

South China Morning Post

DIPLOMACY

# Belt and road 'a sign China is now a global power'

New reality means the country also has new responsibilities, Spanish foreign minister says

Jane Cai  
jane.cai@scmp.com

Beijing's global trade and infrastructure scheme reflects the new reality that China is no longer a developing country but a world power, according to Spain's foreign minister.

But Josep Borrell Fontelles said any projects under the "Belt and Road Initiative" should stick to key principles, including environmental sustainability and a level playing field for all parties.

"The belt and road is proof that China is no longer considering itself a contributor to the world, and this is something Spain welcomes," Borrell said.

**China [now] starts considering itself a contributor to the world**

JOSEP BORRELL FONTELLES

"This entitles new responsibilities and requires for competitive advantages to be abandoned, as they do not correspond with the new reality of China."

Borrell, 72, a seasoned Spanish politician and former president of the European Parliament, will attend the Belt and Road Forum that begins in Beijing tomorrow.

He said that while it was too soon to assess the impact of the New Silk Road, the EU shared the United States' view that China was already a world power, and that any cooperation in the scheme would be based on certain principles being respected.

While Spain had taken a "constructive" approach to the initiative and was a founding member of the China-led Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, he said Spanish officials attending the forum wanted to learn more about the evolving programme.

The plan aims to connect China with Asia, Africa, Europe and beyond along traditional land

and sea routes. When it was launched by President Xi Jinping in 2013, it was referred to as a "project", but it then became an "initiative" as Beijing sought to dispel worries over its ambitions.

Nearly six years on, more than 100 countries and international organisations have signed on to the belt and road, but wariness and distrust are building in Europe amid what critics call China's "debt trap diplomacy" and neocolonialism.

Spain has not officially joined the programme, but it has worked with China on some belt and road projects. For example, Chinese state-owned shipping company Cosco now holds a majority stake in Neatum Port Holdings, the Spanish firm operating ports in Valencia and Bilbao, while a direct goods train link has been launched between the Chinese city of Yiwu and Madrid.

Borrell said Cosco did not control any Spanish ports - rather, it was operating container terminals as the main shareholder in three of 46 ports in Spain.

He also said the train link had yet to reach its full potential since it started transporting goods between China and Spain in 2014.

The China-Europe Railway Express is a flagship belt and road project, but it has been criticised because there is far less freight heading east along the line than west, underscoring an imbalance in trade relations.

China and Spain have pledged to address what Madrid called a chronic deficit with China during Xi's visit to the Spanish capital in November.

Spain had a trade deficit of US\$23.21 billion with China in 2018, a 6.3 per cent increase from the previous year, according to the Spanish embassy in Beijing.

"Spain considers [that the belt and road] still has positive potential to show, as long as some principles that in the EU we consider essential are taken into account: financial, labour and environmental sustainability of the projects, comprehensiveness of connectivity, respect [for] international law, and a level playing field for all the parties," he said.