

# Awareness and Impact of Belt and Road Construction in the Philippines

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**Abstract:** *The Philippines is an important partner in China's "One Belt, One Road" initiative. Since President Rodrigo Duterte took office in 2016, China-Philippines relations have improved and the two countries have started to actively cooperate. To further implement the Belt and Road Initiative, it is important to understand the perceptions and attitudes of Filipino communities toward the Belt and Road. In this paper, I will analyze the impact of the Belt and Road Initiative on the construction of the Belt and Road by sorting out the attitudes and perceptions of various sectors of Philippine society. This will help to understand the effectiveness, problems and challenges of China's Belt and Road construction in the Philippines, which is of some significance for China and Southeast Asian countries to steadily promote the Belt and Road construction.*

**Keywords:** *Belt and Road construction; perceptions of Filipino communities; domestic perception*

## 1. Introduction

In 2013, China proposed to build the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road" cooperation initiative, which has received great attention from the international community. Southeast Asia is a key area of China's Belt and Road Initiative. In 2016, after President Rodrigo Duterte took office, China-Philippines relations entered a "honeymoon period" and began to actively cooperate. In 2018, the Philippines officially became a Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) partner country. 2023 will be the 10th anniversary of the Belt and Road Initiative, and earlier this year, the current Philippine President Marcos renewed the Belt and Road cooperation document with China during his visit to China. What is the Philippine community's perception of China's Belt and Road Initiative during the China-Philippines cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative? How has it affected the construction of the Belt and Road Initiative? This article will sort out the attitudes and perceptions of various sectors of Philippine society towards the Belt and Road Initiative, and analyze what impact it has had on the construction of the Belt and Road.

## 2. The Philippines' perception of the Belt and Road Initiative

According to the Belt and Road Infrastructure Development Index, the Philippines ranked second among Belt and Road countries in 2022 at 129, up one position from the previous year. Among ASEAN countries, the Philippines has a large gap in transport infrastructure and strong growth in energy and utilities. This shows that China's Belt and Road Initiative has great development prospects in the Philippines. The implementation and promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative require a positive response from local countries, so it is important to understand the awareness of the initiative among Filipinos.

### 2.1. Government level

The Philippines has poor infrastructure compared to other ASEAN members. During his term, Aquino III advocated the use of public-private partnership (PPP) projects to attract private investment and improve infrastructure. However, for a variety of reasons, many mature PPP projects did not start construction during the Aquino administration. Although the market for China-Philippines economic cooperation was promising, when China proposed the Belt and Road Initiative, Sino-Philippine relations cooled sharply over the South China Sea issue, and cooperation between the two sides stalled. The Aquino administration's response to the Belt and Road Initiative has also been rather lukewarm.

In 2017, President Duterte made infrastructure development a priority, proposing the Build! Build! Build! programme. The plan is to invest 8.4 trillion pesos over six years in a massive infrastructure project across the country, covering roads, bridges, airports, railways, ports, flood control facilities and other areas. In the wake of this policy, the Philippine government has extended an olive branch to the Belt and Road Initiative, which has led to closer cooperation between China and the Philippines under the Belt and Road Initiative. On 21 January 2022, the Philippine Department of Transportation (DOT) signed a commercial agreement with a Chinese company for the \$940 million Subic-Clark railway project. In January 2023, the current Philippine President Marcos paid a state visit to China. During Marcos' visit to China, China and the Philippines signed a document on "One Belt, One Road" cooperation. The two countries stressed the importance of maintaining the momentum of the good bilateral relations and both sides attached great importance to infrastructure development and agreed to carry forward high-quality projects under the synergy of the Belt and Road Initiative and the "Build, Better, More" infrastructure program to spur economic growth. At present, China and the Philippines have implemented nearly 40 government-to-government cooperation projects, covering a wide range of areas such as anti-epidemic, disaster relief, highways and bridges, and agricultural cooperation.

This shows that since President Duterte took office, China-Philippines relations have developed significantly, with many visits between senior leaders of the two countries and strong support and positive response to the Belt and Road Initiative. The Philippines is willing to deepen and benefit from its economic interdependence with China, as the country's policies are geared towards domestic economic development. The Philippines has become an important base for promoting the Belt and Road Initiative in Southeast Asia.

