

# **BRI As International Norm Construction of Chinese "Green Development" Strategy in Asia**

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## **Abstract**

*For several decades, the environmental considerations have been one of a neglected aspect of China's development process. The massive development and industrialization process have a direct impact on environmental degradation in China, causing considerable economic losses for this country. But now China is no longer a country with an image of development that is not environmentally friendly. That old image seems to be changing, from being not environmentally friendly to pay more attention to develop more "green" development. This change can be seen through the implementation of green development agenda on Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) mega-project. The project is not only China's economic instrument in expanding its market and investment but also can be seen as a tool to construct China's new norms in international level, especially in Asia. The new norm is green development. Thanks to BRI, China has positioned itself as one of the leading countries on the green development agenda. This paper examines the extent of the changes have been taken place by using constructivism perspective through the Norm Diffusion Theory of Finnemore and Sikkink (1998). The norm diffusion theory will be elaborated from two aspects: both of the norm entrepreneur, and the norm life cycle. State actor and non-state actor roles of China are both important players and decision-makers for steering the BRI project on an expected track. Not only that, the establishment of the International Coalition for Green Development on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRIGC) at the beginning of 2019 reflects China's strong commitment to a green development agenda that appears to have been successfully internalized in the Asia region.*

**Keywords:** *Asia Region; BRI Cooperation; China's Green Development Agenda; Norm Diffusion Theory; Norm Entrepreneur; Norm Life Cycle.*

## **Abstrak**

Selama beberapa dekade lamanya, pertimbangan-pertimbangan mengenai isu lingkungan telah menjadi salah satu aspek yang terabaikan dari proses pembangunan di Tiongkok. Pembangunan secara masif dan proses industrialisasi memiliki dampak langsung terhadap kerusakan lingkungan di Tiongkok, telah menimbulkan kerugian ekonomi yang cukup besar bagi negara ini. Namun sekarang Tiongkok tidak lagi dipandang sebagai negara dengan citra pembangunan tidak ramah lingkungan. Citra lama tersebut tampaknya telah berubah, dari yang tidak ramah terhadap lingkungan menjadi lebih perhatian untuk mengembangkan pembangunan "hijau". Perubahan ini dapat diamati melalui implementasi agenda pembangunan hijau pada mega-proyek *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI). Proyek ini tidak hanya sebagai instrumen ekonomi Tiongkok dalam memperluas jangkauan pasar dan investasinya, tetapi juga sebagai alat untuk membangun norma baru Tiongkok di tingkat internasional, terutama di kawasan Asia. Norma baru adalah pembangunan

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hijau. Berkat BRI, Tiongkok juga mampu memosisikan dirinya sebagai salah satu negara terdepan pada agenda pembangunan hijau. Tulisan ini akan mengkaji sejauh mana perubahan tersebut telah terjadi dengan menggunakan perspektif konstruktivisme melalui teori Difusi Norma karya Finnemore dan Sikkink (1998). Teori difusi norma akan diuraikan melalui dua aspek, yakni: *norm entrepreneur*, dan siklus hidup norma (*norm life cycle*). Peran dari aktor negara dan aktor non-negara Tiongkok keduanya merupakan aktor yang penting dan pengambil keputusan utama dalam mengarahkan proyek BRI tetap pada jalur yang diharapkan. Tidak hanya itu, pembentukan Koalisi Internasional untuk Pembangunan Hijau melalui BRI (BRIGC) pada awal 2019 telah mencerminkan komitmen Tiongkok yang kuat dalam agenda pembangunan hijau, yang tampaknya telah berhasil diinternalisasi pada wilayah Asia.

**Kata kunci:** Agenda Pembangunan Hijau Tiongkok; Kawasan Asia; Kerjasama BRI; *Norm Entrepreneur*; *Norm Life Cycle*; Teori Difusi Norma

## Introduction

China and the issue of environmental degradation have become the image of the past. The bamboo curtain state was well known to have a gloomy history of lack environmental quality and pollution. The main problem which is China's facing is the effect of industrialization to its environment. Both of the aspects cannot be separated and affect each other's.

