



The Sustainable Development Goals

A Playbook for Reengagement

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THE ISSUE

International development can no longer avoid the dynamics of great power politics playing out between the United States and China. China's significant new investments across the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) illustrate a rhetorical desire to reset the rules of development. The United States should strategically re-engage with the goals to uphold the values of transparency, inclusion, and accountability and ensure the framework adapts to the Covid-19 pandemic.

KEY POINTS

- While active in creating the SDGs and Agenda 2030—the predominant global development order—the **U.S. government has assumed a largely agnostic role in the framework over the past four years.**
- **During this period, China has been particularly active in the development sphere** as part of its larger efforts to integrate the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) into the wider development architecture, with mixed local-level results.
- **The U.S. government should adopt a strategic approach to the SDGs** to reinforce the neutrality of the multilateral development order, adapt it to Covid-19-era challenges, and invest in sector-specific goals that align with the Biden development policy agenda.

INTRODUCTION

In July 2021, UN member states gathered to reflect on progress toward Agenda 2030 and the SDGs. The UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) met in 2021 for the **sixth time** since **the passage** of the goals. The context could not have been more different than when it last met two years ago; in 2021, international delegations joined the meeting virtually from every corner of the world because of the global pandemic. The meeting's stated **purpose** was to support a resilient recovery from Covid-19 in a way that promotes the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. While Agenda 2030 may not have foreseen the global

pandemic, it will certainly be judged by its responsiveness to Covid-19's impact on development.

In preparing their voluntary national reviews (VNRs) of their progress toward achieving the SDGs, member states **were asked** to reflect on the development impacts of Covid-19 and how to utilize the crisis to get back on track toward the goals. Due to the public nature of VNRs, they can be powerful tools to draw attention to a country's commitment to the SDGs and to assert leadership. During the HLPF, the UN Secretariat **committed itself** to helping identify any “synergies and trade offs [to] meet multiple objectives in a coherent and integrated manner,” supporting a cross-sector development response to

Covid-19. This conversation is the first step in moving the SDGs from a static framework for shared values among member states toward a possible lens for a fair recovery that directly addresses the pandemic's short- and long-term impacts on sustainable development.

WHAT ARE THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS?

The 193 UN member states unanimously adopted the SDGs in September 2015 as a guiding framework to align national-level development strategies within an interconnected global system. At the core of the framework are 17 goals for various development issue areas, ranging from eradicating poverty to ensuring sustainable use of ocean resources. To support implementation and the creation of a global body of knowledge, each goal has specific **sub-targets and indicators**. The broad scope and international consensus behind the goals has helped contribute to their rise as a rallying point. While the goals have had their **critics**, including those who believe that the unwieldy targets make measurement difficult, they represent the best potential opportunity to “**build back better**” after the pandemic, and the SDGs will likely maintain—if not grow—their relevance in multilateral development policy.

The **2021 VNR** by China tells the story of its domestic commitments to address poverty eradication and food insecurity, as well as green its own economy. The report documents China's overseas development investments in SDGs through South-South cooperation, in accordance with its **2021 white paper on development**. The VNR lays out an ambitious target of aligning the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and SDGs to lift “7.6 million people out of extreme poverty and 36 million out of moderate poverty” in BRI recipient countries. This language is symbolic of China's larger interest in the SDG framework. Yet despite such growing expressions of support, China's interest does not extend to other international **agreements and systems** that are at the foundation of the goals, such as financing, accountability, and transparency.

While the United States did not submit a VNR in 2021, during the HLPF proceedings U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) administrator Samantha Power **highlighted** the main challenges to reaching the goals worldwide: the Covid-19 pandemic; corruption associated

with poor governance, weak rule of law, and autocratic regimes; and the climate crisis. Her comments illustrate a potential shift toward greater U.S. action on the goals, both domestically and internationally. Led by the Obama administration and key diplomatic representatives to the United Nations, the United States played an extremely active role in drafting and negotiating the SDGs. The Trump administration took a more hands-off approach—considering the SDGs on the margins of internal policy processes such as the Journey to Self-Reliance but not engaging with them in an external-facing manner—due to overarching skepticism toward **the United Nations** and multilateral engagement.

