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## On the Strategic Position of Agriculture in the Belt and Road Initiative: Postprint

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### Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] The 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China incorporated advancing “Belt and Road” construction into the Party Constitution, reflecting the Central Committee’s high-level attention to this initiative. As agriculture represents a crucial component of “Belt and Road” construction, accurately comprehending its role and strategic position holds significant meaning for realizing the “Belt and Road” strategic vision.

[Method/Process] Based on agriculture’s fundamental status and industrial linkage theory, this study employs qualitative analysis to investigate the strategic position of the agricultural industry in “Belt and Road” construction from perspectives including modern agricultural development, food security, and international cooperation.

[Results/Conclusions] This paper reaches three conclusions: First, developing “Belt and Road” agriculture serves as an essential guarantee for ensuring solid economic foundations and achieving food security across nations; therefore, strengthening agricultural production infrastructure capacity building in each country is imperative. Second, optimizing and strengthening the agricultural industry can systematically address deep-rooted contradictions in the socio-economic development of “Belt and Road” nations; thus, aligning national strategic plans and engineering projects, consolidating popular support and pooling efforts, and developing modern agriculture are necessary. Third, comprehensively enhancing international agricultural cooperation, promoting international integration of primary, secondary, and tertiary industries, and holistically elevating the economic modernization level of “Belt and Road” nations.

## Full Text

# The Strategic Position of Agriculture in the “Belt and Road” Construction

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## Abstract

**[Purpose/significance]** The 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China incorporated the advancement of “Belt and Road” construction into the Party Constitution, reflecting the Central Committee’ s high-level attention to this initiative. As agriculture constitutes a crucial component of the “Belt and Road” construction, accurately understanding its role and strategic position is of great significance for realizing the vision of this initiative. **[Method/process]** Based on agriculture’ s fundamental role and industry linkage theory, this paper employs qualitative analysis to examine the strategic position of the agricultural sector in the “Belt and Road” construction from the perspectives of modern agricultural development, food security, and international cooperation. **[Result/conclusion]** This paper draws three main conclusions. First, agricultural development under the “Belt and Road” framework is an essential guarantee for stabilizing national economic foundations and achieving food security, which necessitates strengthening agricultural production capacity building across participating countries. Second, optimizing and strengthening the agricultural industry can systematically address deep-seated contradictions in the socio-economic development of “Belt and Road” nations, requiring alignment of national strategic plans and project coordination to consolidate popular support and develop modern agriculture. Third, comprehensive enhancement of agricultural international cooperation and promotion of integrated development across primary, secondary, and tertiary industries will elevate the overall level of economic modernization in “Belt and Road” countries.

**Keywords:** the “Belt and Road” ; agricultural cooperation; strategic position

**Classification:** S9

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The 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China identified “Belt and Road” construction as a crucial measure for promoting China’ s new pattern of all-around opening-up and a key component of building a community with a shared future for mankind, incorporating it into the Party Constitution to demonstrate the Central Committee’ s profound commitment. Since the “Belt and Road” International Cooperation Forum in May 2017, this initiative has entered a new chapter. In this new era, advancing the “Belt and Road” strategy carries extraordinary significance and a major historical mission.

Throughout the history of the Silk Road, agricultural and agri-product trade exchanges have constituted both a primary component of the overland routes and an essential part of the maritime Silk Road. Across “Belt and Road” countries and regions—whether in relatively developed Central and Eastern European nations like Slovakia, Lithuania, Hungary, and Bulgaria, or in developing regions of East Asia, Central Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia—agriculture occupies a vitally important position in national economies. Leveraging agricultural cooperation under the “Belt and Road” framework to promote national economic development represents both urgent practical needs and profound global significance.

