

Vague Alternatives and G7 Summitry: The Build Back Better World Initiative

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Summits often feature grand statements and needless fripperies. In Cornwall, the leaders of the G7 countries were trying to position and promote their relevance as the vanguard of democratic good sense and values. They, the message went, remained relevant, valuable and essential to the order of the earth, despite challenges posed by the autocrats.

Never let contradiction get in the way of such a united front. Babbling about liberal democratic values matters little when it comes to crusty realpolitik. The UK and the US continue to supply armaments to their favourite theocracy, Saudi Arabia, even as they take issue with Russia and Chinese actions they deem aggressive, cruel or authoritarian. Germany’s position on dealing with Russia remains distinct within the grouping, not least on the issue of energy politics and the Nord Stream 2 gas project. Nor does the G7 necessarily share the same attitude in dealing with China, each having had its slant in coping with Beijing’s actions in recent years.

The China Syndrome has produced some form of united response at the summit. Welcome, then, to the Build Back Better World (B3W) initiative. This will entail, [according](#) to a White House factsheet, “a values-driven, high-standard, and transparent infrastructure partnership led by the major democracies to help narrow the \$40+ trillion infrastructure need in the developing world, which has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.” The initiative will also involve “the G7 and other like-minded partners” coordinating and mobilising “private-sector capital in four areas of focus – climate, health and health security, digital technology, and gender equity and equality – with catalytic investments from our respective development finance institutions.”

A senior official in the Biden administration [told](#) Reuters that, “This is not just about confronting or taking on China. But until now we haven’t offered a positive alternative that reflects our values, our standards and our way of doing business.”

Since 2013, President Xi Jinping’s multi-billion dollar Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has niggled the sphere of influence watchers. While the developed world went into something of an investment coma after the Great Recession of 2007-9, notably in developing economies, China took its wallet out. Attached conditions to the investment would be few; questions about human rights, freedoms and business transparency would not be

obstacles. As this was happening, high-income states went into chatter mode while keeping their shut purses, [formulating principles](#) for quality infrastructure investments.

The BRI infrastructure program, [currently featuring](#) 2,600 projects, is China's geopolitical bridge to developing states, linking Beijing through an assortment of road, maritime and rail projects. These [include](#) the \$100 billion China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, and the \$62 billion China Pakistan Economic Corridor. Over time, the initiative has moved into 5G technologies and fiberoptic networks.

The BRI initiative is also a way of jostling out countries long presumptuous about keeping their backyard free of competition. (Australia, for instance, has shown alarm that its long standing position as Pacific bruiser and charity giver is facing dethroning.) And it has worried recipient states initially warmed by Chinese offers of investment. In 2016, Pakistani Senator Tahir Mashhadi, chairman of the Senate Standing Committee on Planning and Development, [issued a warning](#). "Another East India Company is in the offing; national interests are not being protected. We are proud of the friendship between Pakistan and China, but the interests of the state should come first."

The G7 states have been doing much head scratching as to how to rival and blunt the BRI. In 2019, the Trump administration, along with Japan and Australia, suggested their own counter: the [Blue Dot Network](#), the principles of which underpin B3W. The BDN initiative [seeks to promote](#) "equality infrastructure investment that is open and inclusive, and transparent, economically viable, financially, environmentally sustainable and compliant with international standards, laws, and regulations." The inaugural meeting of the Blue Dot Network's Executive Consultation Group took place on June 7.

While not specifically referencing the BDN (anything deemed worthy by President Donald Trump is to be assimilated rather than acknowledged), US President Joe Biden has been making regular sprays about, as he [told reporters](#) in March, establishing "a similar initiative coming from the democratic states, helping those communities around the world."

In April, Biden and his Japanese counterpart, Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga, [met to discuss](#) "practical commitments" in establishing an alternative to BRI projects. There was a special emphasis on promoting and protecting "the technologies that will maintain and sharpen our competitive edge" based on "democratic norms that we both share - norms set by democracies, not autocracies."

Cornwall has become the site for similar assurances. The B3W is all about, as the Biden administration [claims](#), "offering a higher-quality choice". The choice will be offered "with self-confidence ... that reflects our shared values". Kaush Arha, who worked as the US G7 sherpa for the Blue Dot Network in 2020, [sees the way](#) paved "for BDN to earn the endorsement of the G7" and feature at the 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference of the Parties in November.

The details of this new plan, for all its claims to transparency, remain opaque. In the first place, it places strong emphasis on private sector contributions that are supposedly drawn in an open, accountable manner. Robert Daly, director of the Wilson Centre's Kissinger Institute on China and the United States [asks](#) the question "whether this is going to be actually new funding, new capacity to build infrastructure in the region, or is this a repurposing and repackaging of resources that are also available." Eventually, the

participating powers will have to show the money.

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