The United States currently faces a critical juncture in supporting the goals as the predominant multilateral development platform. As part of its prioritization of multilateralism, the National Security Council (NSC) is currently considering where and how it should engage on the goals. Because the SDGs form one of the most referenced and comprehensive international development frameworks, centering the wide range of ongoing international efforts around them could help demonstrate the United States' commitment to multilateralism while making use of a pre-existing platform for pursuing partnerships. **The U.S. strategy for engagement with the SDG framework should rely on understanding how China has engaged with it (both rhetorically and practically) and where the Biden-Harris administration has a comparative advantage in pursuing development priorities (notably in anti-corruption, governance, health, education, and climate).** Based on that analysis—and on a broader understanding of the ecosystem in which the goals operate, including multilateral and bilateral partnerships—the U.S. government can exert leadership to enhance the SDGs' inclusion, neutrality, accountability, and responsiveness to the Covid-19 pandemic.

THE ALTERNATIVE MODEL

China has made supporting the SDG framework central to its ambitious **development strategy** effort and implementation of BRI projects. China's February 2021 white paper on development notably **seeks to link the BRI** to Agenda 2030's poverty-reduction targets, part of a trend that UN Secretary-General António Guterres **praised** at the first Belt and Road Forum in 2017. In 2016, China established a UN Peace and Development Trust Fund (UNPDF)—consisting of **a 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Sub-Fund** and a second, peacebuilding fund

run by the Office of the Secretary-General—to support the Department of Economic and Social Assessment (DESA), the UN agency that manages the goals. China pledged \$200 million to the fund over a 10-year period, a remarkable and novel move that reflects its desire to show larger alignment with the UN system as it tries to validate its development approach in the eyes of the international community.

In 2018, DESA piloted the three-year **BRI-SDGs Project**, selecting 14 focus countries in which to support development. Thirteen of these countries (all but Myanmar) have submitted final reports, which provide an interesting window into national-level actions that China sees as supporting progress toward the SDGs. Because China often does not feed into larger development reporting systems, country-level information can be scarce. By contrast, these reports detail national context, BRI-SDG policy objectives, and individual BRI projects and transactions in each country. They are meant to *directly* account for BRI commitments toward country-identified SDG objectives.

The number of BRI projects in each country ranged from 5 in Bangladesh to 81 in **Cambodia** (Figure 1). The reports tell a mixed story of these projects' support for the SDGs. The vast majority of the projects were in infrastructure, followed by the digital and energy sectors. For example, 54 percent of all BRI spending in **Cambodia** and 47 percent of spending in **Laos** was on infrastructure. In some countries, such as **Kyrgyzstan**, all of the projects were in infrastructure. As a result, many country-level SDG priorities remain unaddressed. For example, **Mongolia's** own Green Development Policy prioritizes such issues as poverty reduction, good governance, environmental sustainability, and education access, but 13 of the 32 BRI projects focused on infrastructure and transportation in a manner beneficial directly to China's business interests. While some may argue that infrastructure investments directly contribute to other national goals, the connection is not always sound, especially when projects are retrofitted to the context as opposed to developed in cooperation with the host government. For example, the **Cambodia** report flags limited consultation and planning between BRI stakeholders and national governments. The report flags the use of Chinese state-owned enterprises that skirt local laws on employment, expedite deforestation, and undercut road safety—which in turn make reaching the country's goals less likely.

The **Cambodia** report cites a disconnect between BRI-funded transportation infrastructure and local goals on

Figure 1: SDG-BRI Projects by Country

COUNTRY	NUMBER OF BRI PROJECTS
Azerbaijan	Not stated
Bangladesh	5
Cambodia	81
Czech Republic	6
Georgia	Not stated
Kazakhstan	51
Kyrgyzstan	24
Lao PDR	15
Mongolia	32
Myanmar	6
Romania	13
Serbia	15-20
Sri Lanka	10
Thailand	6

Source: "BRI-SDGs Project Countries," UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, <https://www.brisdgs.org/project-countries>.

poverty reduction due to increased reliance on Chinese state-owned enterprises—which skirt rules for local employment, expedite deforestation, and undercut road safety. The **Bangladesh** report points to the \$961 million the BRI has invested in coal-based power, calling it a direct impediment to the country's ambitious goals on green energy (SDG 7) and climate (SDG 13). The **Laos** report flags rising levels of sexually-transmitted diseases due to increased foreign workers and the high levels of road accidents due to construction as direct impediments to the country's ambitious health goals (SDG 3). **New analysis** aggregating the 14 country level reports suggested that BRI-SDG country governments use careful risk analysis and policy choices to "manage environmental, social, reputational, sustainability and other risks associated with BRI-related activities."

