M. Dawes has studied the effect of collective identity on cooperation when factors such as self-interest and reputation are held constant. When the collective identity is established, cooperation can still be carried out without reciprocity, future expectations or punitive measures.³³ The consensus of cooperation depends on the collective identity. When the shared knowledge and the culture of cooperation are

32 Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics*, translated by Qin Yaqing, Shanghai People's Publishing House, 2008.

33 Robert M. Dawes, Alphons van de Kragt, John M. Orbell, "Not Me or Thee but We: The Importance of Group Identity in Eliciting Cooperation in Dilemma Situations: Experimental Manipulations," *Acta Psychologica*, Vol.68, No.1-3, September 1988, pp.83-97.

internalized as norms, countries will regard cooperation as a habit. Thomas C. Schelling believes that actors sometimes do not need communication or clear agreement; as long as they have the same concept of cooperation, they can cooperate and agree on a unified thinking pattern of all for one and one for all. This model can eliminate free riders and reduce cooperation barriers caused by the consideration of relative benefits.³⁴ Helen Milner called it “tacit cooperation.”³⁵

The English school put forward its own views on cooperation around its core concept of “international society.” Hedley Bull believes that cooperation gives rise to, and is in turn maintained through, a social order. The starting point of cooperation lies in common interests and common values. Common interests include maintaining the survival of the international society, safeguarding national independence and sovereignty, and peace in the international society. Common values include preserving a homogenous culture in a particular region and reconciling cultures from different regions.³⁶ In the international arena, cooperation involves the formation of a common culture among member states within a balance of power system, adhering to the principles of international law, making full use of diplomatic means to promote intergovernmental communication and negotiation, and for major powers, actively playing the role of maintaining and regulating the order of international cooperation. Axelrod proposed a complex cooperation model based on actors, underlining measures such as strengthening and perfecting cooperative behavior mechanisms, clarifying the specific standards of cooperation, establishing international cooperation organizations, and building a common culture of mutual influence.³⁷ It should be noted that the above studies emphasize cultural and social impacts, that is, in regions with a high degree of uniform culture, different countries can form a community

34 Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963, pp.57-58.

35 Helen Milner, “International Theories of Cooperation among Nations: Strengths and Weaknesses,” *World Politics*, Vol.44, No.3, 1992, p.469.

36 Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.

37 Robert Axelrod, *The Complexity of Cooperation-Agent-based Models of Competition and Cooperation*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997.

around common issues. This community cooperation model depends on the shared culture and collective identity of member countries, but it is highly exclusive.

The Belt and Road Practice and the Innovation of International Cooperation Theory

In recent years, with the economic development and the increase of China's global influence, China has objectively gained more opportunities and space for the implementation of its concepts, strategies, and policies; subjectively, China has become more self-confident and has actively integrated its ideas into its practice of diplomacy. Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, China has taken a more proactive approach in its diplomacy, and has continuously put forward its own ideas, propositions and solutions. In practice, China conducts major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics with the BRI as an important element. Dedicated to the connectivity of Asia, Europe, Africa and the nearby oceans, the BRI aims at strengthening partnerships on connectivity with the countries along the Belt and Road, and building a comprehensive, multi-layered, and complex connectivity network to achieve diversified, independent, balanced and sustainable development of these countries. By the end of October 2019, China had signed 199 documents on Belt and Road cooperation with 137 countries and 30 international organizations, and achieved a large number of pragmatic cooperation outcomes. The BRI is an initiative for international cooperation in nature, and is also promoting a new round of globalization. The practice of more than six years not only reflects the vitality and attractiveness of the initiative, but also shows its unique model of cooperation, which provides new ideas for theoretical research in this field.

