

BROADER TOTAL QUALITY LESSONS FOR CHINA'S BELT AND ROAD INITIATIVE (BRI)

Prof. Andrew K. P. LEUNG, SBS, FRSA

Distinguished Keynote Speaker, 24th Int. Conf. on ISO & TQM (**24-ICIT**)

Ex-Director of Social Welfare and Chief Rep. for UK, Eastern Europe, Russia, Swiss, etc.

Visiting Prof. London Metropolitan U., Cambridge U. Law Societies of HK & London.

Prof. Samuel K. M. HO

Research Professor & Co-Chair, **24-ICIT** at Gratia Christina College (www.hk5sa.com/icit)

BSc(Engg.), MSc, PhD, Ex-Prof. & Speaker, Oxford U.; Ex-Research Fellow, Cambridge U.

ABSTRACT

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the largest transcontinental transport, trade, socio-economic, and digital linkage network the world has ever seen. When President Xi first launched the project in Kazakhstan in September 2013, it hardly received any attention in the West, not least the United States. It has since been embraced by more than 150 countries, largely in the Global South. On the one hand, it has brought diverse peoples and nations closer together, meeting some of their critical shortages of utilities, transport, and other socio-economic linkages such as education, health, technical skills, and digital networks. On the other, there have arisen blowbacks on account of lack of transparency, corporate governance, fair competition, and a perceived "debt-trap". It has also sparked off West-inspired initiatives, led by the United States, to counter China's growing BRI influence, such as the Partnership for Global Infrastructure Investment (PGII) and the Indo-Pacific Framework for Prosperity (IPEF). At the 3rd BRI Form on 17 and 18 October 2023, marking the Initiative's 10th anniversary, Beijing revamped the BRI's global strategy towards smaller and greener projects with better transparency, accountability and partnership with a wider range of stakeholders, with deliverables in improved livelihood, skills, transparency, accountability, and national development. On a grander scale, there are important lessons to learn in terms of Total Quality Management, including the 5-S of "Structurise, Systematise, Sanitise, Standardise, and Self-discipline".

Keywords: Strategy; Geopolitics; International Relations; Belt & Road Initiative (BRI); Infrastructure Investment; Total Quality Management (TQM); 5-S Practice

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1. INTRODUCTION

In an era of Great Power Rivalry, China's economic and geopolitical prominence is now firmly held with bipartisan consensus to be the United States' greatest "existential threat" to the America-led "liberal world order". China's growing influence owes in no small measure to its global connectivity. It has become the world's largest trader and manufacturer par excellence. According to the Sydney-based Lowy Institute, 128 nations across the globe have China as the larger trading partner than the United States (Rajah & Leng, 2018). Even for products not "Made in China", China is deeply embedded in the global supply and value chains of a vast array of products sold around the world in terms of materials, minerals, components, services and logistics. Seven of the world's top 11 container ports are located in China, Hong Kong included.

The BRI, launched in 2013, aims to further enhance China's global connectivity through stimulating trade and economic growth across Asia and beyond. It aims to build connecting productive infrastructure such as ports, railways, highways, as well as utilities, hospitals and schools and by broadening trade, economic as well as people-to-people links. The BRI has since expanded to include an "Arctic Silk Road", a "Digital Silk Road" and a "Health Silk Road".

Following a checkered learning curve, with much initial success and later blowbacks, Beijing has recently revamped the BRI's direction and execution, pivoting towards smaller and more readily-deliverable projects, livelihood benefits, debt and ecological sustainability, corporate governance and partnership with local and international stakeholders.

The BRI's strategic revamp suggests that Total Quality Management (TQM) should be applied more rigorously in all its dimensions.

However, unlike TQM's traditional application to single businesses and projects, BRI, in all its global, multinational, multi-theatre, multi-cultural and multi-dimensional manifestations, poses unprecedented challenges to some of TQM's well-established methodologies. For example:-

- (a) How should TQM be applied to BRI NATIONAL POLICY formulation and direction in the light of China's changing global geopolitical and geostrategic situation?
- (b) How should TQM be applied to on-site and off-site management of INDIVIDUAL PROJECTS in the light of diverse challenges in terms of China's strategic priorities and host country's politics, socio-economics, financial and ecological constraints?
- (c) How should TQM be applied to the management of BRI's global narratives in the light of grievances, blowbacks, cultural divides and media distortions, intended or otherwise?