As a major agricultural country, China can accelerate its agricultural “going global” strategy and enhance its global agricultural competitiveness by strengthening cooperation with “Belt and Road” nations. To this end, in May 2017, the Ministry of Agriculture, together with the National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Commerce, and Ministry of Foreign Affairs, jointly issued the *Vision and Actions on Jointly Promoting Agricultural Cooperation in Building the Belt and Road*, which provides top-level design for the principles, mechanisms, framework, priorities, and future directions of agricultural cooperation [1]. Positioning agriculture as a key focus of “Belt and Road” cooperation is crucial for ensuring global food security, advancing modern agricultural development along the routes, and promoting global economic integration.

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## 1. Enhancing Agricultural Production Capacity: The Foundation for Economic Stability and Food Security in “Belt and Road” Countries

Implementing the agricultural strategy of the “Belt and Road” initiative is significant for maintaining regional and global food security, alleviating poverty, and safeguarding surrounding geopolitical and geo-economic security. In recent years, non-traditional factors such as climate change, resource shortages, environmental pollution, bioenergy development, and financial speculation have impacted agricultural production and increased uncertainty in international agricultural markets. Many “Belt and Road” countries face urgent challenges in achieving food security and nutrition and addressing hunger and poverty. Additionally, border areas between China and some neighboring countries suffer from prominent poverty and agricultural development issues that continuously threaten regional geopolitical and economic security. Therefore, promoting agricultural cooperation to jointly advance sustainable agricultural development and ensure food security is imperative.

### **1.1 Grain Output in “Belt and Road” Countries Directly Affects Global Food Security**

Food security is a global issue that all countries attach great importance to. In 2016, the total population of 64 countries along the “Belt and Road” reached 3.21 billion, accounting for 43.4% of the world’ s population. Fluctuations in food demand from nearly half of the global population directly impact worldwide food security levels [2]. Rice and wheat are the main grain crops in these countries, with Asia being the world’ s largest rice trading region, ranking first globally in production, consumption, and import-export volumes. In 2016, rice production reached 434.839 million tons, representing 89.9% of global output. East Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia are the primary rice export regions, with India, Thailand, Vietnam, and Pakistan being major exporters that accounted for 80.9% of global exports in 2016, underscoring the undeniable importance of grain issues.

### **1.2 Improving Agricultural Infrastructure Enhances Food Production Capacity**

Many “Belt and Road” countries possess abundant agricultural resources but exhibit significant variations in agricultural development levels, with numerous nations facing the dual challenges of insufficient arable land and low land productivity. In terms of cultivated land resources, 65 “Belt and Road” countries account for nearly half of the world’ s total, yet their per capita arable land is below the global average, with particularly acute shortages in the Middle East and North Africa. Regarding land productivity, Central and Eastern European countries like Slovakia, Slovenia, Romania, Poland, and Hungary demonstrate relatively high levels, while Russia, Mongolia, the five Central Asian nations, West Asia, and South Asia show lower yields. Most notably, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan achieve yields only one-quarter of China’ s level. Clearly, improving agricultural technology and land productivity is an urgent need for “Belt and Road” countries. Some nations may achieve basic grain self-sufficiency but still face significant security risks.

From a hardware perspective, many “Belt and Road” countries suffer from poor agricultural infrastructure, inadequate power supply, outdated and scarce water conservancy facilities, insufficient storage capacity, underdeveloped logistics systems, and harsh transportation conditions. Improving agricultural and rural infrastructure to enhance production conditions and environments can increase farmers’ resilience to climate change, natural disasters, and extreme weather, substantially reducing agricultural production risks.

From a software perspective, agricultural service systems in these countries generally lag behind, with blocked market information channels and low levels of agricultural mechanization services. Therefore, strengthening agricultural information service systems is essential. In agricultural project design, more agricultural stakeholders should be involved in project preparation and construction

phases to establish bottom-up databases covering agricultural policies, socio-economic and natural environments, crop varieties, production, circulation, and markets, providing farmers with adaptive and sustainable socialized services to optimize the software environment for the entire agricultural industry chain. As “Belt and Road” infrastructure improves and rural social service systems develop, agricultural production conditions and environments will be substantially upgraded, enhancing food production capacity and, through complementary agricultural resources and surplus-deficit adjustments, alleviating food security concerns across “Belt and Road” nations [3].