## 2.2. Media Level

The importance of the media as one of the tools to advance the political process cannot be overemphasised. The Philippines is a country with a highly developed social media presence, the population is active on social media and the media is highly engaged in social affairs. Television has the highest number of media consumers in the Philippines. According to a survey by Kantar Media, 96.6% of the total population in the Philippines watches television. New media coverage is increasingly influencing the population and foreign policy.

To understand the coverage of One Belt One Road in the mainstream media in the Philippines, this article analyses the trend of these stories by searching the GDELT dataset for the keyword "One Belt One Road".

Table 1: Number of mainstream media reports on the Belt and Road Initiative in the Philippines (2022).

Media websites	Philstar	Inquirer	Rappler	The Manila Times
Number of stories	36	16	17	44

First, table 1 shows that mainstream media coverage of the Belt and Road Initiative is low and the level of attention is mediocre. Second, the media's tendency to report on the Belt and Road Initiative is mostly negative, with most believing that China's Belt and Road Initiative would lead to a cross-border ecological and social disaster, or that China is engaging in "debt trap" diplomacy through the Belt and Road Initiative, or that China would not be able to provide sufficient resources to afford the Belt and Road Initiative. Positive reports suggest that the Belt and Road has become a powerful driver of inclusive, equitable and sustainable growth in the global economy, and that the Philippines has benefited greatly from it. There are also neutral reports that the Philippines has nothing to lose by participating in the Belt and Road and that it should try to work with other countries to boost its economic development. Finally, in terms of media attention, there are few reports that provide a comprehensive account of the Belt and Road Initiative, and a few that provide a general introduction to it, but with limited space. There are two main categories of content: those that talk about the Belt and Road Initiative but focus mainly on the Sino-Philippine dispute over the South China Sea. These stories invariably label China as a 'hegemon' and 'aggressor', claiming that China is 'violating' Philippine sovereignty and that its 'hegemonic practices' threaten maritime peace and fisheries development. On the other hand, the coverage focused on economic cooperation, mentioning the 'Belt and Road' initiative and focusing on the progress of the completion of Chinese-funded infrastructure projects in the Philippines.

In general, the mainstream media in the Philippines has not paid much attention to the Belt and Road Initiative, often comparing it to the South China Sea issue, praising it for bringing economic growth to the Philippines while fearing an asymmetrical dependence on China that could lead to a loss of autonomy and an inability to assert the country's sovereignty in the "West Philippine Sea".

### **2.3. Business Level**

"The Belt and Road Initiative is of great importance to the Philippine business community as it aims to contribute to the economic development of the countries along the route and to achieve economic connectivity between the two countries. The Chinese occupy an important position in the Philippine business community, not only as a major group influencing the trade of Philippine goods, but also as a monopoly in shopping malls, real estate, restaurants, transportation and infrastructure construction, directly affecting the lifeline of the Philippine economy.<sup>[1]</sup> In Forbes Magazine's 2022 list of Filipino billionaires, seven of the top ten are of Chinese descent. The economic status of the Chinese in the Philippines is reflected in their good relations with the locals and their support for the Belt and Road Initiative.

Dr. Francis Chua, president emeritus of the Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry, said the Belt and Road Initiative will bring investment opportunities, and Philippines is a good investment target because of its lack of infrastructure. In this regard, the Philippines should also seize the opportunity for cooperation. As the largest chamber of commerce in the Philippines, it organises annual forums on the ADB and the construction of the Belt and Road. Zamora, president of Nickel Asia Corporation (NAC), also said he hoped to work more with Chinese companies, as China's technological prowess will make a strong contribution to the construction of the Belt and Road. During the 2019 Belt and Road International Cooperation Summit Forum, Zamora's company and Chinese companies signed two agreements for Chinese and Philippine companies to jointly build projects such as the Manila Light Rail Tram and the Philippines' national internet connectivity infrastructure.