Challenges notwithstanding, there is little doubt that incorporating TQM principles into the BRI in all its manifestations would help enhance the quality and sustainability of projects and more successful outcomes for China and partner countries

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of extant TQM literature on BRI related issues points to the reality that virtually all literature relates to ECONOMIC TRADE FLOWS, TRADE LINK EFFICIENCIES, or PROJECT EXECUTION in a SINGLE COUNTRY.

Some literature points out the IMPORTANCE of QUALITY MANAGEMENT in BRI projects as they impinge on Local Development, Life Expectancy, Quality of Life, Sustainability, Environmental Concerns, Geopolitics and International Relations. However, none of this literature offers HOW TQM methodologies could be applied to specific challenges in practise.

Where BRI-related literature (as distinct from TQM literature) analyses some of the blowback challenges facing the BRI, there is no literature on specific applicability of TQM methodologies to BRI POLICY AND STRATEGIES.

As a result, there is a yawning gap or void of in-depth research on APPLYING TQM to POLICY OR STRATEGY FORMULATION in response to changing TRANSNATIONAL, TRANSCULTURAL, or GEOSTRATEGIC challenges.

The following tour d'horizon bears out these observations.

Rajah & Leng (2018) examine who dominates global trade by using data from the IMF's Direction of Trade Statistics database, which provides a repository of bilateral trade flows for most countries. The focus is on gross trade flows (i.e. exports plus imports) which serves as a measure of the degree of trade integration between two economies and ask for each country whether the US or China is the larger trading partner. In 2001, the year China acceded to the World Trade Organisation, over 80% of countries with data available had a larger volume of trade with America than China. By 2018, that figure was down to a little over 30% – with two-thirds of countries (128 out of 190) trading more with China than the United States.

George et.al (2019) conclude that new roads can slash delivery time for goods, lowering costs for consumers and speeding through the exports that fuel growth. New seaports can connect an economy to the world, increasing competitiveness and raising the national standard of living. Such examples are plentiful. Why then, according to the Global Infrastructure Hub, will the world be facing a \$15 trillion gap between projected investment and the amount needed to provide adequate global infrastructure by 2040?

World Bank (2020) finds that Kazakhstan is well placed to benefit from the BRI especially if the government implements further complementary reforms. Benefits include transport connectivity for the land-locked country, fall in shipment times especially for non-oil products, rise in exports, expanded GDP (albeit with spatial inequality), and debt sustainability with strengthened fiscal institutions, though stronger regional cooperation and infrastructural integration are needed if full benefits are to be realized.

Fang Ming (2023a) finds that TQM practices positively impact on service quality in Chinese service companies. In particular, TQM implementation leads to improved customer satisfaction, enhanced customer loyalty, and overall organizational performance through mechanisms such as customer feedback, and employee empowerment and involvement. Fang Ming (2023b) concludes that TQM practices enabled manufacturing industries in China to create a positive work environment through fostering employee satisfaction with enhanced performance outcomes, sustainable competitive advantage and continuous improvement.

The findings of this paper recognize the significance of employee involvement, supportive leadership, effective communication, and teamwork.

McBride et.al (2023) find out that some analysts see the BRI project as an unsettling extension of China's rising power, and as the costs of many of the projects have skyrocketed, opposition has grown in some countries. Meanwhile, the United States shares the concern of some in Asia that the BRI could be a Trojan horse for China-led regional development and military expansion. President Joe Biden has maintained his predecessors' skeptical stance towards Beijing's actions, but Washington has struggled to offer participating governments a more appealing economic vision.

Xu & Hu (December 2023) posits that B&R Initiative can improve financial reporting quality through the alleviation of financial constraints and the masking effect of media coverage mainly in key industries involved and in companies with lower capital intensity.