Since the industrialization process began in 1953, when Mao Zedong implement the Five-Year Development Program, up to the first decade of the 21st century has resulted in significant environmental pollution affects the activity of the community to the economic conditions of China (Ho, 2003; Albert & Xu, 2016; Wojcik, 2019). As Ho (2003) and Smil (2015) stated that since Mao Zedong began to rule, the first

massive land degradation was starting as the result of “taking grain as key link” (Ch: 以粮为纲, 全面发展), an agriculture-revolution based policy, and then followed by “taking steel as the key link” (Ch: 以钢为纲, 带动一切), an industrial-revolution based policy (Pinghan, 2014). At least according to Wojcik (2019), two forms of environmental pollution in China are mainly related to the water and air environment. The total estimated economic loss borne by China as a result of environmental degradation reaches 100 billion USD per year or sectoral due to air pollution alone is estimated to reach more than 21 billion USD (Shambaugh, 2016; Xia et al., 2016).

Having pressured to minimize the economic impact of environmental degradation, during 2010's decade China was quite successful in mitigating

and conserving its environment. Both the rising of political pressure and people demands are domestic factors that the Prime Minister of the People's Republic of China (PRC), Li Keqiang, starts to declare an open war on environmental pollution issues in March 2014 as quoted from his speech in front of the Congress: *"We will resolutely declare war against pollution as we declared war against poverty"* (Martina et al., 2014). Four years later, some international reports and news start to tell that China could to be considered success in the term of combatting the air pollution. Referring to the annual report on the Air Quality Life Index (ALQI) in 2018, China succeeded in increasing the quality of life expectancy of its people by an average of 0.5 years in just four years. Not only that, but several international reports also stated that the level of air pollution in major cities in China was successfully reduced by an average of 35% of the air condition before 2014, especially after the UNEP report in 2019 stated that Beijing and its surrounding cities were significantly improved their air quality.

China's recipe for success in combating environmental degradation comes primarily from the contribution of domestic factors. That same year when

Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang publicly stated his government's commitment to the issue, the Chinese parliament finally approved the revision of the latest Law on Environmental Protection, after a two-year-long debate in drafting the law. These legal instruments are designed more critically and more pro-environment, becoming a strong legal standpoint for the Chinese government in developing pro-environment policies in the following years. One of the Chinese government efforts to implement the principles of pro-sustainable development and pro-green development is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

Original 65 countries plus China in BRI			New 22 partner countries
Afghanistan	Iran	Palestine	Algeria
Albania	Iraq	Philippines	Angola
Armenia	Israel	Poland	Australia
Azerbaijan	Jordan	Qatar	Brazil
Bahrain	Kazakhstan	Romania	Cameroon
Bangladesh	Kenya	Russia	Dem. Rep. Congo
Belarus	Kuwait	Saudi Arabia	Ecuador
Bhutan	Kyrgyz Republic	Serbia	Ethiopia
Bosnia & Herzegovina	Laos	Singapore	Ghana
Brunei	Latvia	Slovakia	Jamaica
Bulgaria	Lebanon	Slovenia	Liberia
Cambodia	Lithuania	Sri Lanka	Mexico
China	Macedonia	Syria	Mozambique
Croatia	Malaysia	Tajikistan	Nigeria
Czech Republic	Maldives	Thailand	Peru
East Timor	Moldova	Turkey	Senegal
Egypt	Mongolia	Turkmenistan	South Africa
Estonia	Montenegro	Ukraine	Sudan
Georgia	Myanmar	UAE	Tanzania
Hungary	Nepal	Uzbekistan	Uganda
India	Oman	Vietnam	Venezuela
Indonesia	Pakistan	Yemen	Zimbabwe