### **1.3 Tapping Agricultural Resource Advantages Eases China’ s Food Security Pressure**

China must “secure its rice bowl firmly in its own hands” by coordinating the utilization of both domestic and international resources and markets to maintain control over food security. Many “Belt and Road” countries possess advantageous agricultural production factors, and establishing strong cooperative relationships with these nations can enhance China’ s food security capabilities [4]. Central Asian and African regions feature abundant land and labor resources. By helping these countries improve agricultural production conditions, providing quality technical services, and strengthening training for agricultural practitioners and enterprise managers, their food production capacity can be increased. Based on demand and international relations, establishing international grain reserve facilities in suitable countries can help stabilize domestic supply-demand fluctuations and strengthen resilience against agricultural natural disasters. Additionally, nations with superior natural environments offer opportunities for agricultural research cooperation, including establishing breeding farms and conducting extensive scientific experiments to provide quality seeds for local production while generating fundamental data for China’ s agricultural research, achieving mutual benefits and win-win outcomes [4]. Simultaneously, leveraging respective technological and resource advantages is significant for promoting China’ s agricultural transformation, upgrading, and supply-side structural reform, while also holding strategic importance for optimizing agricultural structures in “Belt and Road” countries.

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## **2. Optimizing and Strengthening Agriculture: A Systematic Solution to Deep-Seated Socio-Economic Contradictions**

People-to-people bonds constitute the social foundation and one of the five major cooperation areas of “Belt and Road” construction. Only through such bonds can the initiative achieve long-term stability and success. The “Belt and Road” vision and actions must benefit people in participating countries to gain understanding and support, ensure security for international cooperation, and

establish a popular foundation for the initiative. Since most “Belt and Road” countries are agricultural nations with high proportions of agricultural GDP and large agricultural populations, promoting sustainable agricultural development along these routes to consolidate popular support is fundamental to ensuring successful implementation.

### **2.1 Agricultural Development Planning Aligns with National Strategies**

From conception to implementation, the “Belt and Road” strategy has been based on the development strategies and visions of participating countries, from Mongolia’s “Steppe Road” and Kazakhstan’s “Bright Road” to Turkey’s “Middle Corridor” initiative, and from Vietnam’s “Two Corridors and One Circle” and Brunei’s “2035 Vision” to Egypt’s “Suez Canal Corridor Economic Zone” plan, all reflecting the shared aspiration for integrated development. In recent years, China’s “Belt and Road” strategic planning has actively aligned with these national plans, unlocking further cooperation potential, as exemplified by the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, where agricultural cooperation holds an important position. Furthermore, “Belt and Road” agricultural planning interconnects with other sectors including industry, transportation, and services, creating an internal mechanism for sustainable development by using rural development as the foundation and agricultural development as the support, complementing other industries’ growth.

### **2.2 Safeguarding Farmers’ Rights and Interests**

Since the launch of “Belt and Road,” China has actively engaged in vocational education cooperation with participating countries, conducting extensive basic skills training for farmers and agricultural practitioners at both national and enterprise levels. This has improved farmer capabilities, promoted local agricultural sustainability, and addressed skills shortages. By improving agricultural and rural infrastructure, production conditions and environments have been upgraded, enhancing farmers’ resilience to climate change, natural disasters, and extreme weather while reducing production risks. When farmers’ interests and concerns are fully respected, they actively support and integrate into “Belt and Road” construction, transforming regional security situations and creating synergistic development momentum.

### **2.3 Agricultural Projects Enhance Mutual Trust Among Peoples**

The “Belt and Road” region encompasses the birthplaces of the world’s four ancient civilizations—ancient Egypt, Babylon, India, and China—where brilliant agricultural civilizations once flourished with highly developed farming systems and complementary resource advantages, establishing historical foundations for agricultural cooperation. Most “Belt and Road” countries are developing nations with diverse agricultural strengths and similar stages of modern agricultural

development, providing a realistic basis for cooperation [5]. Moreover, project development areas along the routes concentrate primarily in agricultural regions. Through implementing various projects, countries and regions can learn from each other in agricultural cooperation, exchanging agricultural civilizations and modern development experiences to strengthen people-to-people interactions and mutual understanding.

