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The Belt and Road Initiative after COVID: The Rise of Health and Digital Silk Roads

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Challenges the BRI faced after the COVID-19 pandemic

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has connectivity at its core. The BRI was launched to expand physical connectivity from China to Eurasia by constructing infrastructure, such as roads, railways, and pipelines in partner countries. In that sense, during the Great Lockdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the BRI faced three serious challenges, including restrictions on the cross-border movement of workers and logistics, China's growing financial burden due to the worldwide economic downturn, and rising anti-Chinese sentiment all over the world.

Rise of the Health Silk Road and Digital Silk Road

Amidst the chaos and upheaval caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, however, China has rapidly accelerated the Health Silk Road (HSR) and Digital Silk Road (DSR) as a basis to expand the BRI. This has been facilitated by factors such as the prolonged pandemic, the vacuum of global leadership, the rise of a digital economy, and developing countries' need for technological support. As a result, China has seen this as an opportunity to strengthen the HSR and DSR because it was able to bring the virus under control domestically faster than other countries.

After the outbreak of COVID-19 in China and the pandemic damaged global supply and value chains, many countries' medical systems reached the brink of collapse and medical supplies were also insufficient. In this situation, the HSR has rapidly expanded through so-called 'mask diplomacy' and 'vaccine diplomacy.' According to the China's Foreign Ministry, China is currently providing vaccine assistance to 53 countries and has exported vaccines to 27 countries. These countries can be differentiated in China's BRI agenda as either situated along the key corridors or as bridgehead countries. For example, China has given preferential vaccine access to countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines, Serbia, Sri Lanka, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates which are located on key

corridors of the BRI. It has also dispatched medical teams to Italy and Pakistan which it regards as bridgehead countries in further expanding the BRI. The HSR and medical aid are likely to reinforce friendly relations between China and the recipient countries and to promote the BRI.

In addition, the pandemic has created a favorable environment for China to implement the DSR. Developing countries need to upgrade their information and communication technology (ICT) systems for the prevention of epidemics, mass contact tracing, and public welfare. The DSR helps China expand the range of the BRI to Africa and Latin America. Even though Western countries, including the United States, have raised concerns about the security and reliability of Chinese technology, it is a secondary problem for developing countries which have urgent needs for economic growth and digital transition. It is also notable that there is no border in the DSR. The farther the DSR expands, the higher the possibility for the BRI to go beyond a physical space will be. Through the HSR and DSR, China is not only trying to improve its national image which was damaged after the COVID-19 outbreak but also to reinforce cooperative relations through the BRI and expand its range.

Implications of the BRI's expansion

China's BRI seeks to respond to the US balancing against China and to resolve structural problems in the Chinese economy. In that sense, the expansion of the BRI through the HSR and the DSR has three key implications.

Firstly, it can help China secure its global leadership. After the COVID-19 pandemic, international organizations including the World Health Organization (WHO) have lost public confidence. As US-China strategic competition is intensifying, global public goods are not properly provided. In this situation, by offering medical supplies, vaccines, and technology platforms as public goods, China attempts not only to recover its national image, but also to secure its status as a global leader.

Secondly, with the spread of the Chinese-style authoritarian system, there is a risk that the spread of universal values such as democracy, freedom, and human rights are likely to be hindered. Through the HSR and the DSR, China's epidemic prevention and control system as well as technological tools have been extensively exported to developing countries. Unlike the early BRI which focused on building physical infrastructure, China has an opportunity to spread its model of government by propagating its national policies to other countries, especially developing countries.

China already established a social control system based on its advanced technology and related policies in promoting Socialism with Chinese Characteristics. For example, the Chinese government built an internet censorship and surveillance system with the Cybersecurity Law and the Great Firewall. A social surveillance system based on facial recognition technology and Big Data is operated under the name of social stability. These technologies and policies have been exported to other authoritarian countries through the DSR. If these Chinese-style systems rapidly proliferate under

the name of epidemic prevention and digital transition, it will be useful for the maintenance of authoritarian regimes in developing countries; and in the other way, it may hinder the spread of liberal democratic values around the world.

Thirdly, it will intensify US-China strategic and technological competition. With the expansion of the HSR and the DSR, US balancing against China will be strengthened. This is especially so if China establishes a vast rival cyber space based on domestic technologies. The Chinese government will be able to obtain massive data from other countries or personal information more easily through cyber networks. Then other democratic countries which are already concerned by cybersecurity threats from China may be unwilling to participate in such a space. In the worst case, the decoupling between the US and China would happen in cyber space, and there is a risk that this split would end in a ‘cyber Cold War.’

South Korea needs to establish values-based principles

Since China first proposed the BRI, South Korea has sought to expand cooperation with China in order to promote economic growth. However, considering the implications of the BRI’s likely expansion after the COVID-19 pandemic, South Korea needs to take a more cautious approach going forward. The expansion of the BRI through the HSR and the DSR poses long-term risks to the universal values that South Korea has pursued and promoted, whether China intends to do so or not. Therefore, South Korea needs to prioritize its values-based principles in order to prepare for the moment when economic interests and values collide in cooperating with the BRI.

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(“포스트-코로나”를 대비한 일대일로: 보건 실크로드와 디지털 실크로드의 확대와 그 함의’,
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