Transcending homogenous cooperation

The Belt and Road international cooperation is equal, open, and

inclusive, overcoming the limits of the model of homogenous cooperation. In recent years, faced with challenges of increasing anti-globalization moods, international cooperation has witnessed continuous setbacks. In fact, the most important feature of globalization is to promote the global flow of commodities, information and capital. However, a major problem arising from the current globalization is that it has stimulated capital concentration and widened the gap between rich and poor. In this process, not every country can participate equally, and benefits are not shared equally, leading to divisions both within and between countries. Some social groups are left out domestically while some countries are marginalized at the international level. This is also an important reason why some developed countries have questioned globalization and why populism, protectionism, and anti-globalization have become widespread in some countries. Part of the reason for the marginalization of some countries and groups is the fact that they cannot meet the threshold for participating in cooperation. This can also be reflected in the interpretation of international cooperation prevalent in traditional Western international relations theories. Cooperation under existing international relations theories is mostly adhering to a strong system of homogeneous cooperation, demanding that all parties involved meet the same standards and follow the same system. All parties to the cooperation must have the same general conditions, otherwise they will not be able to participate. For example, if the European Union is treated as a cooperation mechanism, countries wishing to join the organization must meet the accession standards set by the EU. When the EU formulated its membership threshold, it had already formulated standards for the economic system, the political system, and the level of social development of the members. After joining the EU, countries must also abide by the same rules and systems. The EU cooperation mechanism is a typical homogeneous cooperation with strict criteria. The cooperation mechanism in Southeast Asia, represented by ASEAN, is different from the EU model in the process of formulating cooperation rules and reaching consensus. ASEAN countries

mostly adopt consultation in rules-making and reach consensus only after continuous communication, taking into full account the concerns of all parties and seeking the greatest common denominator. However, once the consensus is reached and the rules are established, all countries must strictly abide by them, making this also a form of homogeneous cooperation.

The BRI broke with the above cooperation model. If we compare the Belt and Road practice with the cooperation models of the EU and ASEAN, we can see that the Belt and Road cooperation model is not homogeneous, but equal and open, which is reflected in the following two points.

First, the BRI emphasizes openness and inclusiveness. Chinese culture always emphasizes the relevance and inclusiveness of things, underscores harmony in diversity, and regards differences as a state of nature. Different things can also form a harmonious whole. Even if things are in opposition or conflict, they are still interdependent and can be transformed into each other.³⁸ If we view globalization in such a way, we can see that the various problems of globalization in the past is partly due to the domination of Western ideas and concepts. The globalization of trade and finance has directly led to the inevitable spread of Western values and standards, resulting in an exclusivist order and even a conflict of civilizations. The BRI is different in this regard. At the beginning of the BRI, the participating countries were called “countries along the Belt and Road.” In the “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road” issued by China’s National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce in 2015, five main routes were planned.³⁹

38 Sun Jisheng, “Traditional Culture and the Construction of China’s Diplomatic Discourse System Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China,” *Foreign Affairs Review*, No.4, 2017, p.8.

39 The Silk Road Economic Belt focuses on bringing together China, Central Asia, Russia and Europe (the Baltic); linking China with the Persian Gulf and the Mediterranean Sea through Central Asia and West Asia; and connecting China with Southeast Asia, South Asia and the Indian Ocean. The 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road is designed to go from China’s coast to Europe through the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean in one route, and from China’s coast through the South China Sea to the South Pacific in the other. See “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road,” March 28, 2015, https://en.ndrc.gov.cn/newsrelease_8232/201503/t20150330_1193900.html.

However, more than six years of cooperative practice shows that the BRI is not limited to rigid routes and fixed participating countries. Instead, it is actually an equal and open cooperative network. Although people will first think of the connectivity of Eurasia when talking about the Belt and Road, it has already spread beyond Asia and Europe, and extended to Africa and Latin America. President Xi Jinping expressed in a meeting with US President Trump in 2017 that China also welcomed the US to participate in Belt and Road cooperation. In other words, the BRI is open to all countries and international organizations with different social and political systems, and different religious and civilizational backgrounds. This is the same even for those countries and regions that are less open and economically underdeveloped. The openness of the Belt and Road Initiative provides a new platform for cooperation among the countries willing to join.