The Philippine business community has generally welcomed the Belt and Road Initiative because of the business opportunities and benefits that China brings to the Philippines. On the other hand, the Chinese in the Philippines are also concerned that the deterioration of Sino-Philippine relations will lead to xenophobia in the region, and therefore hope to ease the relationship between the two countries through economic channels, and the "the Belt and Road" initiative proposed by China is a favorable opportunity.

### **2.4. Academic level**

The Philippine academic community has been commenting on the Belt and Road Initiative since its inception, and the content falls into three main categories. First, scholars have commented on the background of the proposal and implementation of the Belt and Road. Aaron Jed Rabena, a think tank member of the Council on Foreign Relations of the Philippines, notes that the Belt and Road is a domestic development strategy for China that increases opportunities for less developed regions by facilitating China's connections to overseas markets. From an external perspective, China is the country most dependent on the South China Sea as a strategic sea lane for transportation, and the Belt and Road Initiative is a response to the 2011 US rebalancing strategy of 'returning to the Asia-Pacific'.<sup>[2]</sup> Political commentator Richard Javad Heydarian explains the motivation for the Belt and Road Initiative as "rebalancing the domestic economy", "increasing China's role in the Asia-Pacific region". And "increasing China's strategic influence in resource-rich regions". Second, scholars focused on the suitability of the initiative for the Philippines, with most of them saying that the Belt and Road Initiative has some compatibility with President Duterte's "Build! Build! Build!" programme and will help the Philippines' economic development, especially infrastructure development. Third, scholars also expressed concerns about the Belt and Road Initiative. Richard Heydarian argues that the Belt and Road will mean that the world will become more dependent on Chinese legal and technical standards, which will make China a global cultural force like the West and Japan. Others see the Belt and Road as "a new form of colonisation".<sup>[3]</sup>

While Filipino intellectuals are generally optimistic about the economic aspects of the Belt and Road Initiative, they are concerned that the Philippines will henceforth be asymmetrically dependent on Chinese products, labour, technology, etc., while deepening its interdependence with China, thus increasing its sensitivity and vulnerability in the South China Sea dispute.

### **2.5. The General Public Level**

The Philippine polling agency Social Weather Station conducted a survey on the Filipino people's confidence in China. The results are as follows.

Table 2: Historical Philippine China Trust Surveys (2018-2020)

Date	Very Trust (%)	Uncertain (%)	Distrustful(%)	Confidence Index
June 2018	18	27	53	-35
September 2018	27	28	43	-16
December 2018	31	29	39	-7
March 2019	32	27	39	-6
June 2019	27	21	51	-24
September 2019	21	23	54	-33
December 2019	23	27	49	-27
July 2020	22	18	58	-36

Table 2 shows that the Filipino people's trust in China is generally not high, falling to its lowest level in recent years in 2020, at -36%. With this low level of trust in China, the Filipino people also have a low level of understanding of the Belt and Road Initiative. Some scholars have conducted a questionnaire survey on the level of understanding of the Belt and Road Initiative among Filipino youths, and found that Filipino youths do not know much about the initiative. "The youth who know about the initiative believe that more information and explanation should be given to the general public, especially the grassroots, to deepen their understanding of the Belt and Road Initiative."<sup>[4]</sup>

Just as the Philippine media has focused on the South China Sea issue, the Filipino public has also shown concern over sovereignty over the 'West Philippine Sea'. Since 2016, the South China Sea issue has been a major factor affecting the relationship between China and the Philippines. The Philippines is known as the 'land of a thousand islands', and fishing is a large part of its economy, and most Filipino fishermen have a negative attitude towards China, which they see as 'robbing' the country of its fishing resources. William Dar pointed to the recent shortage of fishery resources in the Philippines due to typhoons, and suggested possible plans to import fish from China or other neighbouring countries. In June 2021, the Social Weather Station conducted face-to-face interviews with 1,200 adults nationwide about the South China Sea. 47% of Filipinos said that the government was not doing enough to defend the country's sovereignty in the West Philippine Sea, and 68% of respondents favoured an alliance with other countries to defend the Philippines' rights in the West Philippine Sea. This shows that the Filipino people do not have a high level of trust in China and are concerned about the Sino-Philippine dispute in the South China Sea. The public's perception of China's One Belt, One Road initiative is likely to change with the changes in the South China Sea issue between China and the Philippines. A proper resolution of the South China Sea issue is key.

