
AI translation · View original & related papers at
chinaxiv.org/items/chinaxiv-201807.00020

The Positive Role and Impact of British Think Tanks in Belt and Road Initiative Cooperation: Post-Print

Authors: Zhang Xiao

Date: 2018-07-05T00:00:00+00:00

Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Since the Belt and Road Initiative was proposed, it has garnered extensive support and positive responses worldwide. The United Kingdom is among the earliest Western countries to pay attention to and support the Belt and Road Initiative. Through the positive publicity and guidance of British think tanks, various sectors of British society and even the entire European continent have developed an in-depth understanding of the Belt and Road Initiative. [Methods/Process] This paper provides a brief summary and analysis of how British think tanks have positively publicized and promoted the Belt and Road Initiative. [Results/Conclusion] It briefly elaborates on several implications for Chinese think tanks regarding how to cooperate with foreign think tanks and promote their own development under the Belt and Road Initiative backdrop, and proposes measures tailored to China's national conditions.

Full Text

The Positive Role of UK Think Tanks in Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative

Author: Zhang Xiao, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Beijing 100732

Email: z-xiaosky@163.com

Abstract

[Purpose/Significance] Since its proposal, the Belt and Road Initiative has garnered widespread global support and active participation. The United Kingdom stands as one of the earliest Western countries to express interest in and support for the initiative. Through positive promotion and guidance by UK

think tanks, British society and even the broader European continent have developed a deep understanding of the Belt and Road Initiative. **[Method/Process]** This paper provides a brief summary and analysis of how UK think tanks have positively promoted the Belt and Road Initiative. **[Result/Conclusion]** The paper outlines several implications for how Chinese think tanks can cooperate with foreign counterparts under the Belt and Road framework to promote their own development, and proposes recommended measures tailored to China's national conditions.

Keywords: Belt and Road Initiative; UK think tanks; positive role

Since its inception, the Belt and Road Initiative has received extensive international support and positive responses. Key milestones—including the establishment of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, President Xi Jinping's visits to Central and Eastern Europe, participation in BRICS summits and APEC meetings, and the creation of the Silk Road Fund—have effectively advanced bilateral and multilateral global cooperation. On November 17, 2016, the 71st UN General Assembly unanimously adopted a resolution encouraging countries to advance the Belt and Road Initiative. The Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, held in Beijing on May 14–15, 2017, showcased significant achievements and demonstrated stable forward momentum, indicating that this China-proposed global development vision is gradually becoming reality with positive responses from countries worldwide, forming a broad consensus on international cooperation. The concept of building a “community of shared interests” and a “community of shared future” is gaining recognition and consensus globally. The 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China further affirmed the strategic importance of the Belt and Road Initiative, incorporating it as a key component of economic development and comprehensive diplomatic arrangements, thereby injecting new momentum and vitality into the initiative's implementation [1].

Among the many countries responding to the Belt and Road Initiative, the UK is one of the earliest Western nations to show interest and support. Under the positive promotion of UK think tanks, British society has gained deeper understanding of the initiative, and the two countries have signed a series of strategically significant cooperation agreements, laying a positive foundation for future sustainable collaboration.

1. The Belt and Road Initiative Attracts Significant Attention from Foreign Think Tanks

1.1 The UK Government's Emphasis on the Belt and Road Initiative

The UK responded promptly to the Belt and Road Initiative, becoming the first Western country to announce its participation in the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank. This move demonstrated the UK government's strong support

for this China-proposed global development strategy and established the UK as a western anchor point for the initiative in practice. Research indicates that this development stems from timely, accurate, objective, and comprehensive assessments of the Belt and Road Initiative by authoritative UK think tanks, along with a series of in-depth research outputs. China has long been a focus of attention for British think tanks. In 2016, several prominent UK think tanks—including Chatham House, the Adam Smith Institute, the Centre for European Reform, and the Centre for Policy Studies—conducted research on the Belt and Road Initiative, publishing numerous papers and research reports. Among these, Chatham House and the Economist Intelligence Unit were particularly active [2].