Source: Oxford Economics

*Fig. 1. List of 87 partner countries of BRI, including 22 new partners (right column).*

The mega-project Belt and Road Initiative, also known as One Belt, One Road (OBOR), proclaimed by China to the world in 2013 ago in Astana,

Kazakhstan, managed to get global attention, especially among Asia countries. The rapid growth of China's economic since "Open Door Policy" to be implemented in 1978 and after the momentum of China acceded to WTO in 2001, mainly due to its overcapacity of domestic manufacturing products, created excessive production in China's domestic market (Wong, 1995; Wuttke, 2017; Liu, Li & Yang, 2017; Taplin, 2019). In the context of excessive domestic products, the OBOR or BRI initiative designed as an 'exit' strategy for Chinese companies to solved overcapacity problem (Yafei, 2014; Ahmad, 2016; Solmecke, 2016). Not only OBOR as a way to expand China's economic influence at the international level, but also, they designed BRI as a form of international cooperation project so that China could grasp the world as politically as possible. As a golden opportunity to enlarge each other's capacity and economic interaction, several countries began to raise positive perceptions in welcoming Chinese initiation through the BRI project, as shown by Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and some countries in Central Asia and the other Middle East.

The presence of BRI can be interpreted as an instrument which is spreading Chinese domestic norms, namely "green development". This approach of development was not a new thing but rather derived from Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) frameworks. From a constructivism standpoint, the argument above will be answered by borrowing the "Norm Diffusion Theory" from Finnemore and Sikkink (1998). This paper examines how the process of China's green development agenda could be emerging, diffusing and finally internationalizing within BRI mechanisms through the Finnemore and Sikkink's norm life cycle explanations.

According to Norm Diffusion Theory, at least we could identify two fundamental aspects of its theory: the norm life cycle and the norm entrepreneur (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998). There are three stages of the norm life cycle, including the appearance of the "Norm Entrepreneur" from the Chinese side as the main actors who rising, shaping and playing role in a new norm which is later will be distributed through the BRI projects. The early process of its three stages is called by Finnemore and Sikkink as the "Norm Emergence". In this early stage, a new

norm have just been created or adopted domestically, where the parliament (congress) and government fully committed and support the new norm. The next stage, through a mechanism of cooperation within the body of BRI, is the socialization of the China's green development norm to other countries. The process of spreading the norm through the BRI cooperation mechanism signifies this second stage as "Norm Cascade". At the last stage, green development norm began to be embedded and used in a broader context, especially by the project partner countries. This process indicates that there has been institutionalization or internalization of the new norms, which is specifically targeted the Greater Asia communities. Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) refer to this stage or process as the norm internationalization, once signaled the end of the diffusion process of the new norm.

### **Green Development: BRI and China's New Norms**

In this paper, the meaning of green development signifies the synchronization of the development process towards the environment with the achievement of economic goals that

can run without violating the rules or principles of environmental conservation. As one of the main parameters in the development process, economic factors are measuring instruments that are quite widely used by state actors to justify the success of their government. Similarly, the same standard is used by many countries in Greater Asia especially those among the emerging-economic countries (developing countries). From the forty-nine countries that are on the mainland of the Asian continent, according to IMF data, there are only four countries with advanced economic categories (Japan, Singapore, South Korea, and Cyprus), which the rest countries still in developing economy. The use of economic factors as instruments of development in Asia seems to be inseparable from the strong influence of the existence of the Bretton Woods System, the Washington Consensus and the 1998's Asian Financial Crisis.