EU (2024) see the trans-European transport network policy, the TEN-T policy, is a key instrument for planning and developing a coherent, efficient, multimodal, and high-quality transport infrastructure across the EU. The network comprises railways, inland waterways, short sea shipping routes and roads linking urban nodes, maritime and inland ports, airports and terminals. It fosters efficient transportation for people and goods, ensures access to jobs and services, and enables trade and economic growth. It strengthens the EU's economic, social and territorial cohesion and creates seamless transport systems across borders, without gaps, bottlenecks or missing links. In particular since its revision in 2024, it also aims to reduce the environmental and climate impact of transport and to increase the safety and the resilience of the network.

SCMP (2024) reports when Sri Lanka announced in July 2017 that the underperforming Chinese-built Hambantota port was to be leased for 99 years to a Chinese government-linked company, Western and Indian media outlets went into overdrive by labelling the deal a classic example of Beijing's "debt trap". Washington was quick to spread the narrative, with members of the Trump administration pointing to Hambantota as a warning against China's strategic use of debt. In 2018, then US vice-president Mike Pence called it "debt-trap diplomacy" – a phrase he used through to the last days of the administration. Because of its strategic location, Hambantota was perceived by some Indian and American commentators as a gateway exploited by China for military purposes. Sri Lankan supporters of Hambantota, however, say the port has become a thriving transshipment hub in the Indian Ocean. The Western narrative, according to the supporters, conveniently ignores a key aspect of the deal between Sri Lanka and China. The transaction was not contingent on default by Sri Lanka on its external debt to China's Exim bank; rather it was a lease arrangement for 99 years at a fee of US\$1.12 billion.

Jones & Hameiri (2020) debunk the Myth of 'Debt-trap Diplomacy' on How Recipient Countries Shape China's Belt and Road Initiative. Critics of the BRI accuse China of pursuing a policy of 'debt-trap diplomacy': luring poor, developing countries into agreeing unsustainable loans to pursue infrastructure projects so that, when they experience financial difficulty, Beijing can seize the asset, thereby extending its strategic or military reach. This paper demonstrates that the evidence for such views is limited.

Impact on Local Development: Research indicates that the BRI has significant implications for local development, including infrastructure improvements and economic growth in participating countries. However, the effectiveness of these projects often hinges on the quality of implementation and management practices (Oi, 2020).

Life Expectancy and Quality of Life: A study examining the relationship between Chinese investments in BRI countries and life expectancy found no significant impact, suggesting that while investments are made, the quality of outcomes may not be immediately evident. This highlights the need for a focus on quality management to ensure that investments translate into tangible benefits for local populations (Young & Huber, 2022).

Geopolitical Considerations: The BRI is not only an economic initiative but also a strategic one, aiming to enhance China's influence globally. The quality of partnerships and the management of international relations are crucial for the success of the initiative (HIR, 2021).

Sustainability and Environmental Concerns: The BRI has faced criticism regarding its environmental impact. Implementing TQM principles could help address these concerns by promoting sustainable practices and ensuring that projects adhere to quality standards that protect the environment (HIR, 2021).

While specific academic references from the mentioned institutions on "Total Quality" in the context of the BRI are not available, the existing literature underscores the importance of quality management principles in enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of the initiative. Future research could benefit from a focused examination of TQM applications within the BRI framework.

2.1. BRI's Scope and Connectivity

Cementing China's global connectivity is Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Its scale and scope is illustrated by the following maps ([Figure-1](#)). It shows the "Maritime Silk Road", connecting China's eastern seaboard through the South China Sea, across the Indian Ocean, onto East Africa, through the Red Sea to connect with Athens and finally Venice. There it is picked up by the overland "economic Belt" connecting to Duisburg, and Rotterdam, then Moscow, onto Istanbul, Teheran, through Central Asia, before traversing to Urumqi, Lanzhou and Xi'an.