As Jim O’Neil and others said, as a mechanism and platform to promote regional and inter-regional international cooperation, the BRI enables countries to develop together, and plays the role of a cooperation network and an organizational concept.⁴⁰ Compared with homogeneous cooperation, the BRI emphasizes participation first, then establishes a language of cooperation, and gradually improves the system for substantive cooperation. In addition to being open to different participants, the content of the BRI is also open, including not only the connectivity of land and sea, but also the “Digital Silk Road” and the “Polar Silk Road.” Although Belt and Road cooperation projects are all under the same framework, they are not subject to a fixed standard or a set of rigid rules. The cooperation among the parties is not homogeneous, but exhibits diversity and flexibility. There may be differences in terms of cooperation model and content, as well as the

40 Jim O’Neil, “Ambitious Concepts Needs Matching Tactics: China should Make Key Asian Countries Feel Empowered to Influence the BRI Path,” in *Common Prosperity: Global Views on Belt and Road Initiative*, compiled by China Watch, Beijing: China Intercontinental Press, 2019, p.32; Romano Prodi, “Forward,” in *Common Prosperity: Global Views on Belt and Road Initiative*, p.13.

way of cooperation. According to Kerry Brown, the implementation of Belt and Road projects does not follow a fixed model and has sufficient flexibility.⁴¹ Unlike the strong institutionalism in which all actors must abide by the same rules, the implementation, cooperation patterns, and cooperation areas of the Belt and Road Initiative are specifically agreed upon by the consensus of all parties to the cooperation, and it is a process in which participating countries resolve problems through consultation. In this case, it is not only a powerful system for promoting cooperation, but also a system with flexible design. The cooperation, which can be continually and flexibly adjusted in the process, avoids the rigid restraints of strong institutionalism. Sometimes, cooperation is virtual and intentional at first, but then gradually becomes more substantial. The cooperation patterns can also be flexible and multi-dimensional. It can be bilateral or trilateral cooperation, or even take the form of one policy for one country, taking full consideration of local conditions, wishes and capabilities.

Second, the BRI emphasizes equal cooperation. Although different countries have different needs, they can all participate on an equal basis regardless of their sizes and economic power. This is also influenced by Chinese cultural traditions as well as diplomatic practices and experiences. As early as the founding of the People's Republic of China, Chairman Mao Zedong emphasized that countries big and small alike should treat each other equally.⁴² When talking about foreign policies and tasks, Premier Zhou Enlai also stressed patriotism and opposed cosmopolitanism, indicating that China's internationalism is opposed to the exploitation of small countries by great powers, and all countries should be independent and equal.⁴³ Equality and mutual benefit have also become an important part of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence.

41 Kerry Brown, "Looking for the 'China Model,'" in *Common Prosperity: Global Views on Belt and Road Initiative*, p.47.

42 *Selected Works of Mao Zedong on Diplomacy*, Central Party Literature Press & World Affairs Press, 2011, p.334.

43 *Selected Works of Zhou Enlai on Diplomacy*, Central Party Literature Press, 2000, p.55.

While China witnessed its national strength greatly enhanced and has become an influential power after its reform and opening-up, it has always advocated the democratization of international relations, and stressed that there is no distinction of high and low among all the countries in the world, as all countries are equal whether they are big or small, strong or weak. However, the focus of Western international relations theories has been on large and powerful countries when studying cooperation, while small countries are sadly neglected. For example, Duncan Snidal believes that powerful countries have the opportunity to change the specific content of international regimes and are more capable of promoting a multilateral cooperation pattern, whereas small countries are only passive recipients of the pressure exerted by the hegemonic countries.⁴⁴ Belt and Road cooperation is different in this regard. In practice, it helps bridge the gap between developed and developing nations, large and small countries, and treats them as equal participants. At the first China International Import Expo held in Shanghai in 2018, participants included not only enterprises and companies from developed countries, but also from less developed states. China also waived related fees for participants from less developed countries in order to give them equal opportunities to benefit from the huge Chinese market. In this sense, the BRI is more of an important public good and platform for cooperation. Under this framework, countries can conduct a diverse array of cooperation through the principle of extensive consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits. Each participating country can give full play to its own advantages and tap the potential for cooperation. At the regional level, such cooperation can narrow the development gap between countries and achieve common development.