Within the reports, there is little support for local health (SDG 3) and education (SDG 4) systems except in **Cambodia**, where the BRI-SDGs Project oversaw the construction of 26 high schools and conducted three teacher training sessions, and in **Laos**, where it funded 10 new schools. The project's other education commitments

are focused on scholarship programs or people-to-people exchanges as opposed to improving in-country educational access or quality. For example, [Sri Lanka's report](#) documented that China provided 62 percent of all foreign development training programs for Sri Lankan officials and supported around 1,000 exchanges in 2018. Similarly, health projects receive limited attention, including in [Kazakhstan](#) and [Mongolia](#), where the BRI-SDGs Project made no investments in health-related priorities.

There are also limited mentions of support for good governance (SDG 16), except in the [Laos](#) country report, which advocates enhancing local labor rights. It is not surprising that the BRI has overlooked critical investments in governance and justice given that its low-cost, high-debt projects often show overt preference to the political elite, worsening social divides and sowing distrust among the local population. For example, a series of [anti-China protests](#) broke out in Kazakhstan in 2019 in response to the construction of Chinese factories. In [nearby Uzbekistan](#), public trust in China's ability to bring jobs is dropping while concern about debt and land purchases is increasing.

BRI infrastructure (SDG 9) projects appear to be preexisting and not aligned with country-level standards and regulations. While SDG 9 does not include standards for quality infrastructure, it is premised on the need to conduct environmental, social, and governance (ESG) assessments before launching a new venture. Many BRI projects skip this step, raising concerns that they operate “[without regard to long-run operational costs or longevity](#),” including by reinforcing corruption at the expense of progress toward the SDGs. For example, the [Sri Lanka](#) report flagged the BRI's Hambantota Port Development Project as having the “potential to contribute to” SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth), SDG 9 (industry, innovation, and infrastructure), SDG 11 (sustainable cities and communities), and SDG 17 (partnerships for the goals). Yet, this project is widely [controversial](#), given that it sent the Sri Lankan government into massive debt and pushed it to lease the port and its surrounding land to China for 99 years.

The same is true for the energy sector. The [Kazakhstan](#) report mentions the modernization of the Shymkent refinery, for which the BRI provided \$1.8 billion. However, the project has been [cited](#) by environmental watchdog groups for “[water contamination, damage to ecosystems and mercury pollution](#),” running directly counter to the country's green energy and climate goals. [Bangladesh's report](#) cites its urgent environment and climate goals while

noting that BRI investments in the country have spent \$961 million on projects involving coal. And although [Sri Lanka's national report](#) outlines robust investments in green development, the documented BRI projects mostly helped build ports and water management systems, which in many cases have harmed the local environment, including [fisheries](#).

Analysis of the BRI-SDG country-level reports makes clear that the goals only nominally align with BRI activities, which provide little support for countries' SDG objectives. Support that is provided, usually to infrastructure projects, often does not comply with a given country's stated objectives on specific SDGs, much less international standards for sector implementation. BRI projects appear to be retrofitted to coopt the goal's “brand,” while important country-level objectives on education, peace, and security, and the environment are overshadowed or undercut by the externalities associated with BRI transactions.