Broader Total Quality Lessons for China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)



Figure-1: Scale and Scope of the BRI

(<http://en.people.cn/n3/2016/0624/c90883-9077342.html>)

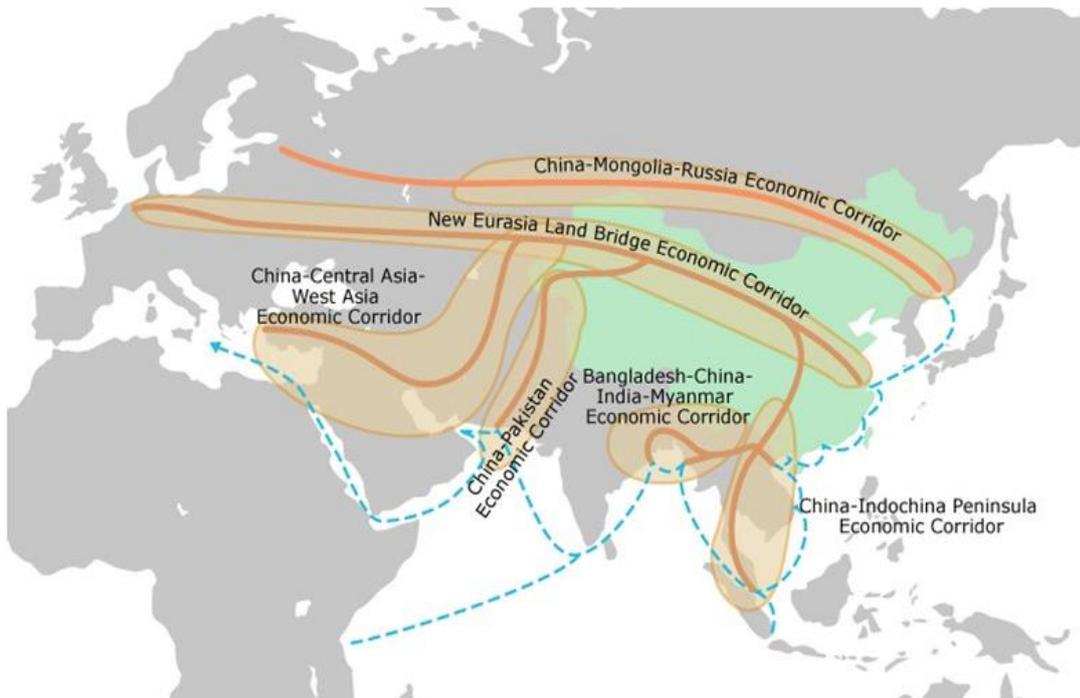


Figure-2: The BRI – Six Economic Corridors spanning Asia, Europe and Africa

(<https://china.acclime.com/news-insights/belt-road-initiative>)

The second map (Figure-2) shows how the BRI is supported by six Eurasian “economic corridors” i.e.

- (a) China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor;
- (b) New Eurasia Landbridge Economic Corridor
- (c) China-Central-Asia-West-Asia Economic Corridor
- (d) China-Pakistan Economic Corridor
- (e) Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor
- (f) China-Indo-China-Peninsula Economic Corridor

According to the World Economic Forum, the world is facing a \$15 trillion infrastructure gap by 2040 (2). Much of this is being met by the BRI.

3. EVOLUTION OF THE BRI

3.1. BRI's Strategic Considerations

BRI is intended to cement China's central connectivity to the rest of the world, particularly the Global South, in terms of Policy, Infrastructure, Trade, Finance and People-to-People Exchanges. According to the Council on Foreign Relations (3), 147 countries, accounting for two-thirds of the world's population and 40 percent of global GDP—have signed up with the BRI or indicated an interest in doing so. BRI's potential investment is estimated at \$5 trillion, many times the post-World War II Marshal Plan (\$120B in today's prices).

BRI's strategic objectives can be deciphered to include:-

- (a) To realize the China Dream of national renaissance, restoring China's global prominence to times of the Historic Silk Road;
- (b) To escape America's military “choke points” in the Malacca Strait and in the Red Sea including the Suez Canal;
- (c) To expand China's global trade & markets;
- (d) To reinforce global connectivity in face of a fracturing world due to rival geopolitics;
- (e) To leverage an “Arctic Silk Road” and a “Digital Silk Road”;
- (f) To meet global infrastructural deficits essential to realizing the United Nations's Sustainable Development Goals;
- (g) To accelerate the internationalization of the Chinese currency (RMB);
- (h) To utilize China's excess capacity;
- (i) To redress China's internal regional disparities.

3.2. Ups and Downs of the BRI

The BRI had initial moments of great success. Once on the brink of bankruptcy, thanks to its BRI location, Greece's Piraeus Port has transformed into one of Europe's largest and most successful container and ferry terminals.

