

Room for all on road to providing better Asian infrastructure

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SCMP Editorial

Beijing should not see other schemes aimed at bringing economic growth to underdeveloped countries as rivals to its own initiative

China's "Belt and Road Initiative" is not the only scheme aimed at bringing infrastructure and economic growth to underdeveloped countries. Other ventures include the Eurasian Economic Union and the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor.

The suggestion that Australia, India, Japan and the United States could join forces for yet another project is bound to be viewed by some in the Chinese leadership as purely about countering Beijing's growing influence.

But if such a move eventuates, it should not be seen negatively; what at first glance would appear to be about competition can also be taken as complementary.

None of the four countries are among the almost 70 that have joined China in its bid to connect Asia with Europe and Africa, although Japan has expressed an interest.

Australian Foreign Minister Julie Bishop confirmed recently senior officials from the nations are discussing a joint infrastructure plan. But the favoured terminology is that it is an alternative to the belt and road plan rather than a competitor.

That is outwardly cold comfort to Beijing, given that all four have recently reinvigorated the Quad, a security alliance squarely aimed at countering China's growing military might.

India and Japan joined forces in 2016 to collaborate on developing infrastructure and digital connectivity in Africa through the Asia-Africa Growth Corridor, a direct competitor to the belt and road plan.



Japan also wants to use its official development assistance to promote a broader “free and open Indo-Pacific strategy” that focuses on high-quality infrastructure.

Russia, which in 2014 launched a development proposal for central Asia through its Eurasian Economic Union, has taken a different tack by officially linking the grouping up to the belt and road.

Countries along the routes desperately need infrastructure such as ports, roads and railways, essential if they are to boost trade.

The Asian Development Bank estimates the cost of Asia’s infrastructure to be more than US\$26 trillion, an amount that dwarfs the US\$900 billion to US\$1 trillion in funding that has been mentioned by Chinese officials for the belt and road.

As eager and capable as China’s companies are to take on all the work, they simply do not have the capacity for such an enormous effort.

Recipient nations also do not want to be too dependent on a single country, knowing that competition provides options and cost-effectiveness.

The belt and road strategy is viewed by rivals with varying levels of enthusiasm and caution. But it cannot be avoided; it is so expansive in its vision that it is central to all other schemes.

Its goal is to bring the world together and provide mutual benefits for all. There is plenty of room for all stakeholders.

Topics: Belt and Road Initiative
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