Going beyond result-oriented cooperation

The Belt and Road cooperation is an example of progressive

44 Karolina M. Milewicz and Duncan Snidal, "Cooperation by Treaty: The Role of Multilateral Powers," *International Organization*, Vol.70, No.4, 2016, pp.823-844.

cooperation that is both process- and result-oriented, overcoming the limits of simple result-oriented cooperation. Most of the existing forms of international cooperation, except for constructivism, are result-oriented and simply ignore process. When it comes to cooperation, it mainly adopts rationalism, paying attention to calculating costs and benefits. Neorealism emphasizes relative benefits, while neoliberalism emphasizes absolute benefits. At the same time, while stressing absolute benefits, neorealism also highlights the role of regimes in promoting international cooperation, that is, noting that regimes can increase transparency, reduce deception during interactions, and make the outcome of cooperation more predictable. In fact, it is cooperation with a predetermined outcome. Arthur A. Stein analyzes the cooperation theory of realism and neoliberal institutionalism from the perspective of rational choice, and argues that what the two share in common is that they both consider cooperation as a goal-oriented state interaction. He proposed a collaborative strategic interaction model of international cooperation based on game theory.⁴⁵ Bruce Bueno de Mesquita believes that before the interaction, the state will first draw up a tree diagram that manifests the logic of cooperation. By analyzing the specific behaviors and information of the partners, different cooperation path alternatives are generated. The state will choose the best cooperative behavior by sorting the selections in terms of costs and benefits.⁴⁶

The Belt and Road practice shows that the outcome of cooperation is not completely predetermined; instead, it first establishes a general cooperation framework, proposes a cooperation concept, and creates a cooperative atmosphere. Specific cooperation can be continuously adjusted, improved, and even innovated under the broader cooperation framework. In fact, the cooperation process itself plays an important role, which

45 Arthur A. Stein, *Why Nations Cooperate: Circumstance and Choice in International Relations*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993, pp.1-10.

46 Bruce Bueno de Mesquita, "Negotiation in International Politics," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol.21, No.3, 2004, pp.155-158.

not only maintains the cooperation, but also gradually shapes mutual perceptions and common interests, and even changes preferences. This approach is also based on Chinese cultural traditions, which emphasizes the flexibility, as well as the change, transformation, and connection of things. The Chinese culture believes as a basic law that things change and transform into each other in the process of development.

Some scholars in the West have also paid attention to the importance of cooperation process. For example, James A. Caporaso argues that cooperation cannot be portrayed simply as a game of strategic interaction, although inter-state behavior in this dimension does exist. Instead, research on cooperation models should shift the focus from the strategic interaction of given utility to such dimensions as debate, communication, persuasion, and ethics. International cooperation is like a game, in which nation-states argue, consult, defend, and transmit signals at the same time.⁴⁷ Andrew H. Kydd takes inter-state dialogue as the first step in forming cooperative relations, pointing out that trust comes from communication, while communication and understanding strengthens partnership and turn “the prisoner’s dilemma” into a game of guaranteed results. Full communication improves the authenticity of information and maintains the legitimacy of the revenue distribution.⁴⁸

The Belt and Road cooperation is a typical progressive cooperation. Since its introduction, the BRI has also undergone a process of gradual improvement, from concept to action and from vision to reality, adhering to open, green, and clean development and striving to achieve high standards, benefit people’s livelihood and fulfill high-quality and sustainable development in joint construction. In this sense, the Belt and Road cooperation is also a learning process, a process of building consensus among participating countries. In the process of

47 James A. Caporaso, *International Relations Theory and Multilateralism: The Search for Foundations in Multilateralism Matters*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, p.88.

48 Andrew H. Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005.

implementation, it fully demonstrates the characteristics of diversity and flexibility, and provides opportunities for further elaboration on the international cooperation theory.

Promoting multi-dimensional cooperation through connectivity

The Belt and Road cooperation has broken the boundaries of simple “spillover” cooperation and highlighted multi-dimensional cooperation through connectivity. When it comes to specific areas of cooperation, traditional Western international relations theories mainly explain international cooperation from the perspective of functionalism and neo-functionalism. Cooperation starts from specific areas and then gradually spills over into other areas. Thomas Diez has done a lot of research on cooperation within the European Union in his book *European Integration Theory*. According to Diez, community cooperation was originally developed in order to complete specific functional tasks. The initial cooperation realized specific functions of economic and trade development, strengthened the recognition of common interests, and constructed mutual trust, thus producing a spillover effect. The spillover of cooperation from a specific field to other issues in political and security areas has increased political mutual trust between countries and strengthened the degree of interdependence within the community.⁴⁹ As people are familiar with, intra-regional cooperation in Europe first started in the coal and steel field, then spilled over into unified currency, a common market, and even common security.