With Venice well-positioned as the de-facto connector between the European end of the BRI's Maritime Silk Road and its pan-Europe “economic Belt”, Italy had the ambition of becoming a pan-Europe transport hub, linking the BRI with the ongoing 500 billion Euro plan – Trans-European Transport Network (TENT-T) – expected to be completed by 2050. Figure-3 shows Italy's location advantage with this proposed linkage.

Banking on the BRI initial popularity, in 2012, Beijing launched the 16+1 initiative to link Central and Eastern European Countries (CEE) to the BRI. 11 EU countries joined (Hungary, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania) plus five Balkan states (Figure-4)

The massive BRI initiative is unprecedented in scale, scope, socio-ecological, geo-economic and geopolitical dynamics. It's no surprise that the learning curve is steep and fraught with difficulties and obstacles. Among them are lack of transparency, deficits in corporate governance, fair competition, and a perceived "debt-trap".

By 2017, the tide against the BRI began to turn. Sri Lanka's over-indebted BRI Hambantota Port project, resulting in its lease to China for 99 years, was held up as a poster-child for Beijing's "debt-trap diplomacy". There were complaints about BRI contracts awarded exclusively to Chinese firms with imported Chinese contract labour denying local job opportunities. There were also criticisms about ecological neglect.

Former U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo famously called the BRI "a constricting *belt*" and a "one-way *road*". The U.S. Congress passed the BUILD Act (2018) with a \$60 billion fund (managed by the International Development Finance Corporation) to provide alternative infrastructure according to World Bank standards. This was followed by the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment (PGII) (2022) and the Indo-Pacific Framework for Prosperity (IPEF) (2022) as counterweights to the BRI.

As tangible economic benefits appeared doubtful and negative narrative against the BRI on the ascendant, the 16+1 initiative began to unravel. The European Union started to embrace the rhetoric of the BRI being a Chinese "Trojan Horse". A thunderbolt followed in December 2023 of Italy's withdrawal from the BRI.

3.3. Beijing's BRI Reform

Learning from the BRI's checkered trajectory, Beijing launched a comprehensive reform package at the BRI Summit in Beijing on 17-18 October, 2023, coinciding with the BRI's 10th Anniversary. The Summit was attended by top leaders from 150 countries, largely from the Global South. Reform policies and measures include:-

- (a) A tilt towards smaller, greener, more readily deliverable projects to improve host countries' national development, including livelihood, social well-being, human skills, governance transparency, accountability and partnership with a wider range of stakeholders;
- (b) Emphasis on high quality, common prosperity, open world economy, and the digital economy;
- (c) Improving trade connectivity, maritime cooperation, a "Clean Silk Road" initiative, think tank, people-to-people and other sub-national areas of cooperation;
- (d) 3,000 cooperation projects with investment of some US\$1 trillion;
- (e) Deepening transport linkages including a "China-Europe Railway Express", "Trans-Caspian International Transportation Corridor", "New Logistics Corridor" across the Eurasian continent; "New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor"; and "Air Silk Road";
- (f) E-commerce cooperation, free trade agreements and investment protection treaties;

- (g) Removal of restrictions on foreign investment in the manufacturing sector; opening up cross-border service trade and investment, expanding market access for digital and other products, and deepening reform including state-owned enterprises, digital economy, intellectual property and government procurement.
- (h) China to hold the Global Digital Trade Expo annually in the next five years (2024-2028);
- (i) Promoting both signature projects and “small yet smart” livelihood programs;
- (j) China Development Bank and the Export-Import Bank of China will each set up a RMB 350 billion financing window. An additional RMB 80 billion will be injected into the Silk Road Fund;
- (k) Green infrastructure, green energy and green transportation, BRI International Green Development Coalition;
- (l) Belt and Road Science, Technology and Innovation Cooperation Action Plan, to increase the number of joint laboratories to 100 in the next five years, and supporting young scientists from other countries to work on short-term programs in China;
- (m) Launching a Global Artificial Intelligence (AI) Governance Initiative;
- (n) Supporting people-to-people exchanges; “Liangzhu Forum” to enhance dialogue on civilizations; Silk Road International League of Theaters; Network of Silk Road Arts Festivals; Silk Road International Alliance of Art Museums and Galleries; Silk Road International Library Alliance; International Tourism Alliance of Silk Road Cities; Chinese government scholarship “Silk Road Program”;
- (o) Promoting integrity-based Belt and Road cooperation; Achievements and Prospects of Belt and Road Integrity Building; High-Level Principles on Belt and Road Integrity Building; Corporate Integrity and Compliance Evaluation System;
- (p) Strengthening or building multilateral cooperation platforms covering energy, taxation, finance, green development, disaster risk reduction, anti-corruption, think tank, media, culture and other fields;
- (q) Beijing to continue to host the Belt and Road Forum and establish a secretariat for the Forum.