In fact, the development process with economic orientation is usually not be able to pursue other aspects of development, especially on environmental aspects. Many examples could be observed from the country developments that do not sustain in

managing their environment, namely China in the early era of industrialization, India today with the level of air and water pollution is highest in Asia, air pollution in Mongolia with smoke from the combustion of coal, Bangladesh with flooding and water pollution, Indonesia and the Philippines with marine plastic-waste, and even to the Middle East region that has been affected by desertification and water scarcity. However, since 2014, China emerge as the environmental champion in Asia, after displaying seriousness in addressing environmental problems, not only within the country but also in the global order. That attitudes shown during the momentum of the 21st Conference of Party in France on 2015, China was committed to contribute positively to reduce the impact of global climate change. China's leadership on environmental issues considered to get stronger after in 2017 the US President, Donald Trump, declared his government to step down from the 2015's Paris Agreement cooperation scheme. In that instant, the world leadership was changing to some countries like France, Canada, Germany and China as the environmental champions, even though later in 2018 Angela Merkel signaled the

withdrawal of Germany leadership after being under pressure from domestic industries and from its allies, the US.

The ambition to realize green development has been started massively and seriously since 2014 and not just stopped at the domestic level. The actors who have an interest in achieving green development, starting from the highest order of the Chinese government, congress and its state companies. The involvement of state and non-state actors is the subject of the norm entrepreneur. The role of state actors, in this case, represented by both Chinese President Xi Jinping and Prime Minister Li Keqiang, acting as executives who want green development norms not only applies to China but also internationally. As stated by Xi Jinping in his speech at the meeting Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation 2019 in Beijing:

*“We need to pursue open, green and clean cooperation. The Belt and Road is not an exclusive club; it aims to promote green development. We may launch green infrastructure projects, make green investment and provide green financing to protect the Earth which we all call home.”*

The Chinese Parliament also shows its commitment by ratifying some laws and government policies which

related to the environmental protection. This was indicated by passing the crucial revisions of the Environmental Protection Law in 2014. It is show up as a big and serious step in China's commitment to creating green development start from their home.

Not only the role of the PRC executive and legislative bodies that importance as the norm entrepreneur, but also the Chinese companies have a role to play in the preparation and spreading of green development norms via BRI's projects. This can be seen from two roles: first, the owners of companies, both governments, private and international, playing a crucial role in putting pressure to the government with economic consideration. Many companies push the PRC government to immediately develop pro-environment policies because of the significant economic impact arising from environmental damage to company performance and productivity. China's economic loss as a result of environmental degradation (without air and water pollutions) reached 100 billion USD per year or by economic sectoral due to air pollution only is estimated to reach more than 21 billion USD per year (Shambaugh, 2016; Xia et al., 2016).

Second, in carrying out the mechanism of bilateral cooperation within BRI, China generally uses a multi-track economic diplomacy scheme, which means it also involves national companies in collaborating with BRI to develop several infrastructure projects in partner countries. The Chinese companies have a role as an agent of diffusion from the green development norm through every collaboration they make, certainly under the direction of china's environmental policy.

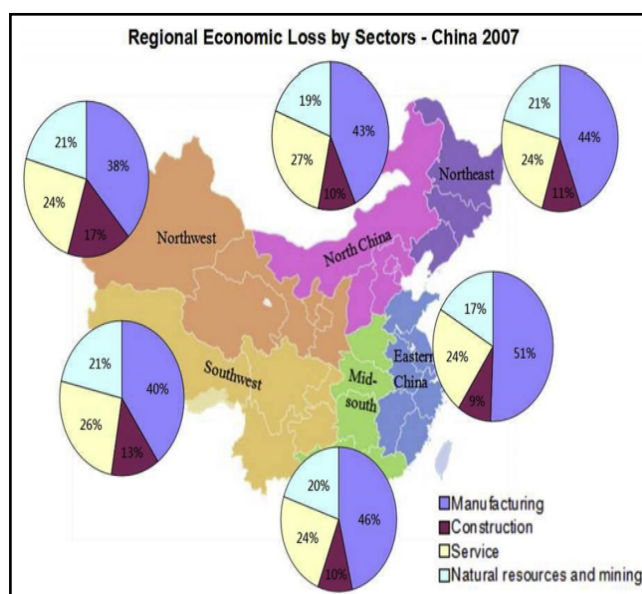


Fig. 2. Map of regional percentage economic loss by sectors as the impact of environmental degradations. (Source: Xia et. al. 2016)