#### **2.4 Agricultural Development Contributes to Building a Community with a Shared Future**

On one hand, the concept of a community with a shared future requires balancing national interests with other countries' concerns, making food security, rural environmental degradation, resource shortages, rural population quality improvement, and integrated development across the three industries common challenges requiring collaborative solutions. On the other hand, the principle of extensive consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits must be followed. Given the diverse political systems, development levels, economic scales, and cultural differences among "Belt and Road" countries, using consultation for equality, joint contribution for cooperation, and shared benefits for mutual gains has become consensus among major agricultural nations. Steady agricultural development thus lays a solid popular foundation for deepening cooperation in other "Belt and Road" sectors.

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### **3. Agricultural International Cooperation: A Pathway to Comprehensive Economic Modernization**

"Belt and Road" strategic cooperation must be based on a framework of equal political and cultural recognition. As most participating countries are agricultural nations whose rural economies, cultures, and social systems represent important manifestations of their socio-political and economic structures, strengthening mutual understanding of rural cultures, social structures, and governance systems not only helps optimize the utilization of respective rural resources and reduce blind development but also serves as an important lever for China's participation in global governance and an entry point for achieving "policy coordination" with partner nations. Since agriculture forms the foundation and lifeline of national economies, all "Belt and Road" strategies are closely related to agricultural development. Therefore, establishing new forms of agricultural international cooperation can facilitate the smooth implementation of international integration strategies.

#### **3.1 Promoting Rural Economic and Cultural Integration**

Many "Belt and Road" countries possess rich rural cultural heritages, diverse rural governance systems, and varied social organizational structures. Through

cooperative development, optimizing resource utilization and strengthening cultural exchange and complementarity can enhance the efficient use of rural resources and reduce development blindness. For China, leveraging the language communication advantages of Confucius Institutes to build platforms for rural social and cultural exchange, adopting flexible organizational methods for cultural activities, strengthening mutual learning, and establishing transnational friendly townships can help consolidate “Belt and Road” development synergy from the perspective of rural cultural integration.

### **3.2 Advancing International Agricultural Industry Chain Integration**

“Belt and Road” construction will accelerate the internationalization of agricultural industry chains, optimizing the use of agricultural resources, expanding international cooperation in breeding research, improving agricultural processing technologies through market competition, and comprehensively enhancing regional trade rule-making capacity. With different factor resource advantages, “Belt and Road” countries will quicken the pace of agricultural resource optimization and industry chain internationalization [6]. Regarding control over international agricultural industry chains, mastery of key development links means market control. Therefore, countries should focus cooperation on breeding technologies, quality seeds, and core agricultural processing technologies to enhance core competitiveness. In this new round of international agricultural industry chain integration, “Belt and Road” nations must leverage their comparative advantages to upgrade agricultural core technologies, improve capacity for agricultural trade rule-making, and advance global agricultural integration.

### **3.3 Facilitating Broader Integration of Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary Industries**

Stable development and transformation of the agricultural industry are prerequisites for innovation in secondary and tertiary industries. The overall development of agriculture in “Belt and Road” countries requires improvements in rural infrastructure, transportation conditions, rural service capacity, and rural financial services innovation. After nearly four decades of reform and opening-up, Chinese agriculture possesses strong comparative advantages relative to other “Belt and Road” countries and can provide basic training in breeding, cultivation, and agricultural mechanization technologies [7]. China can also utilize its e-commerce advantages to support logistics system development in partner countries, enabling coordinated development through industry integration, fully utilizing the advantageous resources of “Belt and Road” nations to achieve mutually beneficial and win-win development goals.

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