PRIORITY GOALS

The ad hoc nature of BRI implementation in support of the SDGs should concern U.S. policymakers, who have a vested interest in upholding the goals as the prevailing global development framework. To ensure the SDGs' neutrality and accountability—while also advancing U.S. development priorities—the Biden-Harris administration should apply its emergent [cooperate, compete, and confront](#) model to this challenge. Specifically, in areas where the BRI has not met its nominal commitments to furthering progress on specific goals (e.g., health, education, climate, and peace and security), the United States should *compete* with China, making asymmetrical, value-added investments in core sectors of interest. This means working with friends and allies to double down on long-standing programs and increasing support for positivist, locally driven alternatives in these development areas. In sectors where the BRI has invested in the SDGs, particularly green energy, the United States should *cooperate* with China, pushing it to expand financing and drive local innovation. Finally, where BRI infrastructure projects undercut larger development objectives, the United States should be sure to *confront* China—not to be adversarial but to bring China in line with long-standing good-donor practices.

Starting with the “competition” approach, the United States should work to make positivist, asymmetrical investments where the BRI has ignored development. For example, China's significant new [funding](#) for education (SDG 4) has skewed toward hosting scholarship exchanges

Figure 2: The SDGs: Where to Compete, Cooperate, and Contest

COMPETE SDGs on Health (2), Education (4), Climate (7), Governance (16)	COOPERATE SDGs on Green Energy (5)	CONFRONT SDGs on Infrastructure (9)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Offer positivist, credible alternatives ▪ Build local mechanisms to push back on misaligned projects ▪ Reinforce partnerships on shared objectives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Leverage financing ▪ Enhance donor and governance standards ▪ Open new value chains 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Create new international accountability systems ▪ Build coalitions on infrastructure accountability ▪ Uphold local frameworks for infrastructure priorities

Source: Author's own analysis from external sources.

and developing online-learning platforms using **Huawei technology**. This gives the United States an opportunity to revisit strategic investments not just in scholarships and exchanges but also in training and workforce programs, national-level university systems, and youth empowerment programs. This should include long-term initiatives such as the flagship **Fulbright Scholar Program** and the **International Visitor Leadership Program** (IVLP). The **Joint Statement of Principles in Support of International Education**, released by the Departments of State and Education in July 2021, is a great first step to devoting greater resources to such educational programs, which have been a mainstay of the international development architecture for decades. Policymakers should use those resources to reinforce SDG 4 objectives for access to high-quality, equitable education and training programs.

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SDG 16 (peace, justice, and strong institutions) is another area where the United States can offer an alternative model for advancing development goals. CSIS **analysis** has found remarkable alignment between the SDG framework's core governance goals and the Biden-Harris administration's objectives, specifically on addressing fragility, injustice,

and corruption. **SDG 16** calls for inclusive governance and equitable access to justice and lays out specific demands for member states to combat all forms of corruption. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has a **compendium** on how institutions can use existing open data to prevent, detect, investigate, prosecute, and reduce instances of corruption—a document that could guide the United States in advancing these objectives. When it comes to corruption in particular, the stakes are higher than ever: more than **\$21 trillion** has been committed to fighting Covid-19 as of June 2021, much of it under emergency measures that bypass bureaucratic hurdles and expedite the flow of funds. The speed and scale of this spending has created **new opportunities** for state-level corruption, ranging from the mundane, such as demanding bribes for medical services, to more systemic forms of financial malfeasance, shady procurement practices, and opaque spending.

There are also opportunities to cooperate with China, specifically on SDG 7 (affordable and clean energy). The United States is already working to empower new clean energy supply chains, including pooling resources to support rare-mineral and extractive industries that will be necessary for meeting future demand. To build a cooperative relationship with China, the United States should push for the BRI to enhance countries' green energy supply chains and give them access to new options—notably solar power and battery storage. Addressing climate change is a space where the United States and China might work together, including through efforts to work together on new green energy technologies and supply chains (SDG 7). If successful, opening supply chains in new markets might alleviate dependence on Chinese green energy supply chains, many of which raise serious human rights **concerns**.

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Development agencies should urgently work toward addressing climate change (SDG 13), including by providing affordable and clean energy (SDG 7). Research from Tufts University found that despite evolving international commitments and pressure from lending institutions, BRI recipient countries **largely determine** their own environmental policies for development projects. This disparity presents an opportunity to leverage **SDG 13 frameworks**—including the National Development Commitments (NDCs) and National Adaptation Plans (NAPs)—to build local capacity in support of national strategy and policy approaches, as well as to maintain these standards in the face of low-cost options that adhere neither to these commitments nor international emissions standards. Implementing these plans will offer an alternative to the potentially negative environmental outcomes of large-scale BRI transactions.