### Construction of Green Development Norms through BRI Cooperation

To be able to answer how the green development norms promoted by China can be well received by the partner countries especially in Asia, the analysis is carried out by borrowing the theory of norm diffusion of Finnemore and Sikkink (1998). Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink first introduced three lifecycles of a norm in 1998 in their work entitled "International Norm Dynamics and Political Change". The three-stages of norm life cycles are norm emergence, norm cascade and norm internationalization. Each stage reflects different motives, mechanisms and logic of behavior (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998).

The three life cycles of a norm reflect different stages of each other, with the presence of entrepreneur norms as motivations and main actors in the construction of existing norms. As stated by Finnemore & Sikkink (1998) that many of the existing international norms as they are now originated from domestic norms, and the internationalization of these norms is nothing but the role of the actor of entrepreneur norms in bringing norms through the two-level game scheme. Rejection from domestic and international pressures affect the

sustainability of the new norm. In the context of green development, it seems that China's domestic norms have managed to survive thanks to the commitment of the large Chinese government. The state ideology factor also supports the continuation of the norm, wherewith the ideology of Marxism, the norms made by the government are less rejection from the public and other pressure groups. Not only that, it seems that the international situation has also helped foster the norms of green development, instead of turning them off. This is reflected in the attitude and policy of China that did not flinch even though several other major countries retreated from the 2015 Paris Agreement commitments. This momentum later become China's international motivation because it sees a vacuum of environmental leadership that can be filled by China to expand its influence, increase its status and prestige on the international stage.

The first stage of the international norm cycle is characterized by persistence norm entrepreneurs in lifting and maintaining a new norm. Norms of entrepreneurs involve state and non-state actors, work together in compiling and socializing green development norms



China inside BRI. First appearance the green development organization within BRI was marked at least after Xi Jinping's commitment speech at First Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing in May 2017 ago:

*“We need to seize opportunities presented by the new round of change in energy mix and the revolution in energy technologies to develop global energy interconnection and achieve green and low-carbon development.....We should pursue the new vision of green development and a way of life and work that is green, low-carbon, circular and sustainable.....China has reached a new starting point in its development endeavors. Guided by the vision of innovative, coordinated, green, open and inclusive development, we will adapt to and steer the new normal of economic development and seize opportunities it presents.....We propose the establishment of an international coalition for green development on the Belt and Road, and we will provide support to related countries in adapting to climate change.”*

Looks at the contents of the Chinese president's speech has mentioned norm green development as one of the norms of BRI. Then since 2017 China formally started implementing green development norms as norm emergence, although it has been done since BRI was founded in 2013.

In the next stage, through a collaboration mechanism in the body of BRI, the dissemination of China's green development norms was carried out to other collaborative partner countries. According to both Oxford Economics (2018) and World Bank data (2018), BRI's partner countries have sixty-five countries, each of which is spread across three continents, namely Asia, Europe, and Africa. Not only the state but in cooperation mechanism BRI also involves non-state actors such as international institutions, for example, the World Bank, ASEAN, Europe Union (EU), Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and many more. Within the framework of the project, BRI is divided into two forms of development, which is the construction of landlines (land corridors) and the construction of sea lanes (maritime corridors). Some Asian countries are mapped as BRI landlines, including:

- a) *The New Eurasian Land Bridge.* Crossing from western China passes Kazakhstan and Russia as land routes.
- b) *The China–Mongol–Russia Corridor.* Crossing from

- northern China passes Mongolia and Russia as a land route.
- c) *The China–Central Asia–West Asia Corridor*. Crossing western China to Turkey as a land route.
- d) *The China–Indochina Peninsula Corridor*. Crossing southern China to Singapore as a land route.
- e) *The Bangladesh–China–India–Myanmar (BCIM) Economic Corridor*.
- f) *The China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC)*.