3.4. Light at End of the Tunnel ?

Sri Lanka’s Hambantota Port, which has long been tarred as the poster-child of BRI’s alleged “debt trap” is beginning to experience a significant turn of fortune for the better. According to a report in the South China Morning Post of 3 May, 2024 (5), the port has become a thriving transshipment hub in the Indian Ocean particularly for vehicles, with a turnover of 700,000 units a month. It is also expected to play a bigger role in supporting the bunkering and oil refining business and has the potential to be a cruise hub.

In any case, the “debt trap” narrative has long been proven flawed at best. According to a UK Chatham House research paper of 18 August 2020 (6), Sri Lanka’s debt distress was unconnected to Chinese lending, arising instead from excessive borrowing on Western-dominated capital markets and from structural problems within the Sri Lankan economy. There was no debt-for-asset swap. Rather, after bargaining hard for commercial reasons, a Chinese SOE leased the port in exchange for \$1.1 billion, which Sri Lanka used to pay down other foreign debts and boost its own fiscal reserves.

The research paper concludes that contrary to mainstream accounts depicting it as a predatory economic statecraft, the BRI remains motivated largely by economic factors. It has also shown that China's fragmented and less-well coordinated international development financing system is not geared towards advancing coherent geopolitical aims. In addition, recipient countries (such as Sri Lanka and Malaysia) are not hapless victims, but actively shape outcomes within China's development financing system. Accordingly, the BRI does not follow a top-down plan, but emerges piecemeal, through diverse bilateral interactions, with outcomes being shaped by interests, agendas and governance problems on both sides.

In particular, the research paper recommends that against vested interests, donors should support transparency initiatives, including whistleblowing, investigative journalism and civil society as well as academic research like the AidData project, which painstakingly pieces together open-source data. Transparency alone will not transform governance, but it will provide opposition groups with the requisite ammunition to pursue greater accountability and policymaking in the public sphere.

4. TOTAL QUALITY APPLICATIONS TO BRI PROJECTS

In terms of individual PROJECTS, TQM principles can be applied to the BRI as follows:-

4. 1. Customer Focus

Stakeholder Engagement: Understanding the needs of participating countries and communities is crucial. Regular consultations and feedback mechanisms should be established to ensure that projects meet local needs and expectations.

4. 2. Leadership

Clear Vision: Strong leadership from China promotes a unified vision for the BRI. This involves setting quality standards and ensuring that all stakeholders align with the initiative's goals.

4. 3. Involvement of People

Local Participation: Engaging local labor and businesses in projects can enhance quality and foster goodwill. Training and capacity-building initiatives help ensure that local communities benefit from BRI projects.

4. 4. Process Approach

Streamlined Operations: Implementing standardized processes for project management can improve efficiency. This includes risk management frameworks to address potential challenges proactively.

4. 5. Systematic Approach to Management

Integrated Framework: Establishing a comprehensive management system that integrates various aspects of project delivery, from planning to execution and evaluation, can enhance overall quality.

4. 6. Continuous Improvement

Feedback Loops: Regular assessments of project outcomes and community impact can inform continuous improvement efforts. Adapting strategies based on lessons learned is essential for future projects.

4. 7. Fact-Based Decision Making

Data Utilization: Leveraging data analytics to inform decisions about project locations, resource allocation, and risk assessment can improve project outcomes and quality.

4. 8. Mutually Beneficial Supplier Relationships

Collaboration with Partners: Building strong relationships with local suppliers and contractors can enhance quality and ensure that projects are delivered on time and within budget.