The Belt and Road cooperation does not follow such a path. It reflects a lot of Chinese ideas and Chinese experience, the first being the emphasis of connectivity. As Chinese medicine believes, connectivity is the foundation of health. Likewise, China’s development also started from connectivity. Since the beginning of reform and opening-up, China has been consistently practicing the idea of “building roads first to

49 Thomas Diez, *European Integration Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

become rich.” Today, the different regions of China have been connected by a dense highway and railway network, and China’s high-speed rail mileage alone accounts for one-third of the world’s total. Connectivity has played an important role in China’s development in the past 40 years. From an international perspective, backward infrastructure in many countries and regions often hinders development. In Africa, you have to transfer in the north for a flight from the continent’s southeast to the southwest. There is no direct north-south and east-west transit in Africa. Such weakness of connectivity is also the case in Southeast Asia and Latin America.

The Belt and Road Initiative is promoting connectivity to facilitate cooperation in various fields, tap the potential of all parties, generate new momentum for cooperation, stimulate new areas of cooperation, and establish new cooperation standards. Among the BRI’s five major goals to promote “policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds,” the first and foremost is to establish shared transportation lines, in order to strengthen connectivity and partially solve the problem of fragmentation, and achieve better circulation of commodities and connection of markets. In fact, the five major goals that address the different dimensions of connectivity can integrate different regions of the world with their combined force.

Promoting development and cooperation through connectivity is also part of the Chinese experience in its reform and opening-up. Connectivity not only promotes China’s domestic development, but more importantly, it gradually changes people’s lifestyles and their concepts of time and space. Similarly, connectivity under the Belt and Road framework will also play its proper role in promoting international cooperation and development. The six-year practice of the BRI has also drawn the attention of the academic community to connectivity, and has led to increased study of different versions of connectivity in different regions, such as those in Europe and Africa and in maritime, Arctic, and cyber areas. Obviously, connectivity

cooperation will continue to be an important core concept of the studies on international cooperation.

Overcoming unilateral interests

The Belt and Road cooperation prioritizes common interests over traditional unilateral interests and highlights development cooperation. Traditional international relations theories discuss absolute benefits and relative interests when measuring cooperation interests. Neorealism mainly emphasizes relative gains. If the relative gains are small, the actors will refuse to cooperate even if the absolute gains are large. Neoliberalism, on the other hand, values absolute gains. As long as cooperation can bring benefits, actors will still rationally choose to cooperate. In fact, under these theoretical perspectives, the interests are fixed and predetermined.

However, the practice of Belt and Road cooperation shows that its focus is precisely that of shaping common interests in the process of cooperation. For example, participating countries shape common interests by jointly promoting development, thereby driving development cooperation in multiple fields. Over the past four decades, China has been the most successful and experienced country in the world in the field of development. Since reform and opening-up, China has successfully lifted 830 million people out of poverty, and has contributed 70 percent of global poverty reduction. The focus of Belt and Road cooperation is to promote cooperation through development. As President Xi Jinping emphasized in his speech at the first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in 2017, “Development holds the master key to solving all problems. In pursuing the BRI, we should focus on the fundamental issue of development, release the growth potential of various countries, and achieve economic integration and interconnected development and deliver benefits to all.”⁵⁰ Therefore, development is the core of Belt and Road

50 “Full Text of President Xi’s Speech at Opening of Belt and Road Forum,” May 14, 2017, http://english.qstheory.cn/2017-05/15/c_1120973669.htm.

cooperation.