### 3. The Impact of the Philippines' Domestic Perception on the Construction of the Belt and Road

Firstly, the recognition, support and active participation of senior government officials are important safeguards for the quality construction of the Belt and Road Initiative. On the one hand, the Philippine government's perception of China is a prerequisite for the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative in the country. As mentioned above, under Aquino III, the Philippines viewed China as a "hegemonic power" that had seized sovereignty over the West Philippine Sea, and the cooperation between China and the Philippines stagnated. The Belt and Road Initiative could not be implemented in the Philippines. The Duterte and Marcos administrations, on the other hand, were friendly towards China, and since they took office, the two governments have become increasingly close in terms of economic exchanges. The Philippine government has even welcomed the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative in the Philippines. Data shows that in the first 11 months of 2022, trade between China and the Philippines reached \$80.41 billion, up 8.3% year-on-year, of which China's exports to the Philippines were \$59.2 billion, up 14.5% year-on-year, while China's imports from the Philippines were \$21.21 billion, down 6.1% year-on-year. China has now been the Philippines' largest trading partner for six consecutive years and has become the country's second largest export market.

On the other hand, the friendship and friendly voice of top government officials towards China will increase the goodwill of the domestic public and media towards China, which will help the implementation of the Belt and Road project in the country. In July 2020, Chinese State Councilor and Foreign Minister Wang Yi held video talks with Philippine Foreign Minister Lurchin, in which both sides expressed their intention to deepen the docking of the Belt and Road and Greater Construction initiatives, advance cooperation in various fields, and promote the new development of China-Philippines comprehensive strategic cooperative partnership. The following day, the Philippine Business Mirror published an article on the Belt and Road entitled "One Belt, One Road connects China and the Philippines, optimistic about the Digital Silk Road", quoting Chinese Ambassador to the Philippines

Huang Xilian's views on China-Philippines cooperation. In January 2022, the Philippine newspaper Manila Standard published an article stating that the Belt and Road project has helped the Philippines improve infrastructure conditions such as railways, water conservancy and bridges, and further deepened comprehensive strategic cooperation between the Philippines and China.

China and the Philippines have a long history of cooperation, and since the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the Philippines in the 1970s, the two sides have cooperated in many areas, including trade, investment, agriculture, mining, engineering contracting, and labour services.<sup>[5]</sup> At the same time, the Philippines is lagging behind in infrastructure development, and the economic structures of China and the Philippines are complementary, and with these advantages, the cooperation between the two countries under the Belt and Road Initiative can clearly bring great benefits to the Philippine economy. Therefore, the economic benefits of the interdependence between the two countries make the Philippine government willing to further deepen the interdependence between China and the Philippines. The Philippine government's friendly perception of China has contributed to the smooth implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative in the Philippines.

Secondly, the negative impact of the South China Sea issue hinders the promotion of the Belt and Road construction. The South China Sea issue is important in the Philippines' security agenda and a major factor influencing the construction of the Belt and Road between China and the Philippines, which is difficult to resolve in the short term and may even intensify in the context of long-term Sino-US competition. <sup>[6]</sup>Under Aquino III, relations between China and the Philippines continued to deteriorate over the South China Sea dispute, with relations between the two countries reaching a freeze, and China and the Philippines maintaining a low level of cooperation. Philippine Foreign Minister Teddy Locsin Jr. has said that the Philippines should appropriately limit Chinese investment given its vulnerability in the South China Sea issue. Therefore, the perception of the South China Sea issue will increase the Philippines' concerns about its asymmetric dependence, which will hinder cooperation between the two countries in the construction of the Belt and Road. Although President Duterte has temporarily shelved the South China Sea issue during his tenure, opposition voices in the Philippines will continue to rise and fall, and with Marcos taking office in 2022, the direction of China-Philippines relations seems unclear due to the Philippines-US military alliance and pressure from the United States. All in all, the proper handling of the South China Sea issue is crucial to the progress of the Belt and Road construction.