4. 9. Challenges and Considerations

Cultural Sensitivity: Understanding and respecting the cultural contexts of different countries is essential to ensure project acceptance and success.

Environmental Impact: Incorporating sustainability practices in line with TQM principles can help mitigate negative environmental effects associated with large infrastructure projects.

5. APPLICATION OF 5-S (STRUCTURALIZE, SYSTEMATIZE, SANITIZE, STANDARDIZE, SELF-DISCIPLINE) TO BRI'S POLICY AND STRATEGIC FORMULATION

International relations and national development are of a different plane, much more complex and fluid than academic concepts of TQM and 5-S practices focused on day-to-day business organizations. However, when dusts are settled and the way forward becomes clearer for reflection, it could be rewarding to imbue a search for BRI's more refined international relations strategies or measures with a healthy dose of TQM and 5-S concepts.

Albeit on a grander scale involving international relations and nation-building rather than day-to-day business organization, BRI's checkered trajectory contains useful kernels of TQM and "5-S" practice wisdom.

Specifically, "a tilt towards smaller, greener, more readily deliverable projects to improve host countries' national development, including livelihood, social well-being, human skills, transparency, accountability and partnership with a wider range of stakeholders" represents an attempt to *structuralize* BRI projects.

"Promoting integrity-based Belt and Road cooperation; Achievements and Prospects of Belt and Road Integrity Building; High-Level Principles on Belt and Road Integrity Building; Corporate Integrity and Compliance Evaluation System" is tantamount to *systematizing* projects.

"Going green" is similar to the philosophy of "*sanitizing*", as in the BRI reform package of Green infrastructure, green energy, green transportation, and the BRI International Green Development Coalition.

Similarly, the BRI reform package of "Promoting integrity-based Belt and Road cooperation; Achievements and Prospects of Belt and Road Integrity Building; High-Level Principles on Belt and Road Integrity Building; Corporate Integrity and Compliance Evaluation System" can be equated to "*standardizing*" BRI projects.

The BRI reform measures of “Removal of restrictions on foreign investment in the manufacturing sector; opening up cross-border service trade and investment, expanding market access for digital and other products, and deepening reform including state-owned enterprises, digital economy, intellectual property and government procurement” involves a great deal of self-correction and “*self-discipline*”.

On a grander scale, by connecting and empowering the Global South, the BRI plays a vital part in China’s trajectory towards realizing the China Dream of national renaissance, in particular, the “Second Centenary Goal” of becoming a “strong, democratic, civilized, harmonious, and modern socialist country” by 2049, the centenary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China. This encompasses China’s playing a much greater and constructive role in improving the world order, making it fairer, more cooperative and more sustainable, with “an open, inclusive, and non-discriminatory environment for international economic cooperation.”, including reform of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the World Trade Organization. Witness President Xi Jinping’s signed article in the Brazil media on 17 November on the eve of the 2024 G20 being hosted by Brazil with the theme of “Building a Just World and a Sustainable Planet”.

Partly through the BRI, Beijing is making considerable headway putting the building blocks together for a fairer, more inclusive, and better-connected world. This includes the New Development Bank (NDB, the BRICS Bank), the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), the BRICS-Plus Group (with 4 new member nations (Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates) and 13 partner countries (Algeria, Belarus, Bolivia, Cuba, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Nigeria, Thailand, Türkiye, Uganda, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam). The BRICS-Plus nine Member nations together account for a third of the world’s GDP (in purchasing power parity terms), 40% of the world’s population, and 60% of the world’s oil production, compared with the G7’s 30% of world GDP and 10% of world population.

All these countries are in the Global South. They are not forming an anti-America block. Nearly all of these countries want to be good friends with the United States. But their cooperation for mutual benefit would serve to hedge against a protectionist, more coercive “America-First” Trump 2.0 administration.

In building a fairer, more cooperative and greener world for the Global South, it can be argued that TQM & 5-S principles are being followed. For example, forming various groupings and regional organizations can be said to “*structuralize*” the Global South partnerships. Creating the NDB and the AIIB can be said to “*systematize*” the relationships. Against a likely Trump 2.0 “Drill, Baby, Drill” fossil fuel lurch, China has become the “New Detroit” for the world’s EVs (Electric Vehicles). It is supplying 70% of the world’s photovoltaic modules and 60% of the world’s wind turbines, which can be argued to help “*sanitize*” the world. Proposing to reform of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the World Trade Organization can be argued as an attempt to “*Standardize*” the global systems to reflect interests of the Global South.