Finally, the U.S. government will need to confront China in order to bolster international standards and ensure BRI-funded infrastructure is accountable to local standards as well. CSIS **analysis** of **SDG 9** found that the goal provides an opportunity to further join forces with allies, such as Japan and Australia, who have led in the quality infrastructure space. Although recent efforts by the Group of Seven (**G7**) and Group of Twenty (**G20**) to set global quality infrastructure standards have made progress, member states are struggling to align, implement, and catalyze a coordinated response to fill the **ever-growing infrastructure financing gap**. This is where SDG 9 can offer a broader framework to generate political momentum around infrastructure and recenter the global conversation on local implementation.

The G7's newly announced Build Back Better World (B3W) initiative might harness collective action under the SDG 9 umbrella through concerted alignment with SDG indicators on quality infrastructure as well as national-level infrastructure accountability through VNRs. Initial steps, such as the establishment of the OECD Executive Consultation Group, have led the OECD to **articulate a shared vision** for

quality infrastructure around the Trump administration's **Blue Dot Network**, a powerful certification-setting coalition for clean infrastructure. Practical investments—in personnel, resources, and the capacity for development practitioners to support this effort across contexts—will need to follow.

STRATEGY SETTING

To be successful, the cooperate, compete, and confront approach would need to be clearly articulated by the U.S. government as part of a wider foreign policy and national security strategy that identifies the SDGs by name. The forthcoming National Security Strategy provides an excellent opportunity to incorporate both core goals and relationships with key UN agencies responsible for their implementation. This would also require partnerships with domestic agencies responsible for SDG integration at home. The United States might consider an interagency strategy for SDG implementation that links domestic and international objectives, as **Denmark** and **Canada** have done. This process could be led by the NSC and Domestic Policy Council.

Based on that strategic articulation, development agencies could work to mainstream sector-specific SDGs into their planning processes, such as through the **USAID's Policy Framework**, creating an umbrella for sector-focused integration. To bolster SDG buy-in, updated development policies—such as a new **anti-corruption strategy** or the forthcoming **USAID Climate Strategy**—could reference not only applicable goals but also specific indicators and country-level activities. This would require continued advocacy for long-term funding streams, such as through the Countering Chinese Influence Fund (CCIF), which finances a range of governance, political, and economic tools in response to China's influence.

Additionally, the United States should reinvest in core international organizations responsible for implementing specific SDGs and exert its influence over these organizations' important leadership elections, appointments, and policy processes. This may include, for example, **rejoining** the UN Economic, Social, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the lead UN agency on SDG 4 (quality education). As the only UN agency with a mandate to promote secondary schooling, UNESCO is a principal organizer of the educational response to Covid-19, including through online platforms such as their **Futures of Education** commission. The UN Development Programme (UNDP) and UN Environment Programme (UNEP), of which the United States is an active member, offer important entry points for renewed influence in the climate sector (SDG 13), such as through the new UNDP

Climate Promise and the UNEP **Global Support Program on Adaptation**. While China has also been active within UNEP, setting up the BRI **International Green Development Coalition** as an umbrella effort, its lack of follow-through opens space for the United States to lead.

The U.S. government should also help the various UN agencies that work to collect data on the SDGs, ensuring that privacy and protection are of the highest priority. In 2020, China announced its intent to host a UN Global Geospatial Knowledge and Innovation Center and a UN Humanitarian Response Depot (UNHRD) hub. Locating such institutes in China might raise concerns among privacy rights advocates who have documented challenges associated with China's data-collection efforts in the developing world—including the Myanmar military junta's use of Chinese **surveillance technology during protests in February 2021**. This is particularly concerning in the humanitarian space, where the lack of norms and standards for data protection have already resulted in data **breaches**.

The U.S. government may also consider making targeted investments in key UN agencies to improve measurement, elevate targets, and help align U.S.-collected data with the framework. For example, USAID **data** can be tagged against the SDG targets, creating a new line of reporting without wasting resources on fully recreating monitoring systems. Finally, this effort should include U.S. priorities for UN reform that improve operational efficiency around the SDGs while also enhancing member state accountability. This will reinforce the shared platform's neutrality.