China hopes to share its development philosophy and experience with other countries through the BRI. China's contribution to global inclusive development is not only reflected in its own development achievements, but more importantly, it demonstrates China's responsibility as the largest developing country in promoting the global development agenda and global development cooperation. China's cooperation philosophy of equality, inclusiveness, openness, and seeking win-win outcomes has promoted global inclusive development through a series of bilateral and multilateral platforms. During the G20 Hangzhou summit in 2016, development was put on the global governance agenda for the first time. This is a unique way for China to improve global governance.⁵¹ The Belt and Road Initiative is actually a mechanism for participating countries to benefit from China's development achievements. Each participating country can align its strategy with that of China's according to its own development needs. According to statistics from the World Bank, there are 19 countries with low- and middle-income levels along the Belt and Road with a total population of 2.4 billion, which accounts for 82 percent of the world's total population living at this level of development. The added value of their manufacturing industries accounts for an average of 14.8 percent of their GDP.⁵² If the Belt and Road can promote the development of these countries and turn them into middle-income countries, the overall development landscape of the world will definitely change. If this can come true, the Belt and Road will also make a tremendous contribution to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals set in the United Nations' 2030 Agenda, which could not be achieved in the past through globalization and various cooperation mechanisms.

51 Xi Jinping, "A New Starting Point for China's Development, A New Blueprint for Global Growth: Keynote Speech at the Opening Ceremony of the Business 20 Summit," September 3, 2016, http://english.qstheory.cn/2016-12/20/c_1120052535.htm.

52 Zhong Feiteng, "The Belt and Road Initiative, New Globalization and Major-Power Relations," *Foreign Affairs Review*, No.3, 2017, p.6.

Combining long-term and short-term cooperation

The Belt and Road cooperation is a combination of long-term and short-term cooperation. Chinese culture puts collectivism first and values holistic and long-term thinking. It usually views issues and global trends from a holistic perspective rather than from the perspective of narrow self-interests. This is also reflected in China's policies. For example, the Chinese government formulates long-term goals or plans, such as five-year plans for national economic and social development, the three-step development strategy, and the "two centenary goals." After the goal is determined, relevant policies will be formulated and appropriate measures be taken. Similarly, China's foreign policy often emphasizes going with the trend of the times and adheres to long-term systematic thinking. In practice, before taking specific measures, it always analyzes the overall situation regarding nations and the world at large. For instance, in the 1980s, Deng Xiaoping made a new judgment that peace and development were the two major themes in the world at the time, and that a timely adjustment of foreign policy was needed to create a favorable external environment for China's reform and opening-up. In addition, China is also relatively adept at integrating different forces in order to form a holistic concept and promote various relations under the overall framework. For example, in recent years, China and Central and Eastern European countries have created a "16+1" mechanism,⁵³ set up the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation with African countries, and established the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation mechanism with some Southeast Asian countries. The thinking preference also leads the Belt and Road cooperation to stress its long-term and holistic nature, and sometimes even ignore or sacrifice short-term gains for the sake of this. For example, some projects may not be very profitable in the short term, but cooperation nevertheless continues. The focus of the Belt and Road cooperation is to establish a macro-language of cooperation before

53 In 2019, with the participation of Greece, the "16+1" mechanism developed into the "17+1" mechanism.

conducting specific diversified cooperation under this framework.

Conclusion

With the growth of its overall national strength, China has continuously put forward its own strategies, guidelines, and policies, as well as its own ideas, initiatives, and measures. As an independent variable, it is constantly influencing the current evolution of the world order and the adjustment of the international power configuration. In this process, China needs to promote its theoretical consciousness and refine its theoretical discourse. With distinctive Chinese characteristics, the Belt and Road Initiative has become an effective platform and mechanism to promote cooperation between China and other countries and regions, and has served to advance a new round of globalization based on an approach proposed by China. As can be seen from the progress of the BRI, in addition to the similarities with traditional international cooperation, it also reflects many new features. The BRI adheres to the principle of extensive consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits. It emphasizes equality, openness, inclusiveness, and development, while stressing gradual progress, process, consultation, and long-term interests, thus adding new content and new elements to traditional international cooperation theories. The theorization of Belt and Road practice and the refinement and improvement of the theory is of great significance, not only to further supplement and enrich existing international cooperation theories and the concept of multilateralism, but also to raise Chinese practice from the empirical level to the theoretical level, and translate the particularity of Chinese practice into theoretical knowledge of universal significance. Only in this way can China's international cooperation concepts and models provide a new fund of knowledge in the field of international cooperation and thereby create a new chapter in international relations theories for the benefit of the world community. 🌍