

China Expands Its Economic Silk Road Diplomacy

June 14—China is continuing its international mobilization around the New Silk Road perspective. This was the major topic at the Sixth Ministerial Conference of the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum held June 5 in Beijing. More than 200 guests from China and the Arab states participated in the forum, which is now celebrating its 10th anniversary.

Although it was organized only at the ministerial level, President Xi Jinping made a point of addressing the gathering personally; he reiterated his project for developing the Silk Road Economic Belt, combining it with the Maritime Silk Road into a single project which he designated “One Road and One Belt.” “The next decade poses a critical development period for both China and the Arab states, which calls us to carry forward the Silk Road spirit and rejuvenate our countries,” Xi said, and quoted an old Chinese saying: “Five colors, when shining upon each other, will add beauty to each other; eight musical instruments, when played together, will make a harmonious melody.”

“No one civilization can claim to be superior to another,” he underlined. He called on the organization to begin discussions on establishing a China-Arab technology-transfer center for training Arab experts in the use of nuclear energy and for opening the Chinese Beidou Navigation Satellite System to Arab states. Three major sets of agreements were signed at the ministerial conference, focussing on nuclear technology, aerospace technology, and “alternative” energy resources.

At the same time, there was a seminar in Beijing together with the Iranian Embassy entitled “21st-Century China-Iran Silk Road.” The seminar was organized by the Cultural Section of the Iranian Embassy with the Minzu University of China, Beijing Ethnic Education Association, and Beijing Huimin School. It was oriented to the Hui minority in China, which had its origin along the ancient Silk Road.

During the May 20-12 Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA) in Shanghai, President Xi also met with Iranian President Rouhani. The two pledged to jointly work to build the New Silk Road.

And Now, with the Subcontinent

Several days later, on June 10, President Xi hosted Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in Beijing, where the New Silk Road approach was again on the agenda. Both pledged joint efforts to build an economic corridor linking Bangladesh, China, India, and Myanmar.

“Bangladesh is an important country along the Maritime Silk Road,” Xi said during the meeting, noting that China welcomes the Bangladeshi side’s participation in the construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road, while pushing ahead with the economic corridor.

Echoing Xi’s proposal on the belt and maritime route, Hasina said the four-nation economic corridor is of great significance for the development of South Asia, and that her country will play an active role in its construction.

A day earlier, Prime Minister Hasina had commented on how deeply impressed she was by China’s development and changes. “From my first visit to China in 1993 till the present, I have witnessed the great development of China. I think Bangladesh can learn a lot from China—the way China develops. I believe, in the near future, China will be the world’s biggest economy. As an Asian country, Bangladesh takes pride in that,” she said.

China is also reaching out to India. Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited India June 8 and 9, held meetings with Prime Minister Narendra Modi, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj, President Pranab Mukherjee, and National Security Advisor Ajit Doval, among others, praising the new era in India and pledging full Chinese support for India’s development and expanded relations.

Wang focused on Chinese investment in the infrastructure sector. “As special envoy to the President, I have brought the most important message, that on your road to national rejuvenation, China stands by your side,” he said. He told journalists after meeting Prime Minister Modi that China wanted to upgrade railways and build expressways in India. “We are competitive and cost-effective.” Swaraj spoke about the possibility of China setting up industrial parks in India.