Domestic agencies may consider offering up data to produce a VNR that **tells Americans' own story**, which—as Administrator Power's HLPF **remarks** highlighted—is evolving and incomplete with respect to national development and governance. The United States has yet to submit a country report, joining a group of only **17 of 193 UN member states**. Thus, it is time for to take advantage of the VNR mechanism to **humbly** re-engage by recognizing distinct **deficits at home** while also pushing for change abroad. While the United States does not have a pre-existing VNR process, it can draw upon **guidance from the United Nations** or even build upon the voluntary local reviews submitted by major cities such as **New York City, Los Angeles, Pittsburgh, and Honolulu**. These efforts provide a natural bridge between a lofty international framework and the impact on Americans' everyday life. Leveraging the SDGs is a critical opportunity to work toward a **“foreign policy for the middle class”** to contribute to improving domestic conditions.

NEXT STEPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Biden-Harris administration's Interim **National Security Strategic Guidance** tasked policymakers to “ensure that America, not China, sets the international agenda, working alongside others to shape new global norms and agreements that advance our interests and reflect our values.” The administration's return to U.S. leadership in the international organization space and renewed prioritization of multilateralism are important. Yet this reorientation needs to be accompanied by pragmatic investments in those multilateral frameworks which offer highly efficient, effective, and appropriate opportunities to advance U.S. standards. In the development space, the United States should hold China accountable to its commitments to align infrastructure and energy projects with international standards and offer a credible alternative where BRI projects fail to reinforce critical goals related to education, climate, and peace and security, among others.

Based on current U.S. international and domestic objectives, this will not only require being selective among international frameworks but also addressing the impact of competitors' attempts to coopt those frameworks for their own interests. When examining Agenda 2030 and the SDGs, the U.S. government should prioritize those goals that converge with U.S. development priorities, offer an opportunity to tell the United States' domestic story, and ensure that developing countries are clear-eyed about the scope, impact, and scale of China's investments within their borders. The deep gap between China's in-country SDG support and its broad platitudes of support for the framework will only be reconciled by mobilizing development and private sector resources to offer a positive alternative vision focused on plurality and democracy.

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The following are recommendations for advancing U.S. domestic and international objectives through an SDG prioritization grounded in multilateral and bilateral partnerships in support of a positivist world order.

U.S. GOVERNMENT

- Draft a sector-driven roadmap—created by the NSC’s development directorate, working alongside the multilateral team—that lays out priority goals (such as education, health, peace and security, and climate) and key milestones, identifying critical bilateral and multilateral partners with whom to engage regarding each goal.
- Create a partnership between the NSC and the National Economic Council to undertake a voluntary national review (VNR) that closely links international policy priorities with domestic progress on the goals.
- Build USAID capacity and mechanisms to improve tracking of the in-country impacts of BRI projects to hold their implementation accountable to China’s rhetorical commitments.
- Identify several high-priority SDGs to integrate into the Department of State’s Joint Strategic Plan and USAID’s Policy Framework, thereby also providing guidance for further sector-integration and mission-planning processes.
- Create coalitions of interagency partners to use statements of support to hold China accountable for BRI externalities that impact development and progress toward the goals.

UNITED NATIONS

- Undertake an audit of BRI-SDG programming to ensure outcomes closely match project goals, and take action where discrepancies exist.
- Encourage country VNRs to report on limitations that obstruct progress toward the goals, such as rising debt burdens and poorly designed infrastructure projects.
- Create standards for member states’ co-branding of UN projects, ensuring that they reflect best practices by all member states.

CIVIL SOCIETY

- Raise the SDGs’ profile at important international meetings, including high-level forums and processes.
- Continue to push for transparent and open processes around SDG investments and reporting.
- Clarify expectations of donors supporting specific goals to ensure that inputs and financing reinforce best practices and are not solely rhetorical commitments.
- Continue to monitor the social, economic, and environmental outcomes of BRI projects in local contexts, ensuring a full and accurate picture of their impact.
- Push for transparency, inclusion, and accountability among SDG goals, outcomes, and targets while adapting the framework to respond to post-Covid-19 development. ■

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