

Beyond the Fix: Assessing the Belt and Road Initiative Rebrand and Its Unaddressed Labor Issues

The Launch and Growth of the Belt and Road Initiative (2013–2021)

Launched in 2013 by President Xi Jinping as a flagship foreign policy initiative of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), BRI was designed to enhance connectivity across Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. Since its launch, The BRI initiative had two main components: infrastructure-led expansion and debt-fueled development. The former focused on the construction of extensive physical infrastructure in the partnering countries, such as roads, railways, pipelines, and power stations, while the latter involved China offering low-interest or concessional loans encouraging partner countries to take on substantial debt to fund these developments. This promise of Chinese-led development attracted numerous nations, particularly those with urgent infrastructure needs and limited access to global finance, such as Myanmar, Laos, and Ethiopia. Nations like these often struggled to secure investment from institutions like the IMF or World Bank due to issues like poor credit ratings, political instability, or corruption, and therefore saw China as a critical alternative partner. Furthermore, the BRI has become a cornerstone of Chinese foreign policy because it helped China to position itself as a development facilitator. While the stated goal of the BRI was to boost regional connectivity and economic cooperation, it also expanded China's economic and geopolitical influence by increasing debt dependence and securing strategic infrastructure abroad. By 2021, around 150 countries have joined the BRI.

Although the BRI presents several advantages, it has also encountered significant challenges and criticisms, mainly from Western governments, such as the United States of America and European Union member states, as well as from NGOs and numerous scholars. Two issues came to dominate international critiques: the environmental damage caused by BRI projects and the risk of debt-trap diplomacy. First, ecological concerns were raised about China's prioritization of rapid infrastructure development over environmental safeguards and local ecosystems. For instance, BRI projects were found to threaten biodiversity corridors, led to deforestation, pollution, and hazardous waste. Second, the financial terms of Chinese loans were increasingly seen as unsustainable for recipient countries. Many nations incurred heavy debt under vague lending conditions that arguably benefited China, raising concerns of one-sided economic gains. These early projects often failed to account for a country's repayment capacity or to adjust project scopes in ways that could reduce long-term debt risks. The result was inefficiency, fiscal strain, and growing fears over financial sovereignty of the partner countries. Together, these criticisms contributed to perceptions of China as engaging in neo-colonial practices under the guise of development.

Growing international scrutiny began to undermine China's image and credibility, prompting the Chinese government to rethink and refine the BRI model in what would become the "rebrand" of the initiative.

Shift and Rebranding (2021-2025)

Significant strategic shifts in the BRI began around 2021, when Xi Jinping attended the [third symposium](#) on BRI development and set forth future plans of the initiative, which emphasized "commitment to sustainability, strengthened cooperation between countries, more efficient use of resources, improved quality of projects and supplies, and building greater resilience to challenges". Several catalysts prompted this evolution, including the latter mentioned mounting global criticism and structural vulnerabilities. In 2023, President Xi Jinping, further formalized the rebrand of the initiative in a speech marking the [10th anniversary](#) of the BRI. Key criticisms, particularly regarding debt sustainability and environmental impact, were addressed in this updated model.

First, in response to the "debt-trap" accusation, China pledged to tailor BRI projects to better align with the repayment capacities of partner countries. This involved scaling back from massive, high-risk megaprojects in favor of more manageable, targeted initiatives - a strategy summarized by the phrase "[small and beautiful](#)". The aim was to improve project efficiency, reduce delays, and minimize the burden of unsustainable borrowing. As of 2025, China has restructured or renegotiated loans with at least 18 countries such as [Zambia and Pakistan](#). However, while this appears to be a meaningful adjustment, critics argue that the debt relief is often symbolic, with China's largest loans still tied to non-concessional terms and [opaque contracts](#).

Second, to respond to environmental concerns, the revamped BRI emphasized a stronger commitment to green development, elevating environmental sustainability to one of its core pillars. China announced it would stop financing coal-fired power plants abroad which is a landmark decision given its previous status as the world's largest public financier of [coal projects](#). Following this announcement, dozens of coal projects in countries like Kenya, Bangladesh, and Egypt were either cancelled or converted into renewable alternatives. China has since expanded its investments in solar farms, wind power, and hydropower. Furthermore, it introduced green development guidelines and environmental safeguards to guide and monitor future projects.

While this rebrand has addressed many high-profile concerns, one major issue remains conspicuously unaddressed: the widespread labor rights violations associated with BRI projects.

The Exclusion of Labor Rights and Safety Issues

Labor violations related to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) have been ongoing yet often under-discussed - frequently overshadowed by more prominent concerns such as debt sustainability, environmental damage, and geopolitical implications. However, the labor dimension is critical,

because it's a fundamental element of human rights and social justice. Fair working conditions and just compensation are recognized as [fundamental human rights](#) under international law, including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

While it is true that many BRI infrastructure projects are constructed by Chinese firms (State owned enterprises) using Chinese labor and materials, these projects also [employ local workers](#) of the partnering countries and engage with various local stakeholders. Therefore, when referring to “workers” in the context of BRI, it is essential to consider both Chinese and local laborers, as each group faces overlapping but also distinct challenges. Reports by human rights organizations have revealed mounting evidence of worker exploitation tied to BRI-related projects.

