

# Tokyo urged to embrace Beijing-led Belt and Road Initiative

Working with China will aid in tapping global markets, build East Asian community, says expert

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The Belt and Road Initiative will become the axis of future world development, and Japan must revitalize itself by participating in the BRI, collaborating with China in developing markets in third countries involved in the initiative, said Eiichi Shindo, director-general of the Belt and Road Initiative Japan Research Center.

Many Japanese scholars believe that despite the severe disruptions caused by COVID-19, the BRI has achieved significant results because transportation channels between China and Europe, and between China and Southeast Asia, had already been established, and preparations for promoting economic development had been made, said Shindo, who is also professor emeritus at the University of Tsukuba.

He noted that the BRI concept is, first and foremost, to boost connectivity. The building of railways and development of infrastructure have

helped to improve logistics. The initiative also aims at achieving sustainability.

"China has made sustainable development a focus of its economic growth, and this model has extended to countries involved in BRI. We can see that China will guide world economic development in this way.

"In the future, BRI will certainly have broader development, not only in Southeast Asia but also in Europe and connecting the entire world. The initiative will become the axis of future world development, and China will use this as a strategic approach to lead Asia," said Shindo during an exclusive interview with China Daily.

He emphasized that if the 20th century was dominated by the United States, the 21st century will be led by Asia, driven by China's increasing strength. In terms of social, economic, diplomatic, political and various other perspectives, Asian countries are becoming increasingly powerful, and Asian cultural influence on the world is also growing.



Eiichi Shindo

"I believe that after COVID-19, the world's development will shift from the era of the US to the era of Asia. Against the backdrop of changing times, Japan should break free from the trap of viewing China as a threat and establish a united East Asia," Shindo said.

"The Belt and Road Initiative provides us with a good inspiration for the concept of building an East Asian community. The initiative serves as the path to practically implement this concept. The cornerstone of BRI is the establishment of a strong market, promoting the development of logistics and the economy.

"I think Japan should build a sustainable society like China and not

just look within Japan but shift its focus from Asia to the world, exploring new markets and new fields. Japan must undergo this shift in mindset and revitalize itself by participating in BRI. Our research center aims to play a role in this regard," he said.

The Belt and Road Initiative Japan Research Center is a think tank established by intellectuals and journalists in Japan in 2017. Yasuo Fukuda, former prime minister of Japan, has served as its supreme advisor.

Some Japanese government officials, such as Naoya Imai from the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, have proposed a plan for Japan and China to collaborate in developing markets in third countries involved in the BRI.

For example, Japanese and Chinese companies could collaborate in developing an energy-efficient smart city in Thailand. Besides smart cities, there are many other areas where the two countries can develop new markets, Shindo said.

Also, Japan should join the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, which presents a great development opportunity for the nation, he said.

Some Western experts have accused China of pursuing "debt-trap diplomacy" by providing unsustainably large amounts of loans for infrastructure projects to exert influence over some Belt and Road participating countries, but Shindo said such criticisms fly in the face of facts. In Sri Lanka, for example, China's total investment there is less than Japan's.

Shindo said his research center will propose the establishment of a mechanism called the Beijing Club at an international symposium on the BRI.

"This mechanism, which is similar to the Paris Club, will be designed to prevent Asian countries from falling into the debt trap that some Western scholars have mentioned," he said.

Paris Club is an informal group of official creditors tasked with finding coordinated and sustainable solutions to the payment difficulties experienced by debtor countries.