

BELT AND ROAD NATIONS REACH CONSENSUS

124 countries agree to work together to realise 'project of the century'



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BEIJING

THE second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation (BRF) came to a close yesterday with participating countries reaching a consensus to push for the realisation of what has been called "the project of the century".

This outcome is especially important for Beijing as the forum had been a means to convince the international community of its intentions and the success of the project.

BRF sought to solidify cooperation among Belt and Road participant countries, now 124 strong, as the ambitious scheme reaches its sixth year while facing numerous setbacks and international suspicion.

At the end of a Leader's Roundtable yesterday at the Yanqi Lake International Conference Centre, a joint communique was issued to outline the roadmap forward for member countries and the political consensus reached.

All participants agreed that the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) presented an opportunity for prosperity and would work together to strengthen mechanisms of cooperation.

Chinese President Xi Jinping concluded that the second BRF

had been more substantive than the first in 2017.

"All interested parties are welcome to join us."

Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad attended the roundtable with 36 other world leaders, senior representatives from countries such as the United Kingdom and Japan, as well as United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and International Monetary Fund managing director Christine Lagarde.

There is participation from more heads of government this year as only 29 attended the first BRF.

Dr Mahathir had expressed his thoughts both at the roundtable and during the opening of the forum on Friday.

At the roundtable, he said Malaysia believed that the BRI would make the world more peaceful and connected, as well as reduce the gap between the rich and poor.

He stressed, however, that even as countries became more connected, a single value system must not be imposed on the world as many countries were not prepared for it.

"We need to tolerate different cultures and values."

As the leader of a country that is central to the BRI, Dr Mahathir's views were keenly anticipated as he was attending the forum immediately after successfully renegotiating the centrepiece of China's infrastructure push — the East Coast Rail Link (ECRL) project.

While supportive of BRI, Dr Mahathir, in his statements at the forum, showed he was more willing than other leaders to push for an equal relationship.

He spoke up on behalf of poor littoral states against "the great nations of the East and West"



when invited to give a speech during BRF's opening.

Less-developed nations were decidedly not as inclined to speak up.

Dr Mahathir's voice is an important one for member countries to hear after setting a benchmark on how they can approach China on BRI projects.

His confident endorsement of BRI, on the other hand, is a boost for China, which has refuted claims that the ambitious scheme creates debt traps for developing countries.

Xi has taken steps to allay concerns over the initiative in his remarks throughout the forum.

He pledged transparency and zero tolerance for corruption, and promised to keep Belt and Road open, clean and green.

BRI is about high quality and common development, he stressed.

Analysts say the issues discussed at this BRF is an indication that the initiative has entered a second phase where the concerns of other countries are taken into account.

Earlier, the BRI may have been considered a fantastical notion without a formal framework, but now that it has taken off, the focus has rightly shifted to upgrading, and ensuring sustainability and equality.

It is promising that China's leadership has heard the criticisms and appears intent on addressing them.

This evolution can help revive the initiative's momentum after the number of new projects plunged last year.

The next most important step is action.

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