According to [China Labor Watch](#), Chinese labor involved in the BRI projects, are especially vulnerable to contract deception and isolation. Chinese labor export agencies often use misleading advertisements that promise high wages and good living conditions, which are promises that rarely materialize. Subsequently, workers report being subjected to contracts they did not fully understand or never formally signed, therefore becoming vulnerable to exploitation. A recent case at the BYD electric vehicle factory in Brazil exemplifies this: Chinese workers were reportedly found living in degrading, near slave-like conditions, working seven days a week under [severe restrictions](#). Moreover, being in a foreign country isolated from familiar culture, language, and support networks like family and friends, can significantly impact workers' mental well-being.

On the other hand, native workers of the partner countries working on the BRI projects, tend to face discrimination, lower wages, and a lack of adequate protection. Several BRI projects have been linked to [labor abuses](#) involving local communities. For instance, in Kenya, issues such as racial bias in hiring, arbitrary dismissals, and unequal pay were [widely reported](#). Such discriminatory practices further deepen the exploitation, adding to the harsh and hazardous working conditions.

Given the scale and recurrence of these violations, the question arises: Why has China failed to adequately address labor rights abuses within the BRI, especially while it addressed other criticisms? It could be argued that to understand this failure, we need to examine how human rights are understood and applied in China, particularly in relation to labor rights.

Understanding of Chinese Human Rights

Under the UDHR framework, which China is expected to uphold, labor rights are considered part of economic and social rights, all of which are fundamentally grounded in [individual rights](#). However, CCP is known for prioritizing *collective rights*, such as national development and social stability over individual [freedoms](#). This approach contrasts sharply with Western democracies, where individual rights and personal liberties are emphasized more strongly.

Without a strong emphasis on individual rights, Chinese government has not developed robust frameworks to ensure meaningful labor protections. While labor laws do exist on paper, their enforcement is often [weak](#). Furthermore, those who attempt to speak out, such as workers or labor activists, are frequently silenced due to broad political suppression, including restrictions on [labor activism](#). Thus, as a result, workers across various industries and firms in China face serious challenges. These struggles stem from a combination of exploitative labor practices, inadequate enforcement mechanisms, and political constraints. Chinese firms involved in BRI projects tend to replicate these domestic labor practices [abroad](#).

Since the BRI functions as an extension of the Chinese state, it often mirrors the priorities and policy orientations characteristic of governance under the CCP. The BRI's recent rebranding addressed concerns such as financial inefficiency and environmental harm, both of which have also been the focus of domestic reform efforts. Recent developments, such as [China's financial regulatory reforms](#) and [green transformation](#) of its economy illustrates this. However, labor rights protections were notably missing from the BRI update and do not feature prominently on the domestic agenda of the CCP. This omission further underscores the fact that labor protections are not strongly enforced within China itself, where individual rights are given limited emphasis. In this way, the BRI continues to export a development model shaped by China's domestic regulatory and political framework - one that prioritizes economic growth and geopolitical influence over the protection of individual labor rights.

Possible solutions

What is crucial for host countries is the development of strong national institutional frameworks that protect against potential exploitation, particularly labor violations, by Chinese firms involved in BRI projects. Recipient countries must establish and enforce robust legal safeguards that apply to all actors operating on their territory, including foreign contractors. When it comes to labor protections, partnering countries cannot afford to wait for China to voluntarily improve its practices. Instead, they must proactively implement and enforce rigid labor laws that Chinese companies are legally bound to follow. When such frameworks are in place and effectively implemented, they can help protect local workers from exploitation.

However, developing countries lack both the legal infrastructure and enforcement capacity needed to uphold labor rights, creating vulnerabilities that can be, and often are, exploited. In environments where labor protections are weak or poorly enforced, Chinese firms frequently operate according to their norms which prioritize cost-efficiency, speed, and project completion over fair labor practices, and this in turn leads to violations. However, international organizations, such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) or the World Bank, can help host countries strengthen labor protections. Therefore, a possible solution can be sought through those organizations; however, this requires unwavering commitment from the partner countries to limit labor rights violations.

Although [China argues](#) that its companies are expected to respect local laws and regulations, this raises a key question: if that commitment exists, why was it not formally integrated into the new BRI framework through concrete mechanisms to monitor and ensure compliance? The absence of such accountability measures suggests that labor rights remain a low priority within China's development model, both at home and abroad.

Conclusion

During the years, the BRI changed its scope and image, however despite these changes the BRI labor rights violations remain a largely unaddressed issue, and that leaves both local and Chinese workers vulnerable to continued exploitation. Ultimately, labor exploitation within BRI projects is enabled by a toxic combination of weak institutional protections in host countries and China's project oversight. Many partner states lack the legal and enforcement mechanisms to safeguard workers' rights, while Chinese firms continue to export domestic labor practices that fall short of international standards.

Xi Jinping's push to reinvent BRI reflects a strategic response to global criticism. Yet, the underlying approach remains firmly rooted in China's own governance logic, which often sidelines labor protections in favor of rapid progress and control. Even with a new image, the BRI continues to operate "the China way" which prioritizes state-led efficiency and strategic influence over transparent, rights-based development.

While the scope of BRI projects has narrowed since its 2013 launch, the initiative still holds a central place in China's foreign policy and global ambitions, and therefore it's still considered to be important. Without meaningful commitment to labor rights, both from China and from the countries hosting BRI projects, the initiative risks continuing as a vehicle for infrastructure growth at the expense of human dignity and social justice.