Last but not least, China is doubling down on improving a “high level socialist market economy”, with the private sector already contributing 50 per cent of tax revenue, 60 per cent of gross domestic product, 70 per cent of innovations, 80 per cent of urban employment, and 90 per cent of registered businesses (“Private Secor 56789”), opening up the country more for trade, investment, tourism, and people-to-people exchanges. These reforms are set to benefit the rest of the world including the Global South. All these self-imposed reform measures can be said to be a form of “*Self-Discipline*”.

Naturally, nation-building and international relations are far too complex and fluid to admit compartmentalized application of TQM modalities. As for application to the BRI, as vindicated by its checkered trajectory and the Chatham House research paper, there are many unique factors to take into account including changing local characteristics, stakeholder priorities, human or foreign relations, relative costs, timing and where applicable, other socio-economic or political dynamics. There is no one-size-fits-all. By way of analogy, choosing a Rolls Royce de-lux car to cross a desert may not be an ideal TQM decision. Perfection can often be the greatest enemy of the good, if the best TQM outcome is to be realized for any BRI project at any particular point in time. In this context, TQM can only be a relative concept, depending on a host of variables.

6. SUGGESTED FURTHER RESEARCH WORK

The above ideas for 5-S applicability to BRI POLICY and STRATEGY are only tentative. They are not meant to fill the void in this groundbreaking challenge to traditional TQM methodologies. Widening TQM research to include BRI's fluid international relations including transnational and transcultural developmental challenges will open up a whole vista of exciting horizons for TQM and 5-S academic pursuits. It is hoped that our groundbreaking efforts in this paper will throw a sprat to catch a mackerel.

Naturally, International relations and national development are of a different plane, much more complex and fluid than academic concepts of TQM and 5-S practices. However, when dusts are settled and the way forward becomes clearer for reflection, it could be rewarding to imbue a search for more refined international relations grand strategies or measures with a healthy dose of TQM and 5-S concepts.

Likewise, it could open up much wider and more exciting horizons for TQM and 5-S academic pursuits by widening related research to include international relations and national development cases.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Andrew K. P. LEUNG ⁰⁰⁰⁰⁻⁰⁰⁰³⁻³⁵²³⁻⁹³⁴⁸ -- Hong Kong's former Director-General of Social Welfare. Former deputy director-general of industry, Deputy Secretary for Transport, and chief representative for UK and Eastern Europe, Russia, Norway and Switzerland -- prominent international China strategist. International advisory boards include Brussels-based Silk Road Partners and Vienna-based European Centre for e-Commerce and Internet Law. Elected Fellow of RSA. Elected Member, Royal Society for Asian Affairs. Governing Council, King's College London 2004-10. Visiting Professor -- London Metropolitan U.; Cambridge U.; Law Societies of HK and London; PMD, Harvard Business School. Silver Bauhinia Star (SBS). UK's Who's Who since 2002. He is also the Distinguished Keynote Speaker at the **24-ICIT**.

www.andrewleunginternationalconsultants.com/all/aboutme.html

Samuel K. M. HO ⁰⁰⁰⁰⁻⁰⁰⁰²⁻⁸¹⁰²⁻¹⁴⁸¹ -- BSc, MSc, PhD; Research Professor at the Gratia Christian College in the HKSAR. As an ex-Research Fellow in TQM at Cambridge U., and Guest Speaker in Lean Mgt. at Oxford U., he was also Visiting Professor in TQM at Coventry, Paisley, RMIT, Linnaeus, NUS, HKU, CUHK, PKU, THU & SYSU. During 2000-2005, he was the Chief Editor of the Journal of Service Management (Ranked Q1 with H-88 by **SJR**). As the Founder Chair of the Int. Conf. on ISO & TQM (**ICIT**), he is chairing the **24-ICIT** at GCC during 2025/2/6-8. samho@gratia.edu.hk -- *Corresponding Author*

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