Chatham House published over 20 commentaries on the Belt and Road Initiative, describing it as a massive project that would effectively promote trade and stimulate economic development not only for China but also for Asia and the entire world [3]. The Economist Intelligence Unit conducted comprehensive systematic assessments, releasing its latest research findings in April 2015—*Vision and Challenge: Risk Assessment Along the Belt and Road*—which generated strong reactions across EU member states and globally [4]. Due to these think tanks’ long-standing credibility and authority, the high-profile dissemination of their research findings has had a crucial positive impact on building global consensus and advancing the initiative in key areas and at critical junctures.

1.2 The Butterfly Effect: Resonance Across Europe

Following China’s proposal of the Belt and Road Initiative, the UK government quickly voiced its support, making a clear strategic choice through concrete actions. This demonstrates that the UK had well-defined decision-making foundations and precise risk assessments, in which the positive guidance of authoritative UK think tanks played a significant role. Despite varying research conclusions, political focuses, and perspectives, these think tanks’ objective interpretations of China’s “amity, sincerity, mutual benefit, and inclusiveness” and “win-win cooperation” principles have undoubtedly been constructive. This became the primary driving force behind the UK’s decision to join the Belt and Road Initiative.

The risk assessment report on the Belt and Road Initiative released by the Economist Intelligence Unit clearly shows that the report was not prepared solely for the UK but adopted a comprehensive, multi-dimensional perspective covering dozens of countries across the vast Eurasian-African region. Consequently, its conclusions carry greater scientific validity and persuasiveness, with unparalleled scope, breadth, and depth, serving to some extent as a universally applicable benchmark. This has made the report highly valuable for practical reference and for clarifying misunderstandings, earning significant attention from various countries. The positive influence of authoritative UK think tanks affected the UK’s top-level policy decisions, which in turn influenced France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Finland, Denmark, and subse-

quently the entire Eurasian continent. In the formation of this butterfly effect of Belt and Road recognition across Eurasia, UK think tanks indeed played a leading role, becoming the first “butterfly” to set the process in motion.

2. Positive Functions of UK Think Tanks

2.1 Facilitating National Decision-Making and Prompt Cooperative Responses

Authoritative UK think tanks are often referred to as the “shadow cabinet” and the “government’ s external brain” in policy consultation, maintaining relationships with decision-makers characterized by mutual information and resource sharing. Particularly noteworthy is that former party and government officials often hold key positions in these think tanks, forming what can be described as an “epistemic community” and “decision-making community” in British political and economic society. According to statistics, Chatham House has directly participated in 18.4% of parliamentary debates on China-related issues in recent years, accounting for approximately one-fifth of such discussions. In the field of China studies, former British parliamentary and cabinet officials comprise 82.1% of the think tank’ s experts in this area [5].

In recent years, several key UK think tanks have focused their efforts on the Belt and Road Initiative, publishing articles and presenting viewpoints, including some critical proposals that have significantly impacted high-level decision-making. The International Institute for Strategic Studies released reports such as *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy, China’ s Geoeconomic Strategy Shift*, and *How China Views Opportunities, Challenges, and Global Leadership*, comprehensively examining the transformation of China’ s and other countries’ roles and responsibilities in the global context of the Belt and Road Initiative [6]. Chatham House published reports including *The Belt and Road Initiative: China’ s 21st Century International Development Strategy*, *The 21st Century Silk Road*, and *Risk Management Under the Belt and Road*, offering detailed interpretations from diverse political, economic, and military perspectives while articulating clear positions [7]. The Economist Intelligence Unit focused on investment perspectives, presenting its latest research findings: the Belt and Road Initiative presents both risks and opportunities. This comprehensive conclusion, drawn from systematic analysis of China’ s economy and society by the entire UK think tank community, undoubtedly served as a positive force influencing and accelerating the UK government’ s decision to respond promptly to the Belt and Road Initiative [8].