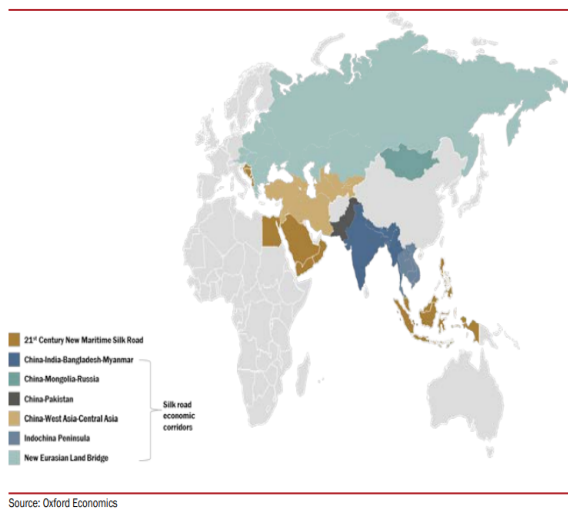


Fig. 3. Map showing the original 65 BRI's project partner and 6 corridors of BRI developments.

Based on some data from the official BRI website, the Chinese government has signed 123 collaborative documents from 105 countries and 26

other collaborative documents from 29 international institutions. With this cooperation mechanism through BRI, China can more easily disseminate and introduce green development norms. Not only by relying on bilateral cooperation, but also China success to be partner with UNEP, UNDP and other international institutions. During 2019, China succeeded in establishing the international green development coalition under the auspices of the collaboration of BRI, known as BRIGC or International Coalition for Green Development on the Belt and Road. This further strengthens China's commitment to disseminating the norms of green development through the institutionalization of cooperation. This process reflects how the domestic norm of China could become the international norm through the stage of norm cascade within the BRI.

At the last stage, the norms of green development began to be embedded and used in a broader context, both by partner countries and the global world. With the establishment of the International Coalition for Green Development on the Belt and Road (BRIGC) will make China easier to spread green development norms even

throughout the world. The justification that the green development model as one of the latest and best development trends via global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), also playing a part in facilitating and accelerating the green development norm to be constructed in Asia. The level of interdependence among Asian countries to China nowadays, both economically, investment and trade, also strengthen the position of green development norm not to be easily rejected without thinking of the rational consequences caused by systemic interdependence. In the future, with the existing mechanism, China could become a role model of green development, not only in the Greater Asia but also as the new champion in the world, especially when the role of US begins to vacuum from global environmental issues.

### **Conclusion**

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) project that was launched by China in 2013 has been used well as an instrument for China to internalize new norms in the order of cooperation in Greater Asia. The new norm is the green development as the latest new model of global development guideline and cooperation

between countries. The biggest momentum from China in realizing this normalization occurred when the Prime Minister of China, Li Keqiang announced publicly to fight pollution and environmental damage in his country. Since 2013 Xi Jinping has begun to launch the formation of a deep green development coalition on the body of BRI, which was formally established at the beginning of 2019 via BRIGC.

The new norm raised by China's since 2013, and was establish domestically in 2014, by the contributing role of both actors, the state actors and non-state. At this time the green development norm starts to reflect the stage of emergence nationally. Over time, bilateral cooperation between China and its partner, more than a hundred countries dominantly from Asia continent, instilled green development norms in each form of their agreements and MoU. This indicates the stage which norm start to spread or cascading both regionally and globally. The existence of this international collaboration reflects that the norms of green development have been well received and have begun to serve as principles in every development process and cooperation through the BRI mechanism. It is also

marked that the green development norm began to enter the stage of norm internationalization. Later in 2019, thanks to BRIGC as the final form of internationalization of the green development norm, Chinese government efforts to affect its Asia neighborhoods once again managed to prove its strong influence and credibility.

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