Finally, the Filipino people's lack of trust in China lowers their expectations of Belt and Road cooperation. When Chinese companies implement Belt and Road projects in the Philippines, they are obliged to cooperate with relevant local institutions and engage in exchanges with civil society, as well as their satisfaction with the projects, so the Filipino people's perception of China's Belt and Road is also crucial. Therefore, the Filipino people's perception of China's Belt and Road project is crucial.

From the above, it is clear that the Filipino people do not have a high level of trust in China. First, "Made in China" products do not have a good reputation in the Philippines. Chinese products are very common in the Philippines, and because they are not expensive, they are available to the general public, and Chinese imports are visible in every household. However, in recent years there has been a lot of news about Chinese food hygiene and substandard products, and the Filipino people are aware of this, which has led to a decrease in the Filipino people's trust in Chinese products; second, the Filipino people are very active on social media and are often seen on Twitter and Facebook. In these social media, news about the stigmatization of China by the West and the "China threat theory" often appear, which can easily affect the Filipino people's perception of China; again, the aforementioned dispute between China and the Philippines in the South China Sea is of concern to the Filipino people, and the South China Sea issue has also led many people to view China as a "hegemonic power" and its actions to defend its territory as "hegemonic acts". Many new Chinese immigrants have a high crime rate and are involved in businesses such as drugs, gambling and pornography, which have a negative impact on Philippine society. Therefore, it is not easy for Chinese residents to apply for Philippine visas, which is not conducive to civil exchanges between China and the Philippines. The Filipino public's low level of trust in China makes it difficult for the two countries to engage in people-to-people exchanges, which lowers expectations for Belt and Road cooperation between the two countries.

#### 4. Conclusions

China and the Philippines are geographically close and have a long history of cooperation. With the removal of political barriers and the improvement of China-Philippines relations, China should cooperate with the Philippines in all aspects and fields under the Belt and Road Initiative. The interdependence

between China and the Philippines is bound to deepen under the Belt and Road Initiative, and it is important to pay attention to the Philippine community's perception of the Belt and Road Initiative to prevent it from becoming a source of conflict in the future.

On the one hand, the economic cooperation between the two countries under the Belt and Road Initiative has brought huge economic benefits to the Philippines, so the Filipino community is willing to further deepen interdependence based on the need for economic development. On the other hand, due to the Philippines' asymmetrical interdependence with China, the Philippines fears that deepening its dependence on China under the Belt and Road Initiative will lead to a loss of national autonomy and a loss of initiative in balancing China's influence in the South China Sea agenda. To further promote the Belt and Road construction, China should actively enhance the recognition and awareness of the Belt and Road among all sectors in the Philippines.

First, the Chinese government should handle the South China Sea issue properly to avoid diplomatic miscalculations that could exacerbate Philippine sensitivities and vulnerabilities. Although the Philippines has strong economic needs for China and has cooperated in several projects based on these needs, the Philippines is vulnerable to China's influence based on the perception of asymmetric interdependence and is concerned about its own vulnerability to dependence, thus seeking alternative options to reduce its dependence on China. Therefore, a proper resolution of the South China Sea issue is an important step in further promoting the Belt and Road Initiative and a basis for deepening cooperation between the two countries. Second, given the limited understanding of the Belt and Road Initiative among Philippine academics, media and the public, and the fact that the local construction of the Belt and Road requires the support and active participation of Filipino people's groups, expanding communication channels between China and the Philippines and opening up civil communication between the two sides is an important key to raising expectations for cooperation between the two countries. Finally, tell the Chinese story, make good Chinese products and enhance China's soft power overseas. Cultural exchanges between China and the Philippines are few and relatively transient. There are also fewer opportunities for Chinese and Filipino scholars to exchange, all of which limits China's influence. As the Filipino public's interest in Chinese culture grows, China should continue to improve its propaganda efforts to disseminate and promote its traditional and popular culture. On the other hand, it should ensure the quality of Chinese export products, adjust their overall structure and improve their reputation, so as to reduce Sino-Philippine trade and economic disputes and increase public trust and goodwill towards China.

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