2.2 Clarifying the Cooperative Vision and Guiding Public Opinion

Enabling the British public to understand China more accurately and comprehensively, and fostering a relatively clear and authentic perception of this ancient Eastern civilization with its five-thousand-year history, constitutes the social foundation for achieving people-to-people connectivity, cultural exchange,

and subsequently promoting policy, infrastructure, financial, and trade connectivity. This is essential for the effective implementation and fruitful outcomes of Belt and Road strategic cooperation between the two nations. In recent years, the UK government's positive posture and concrete actions regarding Belt and Road cooperation have demonstrated the inclination of British public opinion on this major national interest issue, indicating that the British people hold high expectations for the initiative's future. Among the many factors contributing to this positive development, the accurate interpretation and promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative by major UK think tanks, along with their correct guidance of social perception, have played a crucial role.

Facing society, helping the government explain policies to the public and build confidence while meeting public expectations has always been a core mission of UK think tanks. Due to their professionalism and consistent rigorous approach, these think tanks possess greater authority and credibility in the public eye. Multimedia promotion is a key characteristic of contemporary UK think tanks, utilizing forums, conferences, publications, news, and networks as important communication and dissemination channels. The viewpoints and positions of these authoritative UK think tanks on the Belt and Road Initiative have inevitably generated widespread influence among the British public. For instance, Chatham House, the Centre for Economic Policy Research, and LSE IDEAS have all provided comprehensive introductions to the Belt and Road Initiative through lengthy written reports. The International Institute for Strategic Studies has interpreted how the initiative affects economic relations between China and North Africa through graphical presentations.

2.3 Identifying Cooperation Directions and Analyzing Operational Risks

Comparative studies of the Belt and Road Initiative by major global think tanks reveal that risk assessment research represents a particular strength of UK think tanks. Among these, the Economist Intelligence Unit's report *Vision and Challenge: Risk Assessment Along the Belt and Road* stands out as particularly systematic and comprehensive, offering strong operational guidance. The study collected analytical samples from over 50 countries, providing broad reference value. In this research, the Economist Intelligence Unit conducted quantitative assessments and forecasts of various risks and potential threats worldwide. For operational risk assessment, the analytical model established ten independent risk criteria—including security, political stability, government effectiveness, legal and regulatory environment, and labor market conditions—comprising 66 subcategories such as armed conflict, terrorism, social unrest, orderly political succession, policy formulation, and exchange rate fluctuations. For national credit risk assessment, the unit provided two-year forecasts of the most important economic variables by continuously monitoring emerging and developed markets, evaluating six major categories including sovereign risk, currency risk, and banking risk through quantitative and qualitative indicators.

This high-precision analysis by UK think tanks offers strong relevance and practical reference value for governments, relevant organizations, and enterprises in formulating cooperation plans, selecting projects, and implementing operations [9].

3. Recommendations for Chinese Think Tanks

3.1 Prioritizing Belt and Road Research

Chinese professional think tanks should regard the Belt and Road Initiative as a research priority for a considerable period. They must seize this opportunity, fully leverage their advantages as the host country, take preemptive action, and secure the commanding heights by establishing relevant specialized think tank institutions, formulating work plans, and implementing them swiftly. National-level advanced research institutions such as the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences should utilize their talent and resource advantages to establish or reorganize Belt and Road Strategy Research Institutes, develop high-level plans, select major topics, and conduct strategic research at the national level. Key cities at the forefront of opening-up, international economic and financial centers, and major hubs for international exchanges and projects—such as Shanghai, Beijing, Shenzhen, Qingdao, and Hong Kong—should promptly establish corresponding research institutions to conduct targeted studies. All research should closely align with the national strategy of the Belt and Road Initiative, particularly focusing on risk assessments of national, policy, and project risks with scientific rigor to formulate preventive measures, reduce errors, minimize losses, increase benefits, and ensure smooth progress of the initiative’s strategic planning [10].

