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## CHINA'S BELT AND ROAD: ENVIRONMENT'S ENEMY?

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To all of the other problems that have cropped up recently with Chinas massive multi-trillion-dollar Belt and Road Initiative development scheme, add one more: the possibility of global environmental damage, according to a new 88-page policy research working paper released recently by the World Bank.

Produced by five academicians from Duke University in the United States, the paper says that new road or rail access to frontier forests to aid development typically leads to the greatest absolute deforestation and eco-service losses, at least in the short term. These forests are close to infrastructure yet not cleared, and conditions are ripe for expansion of economic activities.

In recent months, as Asia Sentinel has reported in a series of stories, there is growing concern that China is offering too many countries too much of a good deal □ that the extensive development touted both across Asia and Africa comes at a considerable price. Sri Lanka and Pakistan notably □ among many other countries □ have found themselves heavily indebted for dubious projects built by Chinese labor that has nearly bankrupted them and provided little economic uplift.

In fact, according to academic Christopher Balding, writing in the prestigious Foreign Affairs in October 2018, China faces a backlash to BRI at home and abroad, with resentment rising domestically over what is considered wasteful spending. As Balding writes, China does not require its partners to meet stringent conditions related to corruption, human rights, or financial sustainability. This no-strings approach to investment has fueled corruption while allowing governments to burden their countries with unpayable debts. And citizens of many BRI countries have reacted with anger toward China □ an anger that is now making itself felt in elections. Far from expanding Chinese soft power, the BRI appears to be achieving the opposite.

Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad recently opted out of several BRI projects signed onto by his predecessor, Najib Razak, concerned that the country was becoming an economic hostage to China. The latest report has Kenya on the edge of defaulting on a □ billion debt to Chinas Exim Bank over the construction of its Mombasa port. An auditors report has Kenya set to spend as much as €6.8 billion to service debt in 2019.

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