



ADDRESS BY SOUTH AFRICA'S MINISTER OF HIGHER EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND INNOVATION DURING THE OPENING CEREMONY AND PLENARY SESSION OF THE BELT AND ROAD CONFERENCE ON SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY EXCHANGE

Chongqing: 6 November 2023

His Excellency, Mr Ding Xuexiang, Vice Premier of the People's Republic of China,
His Excellency, Mr Yin Hejun, Minister of Science and Technology of the People's Republic of Science

Ministers, Excellencies, and all esteemed participants in the first Belt and Road Conference on Science and Technology Exchange

Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a singular honour and privilege for me to address you this morning. Today is truly an historic occasion, as we celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Belt and Road partnership, with this first dedicated event to focus on the strategic role science and technology should play, to accelerate, deepen and expand Belt and Road cooperation.

South Africa is privileged to be part of the Belt and Road, it is a partnership my Government is strongly committed to, and I can therefore also bring you the good wishes of our President, His Excellency, Mr Cyril Ramaphosa, who share our conviction on the critical importance of knowledge and innovation for development.

President Xi's call at the recent Third Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, for science and technology to be a priority focus of the next phase of Belt and Road, is therefore one South Africa fully supports.

We would, thus, like to congratulate Minister Yin and the Ministry of Science and Technology of China, as well as all the other organising partners, including the Chinese Academy of Sciences, the Chinese Academy of Engineering, the China Association for Science and Technology, the Chongqing Municipal People's Government and the Sichuan Provincial People's Government, as well as the National Development and Reform Commission, on the efficiency with which they have acted to translate into action President Xi's vision.

I am also delighted to see that so many of our strategic partners, countries to whom South Africa is bound to in deep and historic solidarity, also honoured this invitation.

The theme for our opening session this morning is ***“Tackling Global Governance Challenges with Science, Technology and Innovation.”***

At a time when international solidarity and multilateralism is under attack through the unilateral, biased, and selfish action by some, ensuring global governance is enhanced to become truly inclusive and more responsive to the concerns of developing countries, deserves our urgent attention. Science, technology and innovation can and should play a critical role to help us achieve this objective.

Over the past few years, President Xi has respectively proposed the Global Security Initiative, the Global Development Initiative and most recently the Global Civilisation Initiative, all with the objective to enhance global governance.

I therefore believe that it is the mission of this conference to launch concerted Belt and Road partnership initiatives in science, technology and innovation, which will assist to not only enhance global security and global development governance, but also in achieving the vision of the Global Civilization Initiative, to foster a more harmonized world, characterized by cooperation, connectivity and shared prosperity.

South Africa stands ready to work with China and other Belt and Road partners, to achieve these objectives, and I would like briefly share three proposals for immediate action, which we could take to enhance global governance through science, technology and initiative.

Firstly, one of the most serious challenges currently posed to global security is the lack of inclusive global governance, meaningfully involving developing countries, of disruptive technologies such as Artificial Intelligence.

South Africa therefore welcomes and strongly supports China's proposal for a new Global Initiative for Artificial Intelligence Governance.

We would like to propose the convening of a dedicated conference to further develop without delay this seminal initiative and stand ready to actively support its organisation.

Secondly, global poverty and inequality will continue to persist, unless infrastructure development in developing countries is more decisively supported and without the burdening conditionalities often imposed.

The Belt and Road partnership has already made tremendous contributions to for example developing transport and logistics infrastructure in Africa and Asia.

Consistent with the new Belt and Road focus on science and technology, I would like to propose that the partnership now expands its focus to also invest in infrastructure for science and innovation, such as for example high-speed communication networks dedicated for research, cloud and supercomputing resources, as well specialized laboratories.

South Africa is willing to champion this initiative including with potential funding partners such as the New Development Bank.

Thirdly, progressing towards a world of characterised by greater cooperation and connectivity and shared prosperity, as foreseen by the Global Civilization Initiative, requires us to be inspired by the universal language and values of science.

Science doesn't discriminate, doesn't tolerate prejudice and advances through the sharing of experience, expertise and resources.

I would therefore like to propose that we launch a dedicated programme to support transnational research and innovation cooperation between Belt and Road partners.

South Africa stands ready to contribute to such an initiative, by for example sharing the experience gained by entities such as our National Research Foundation and Technology Innovation, represented here today, in the administration of multilateral research and innovation programmes, such as the BRICS Framework Programme of Science, Technology and Innovation.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, permit me to conclude with an extract from the lyrics from a very popular Chinese song of three decades ago, by the group, Beyond, entitled “The Glorious Years.”

It is a song about one of the founding fathers of South Africa’s democracy and our first democratic President, His Excellency, Mr Nelson Mandela.

President Mandela would certainly have approved and actively supported the Belt and Road vision of partnership, solidarity and development.

He inspired and continues to inspire many, in Africa, in China, and across the world. The song, “The Glorious Years”, was written when President Mandela was still imprisoned by the apartheid regime, and ends with the following lyrics reflecting President Mandela’s courage and destiny:

“Believing in one’s ability to change the future, who can accomplish this?”

I would therefore like to urge: *Let us believe in our ability to change the future, let us change the future to truly make it a better world for all, and let us accomplish our task to develop the Belt and Road science, technology and innovation partnership.*

I thank you.

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