3.2 Establishing a Comprehensive Belt and Road Database

Although China has established numerous Belt and Road strategic databases, most suffer from poor domain specificity or incomplete information coverage. This necessitates the use of advanced technological means to extensively, comprehensively, and timely collect all global information regarding the Belt and Road strategy—including investments, project outcomes, and implementation progress—to obtain complete and accurate data accumulation and establish a genuine Belt and Road specialized “big database.” Some Chinese institutions have already achieved remarkable success in building specialized Belt and Road databases. For example, the Social Sciences Academic Press has developed the “Belt and Road Database—National Frontier Strategy Support Platform” [11] by leveraging the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences’ strong research capabilities and expert resources. The platform uses foundational databases, academic theory databases, and investment guide databases as its cornerstones, comprising eight major libraries—including consultation, theory, country, provincial, thematic, index, historical narrative, and expert databases—along with six specialized databases. By timely integrating, refining, and categorizing relevant information, the platform presents a framework that is both rigorous and accessible, representing a significant advantage worthy of emulation.

3.3 Strengthening Cooperation with Foreign Think Tanks, Particularly European and British Counterparts

First, China should focus on building a “national think tank team” by cultivating and establishing a group of national-level, high-level comprehensive, and authoritative specialized think tanks. In 2015, the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences took the lead in establishing the China-CEEC Think Tanks Network in Beijing, and in April 2017, launched the China-CEEC Institute in Hungary [12], becoming China’s first independently registered and operated research think tank in Europe and providing a beneficial platform for deepening “16+1” think tank exchanges and cooperation. Simultaneously, China should emphasize “open research,” strengthening exchanges and cooperation with advanced think tanks from the UK, Europe, and worldwide, and earnestly learning from their management experience and operational models. Additionally, China should enhance international engagement and improve its think tanks’ participation in and governance of international affairs. China should proactively establish and participate in “International Think Tank Alliances” and “International Think Tank Associations,” actively organize and attend international think tank conferences, and promote international exchanges and cooperative research through multiple channels and methods. This will enable rapid achievement of “interconnectivity,” “information sharing,” and “achievement sharing” with high-end think tanks from the UK, the US, and other countries. By selecting research topics at “world-class” standards, observing the world from a global perspective, and making China’s voice heard on the international academic stage, China can demonstrate its intellectual strength, influence the world with Chinese wisdom, and truly assume the responsibilities of a major think tank nation.

References

- [1] China attaches great importance to the Belt and Road Initiative and incorporates it into the Party Constitution [EB/OL]. [2017-12-02]. http://www.china.com.cn/news/2017-10/30/content_41813776.htm
- [2] Global Vision. Foreign think tanks on the Belt and Road Initiative [EB/OL]. [2017-05-01]. http://www.globalview.cn/html/global/info_7661.html.
- [3] Chatham House. China’s foreign policy as domestic policy: The case of ‘one belt, one road’ [EB/OL]. [2017-05-01]. <http://www.chathamhouse.org>.
- [4] The Economist. Economist Intelligence Unit [EB/OL]. [2017-05-03]. www.eiu.com.
- [5] Xin Hua, Yang Haifeng. The influence mechanism of British think tanks on UK decision-making toward China: A case study of Chatham House [J]. Foreign Affairs Review: Journal of China Foreign Affairs University, 2014(4): 121-138.
- [6] The International Institute for Strategic Studies [EB/OL]. [2017-05-03]. www.iiss.org
- [7] Chatham House. Chatham House [EB/OL]. [2017-05-01]. <http://www.chathamhouse.org>.
- [8] Yi Ou. Three key phrases used by top global think tanks to describe the Belt

and Road Initiative [EB/OL]. [2017-05-01]. http://www.china.com.cn/opinion/think/2016-07/15/content_38886768.htm

[9] The Economist. Vision and Challenge: Risk Assessment Along the Belt and Road [EB/OL]. [2017-05-03]. www.eiu.com.

[10] Zhang Chunhai. Chinese Academy of Social Sciences 集中发布 Belt and Road research results [EB/OL]. [2017-05-04]. http://www.cssn.cn/zx/bwyc/201506/t20150625_2048763.shtml.

[11] Digital Publishing Branch. Introduction to the Belt and Road Database [EB/OL]. [2017-05-03]. <http://www.ssap.com.cn/c/2016-08-15/1034365.shtml>.

[12] China-CEEC Think Tanks Exchange and Cooperation Network [EB/OL]. [2017-05-03]. <http://16plus1-thinktank.com//index.html>.

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

Source: ChinaXiv – Machine translation. Verify with original.