

The Health Silk Road: A Model for Global Health Cooperation and Promising Opportunities for the Egyptian Health Sector

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Introduction

The Egyptian President's visit to China from May 28 to 31, 2024, aimed to discuss the bilateral relations and develop a comprehensive strategic partnership between the two countries. The visit focused on infrastructure, transportation, shipbuilding, participation in building the financial and business district in the New Administrative Capital, launching the Egyptian satellite, financial and economic cooperation, promoting efforts to localize industry, and transferring knowledge and technology. Additionally, the executive program for the next five years was signed, enhancing the integration of the Belt and Road Initiative's goals with Egypt's Vision 2030 for sustainable development. This study discusses the health-related initiatives under the Belt and Road initiative, "The Health Silk Road"; its objectives, success stories, and challenges. It also highlights the potential opportunities for the Egyptian health sector to benefit from this program, share knowledge, exchange experiences, and complement each other. In addition to developing the capacities in the Egyptian healthcare sector, Egypt can benefit from this program to strengthen its soft power.

Key Words

Health Silk Road, Health Diplomacy, Belt and Road Initiative

The Emergence and Development of the Health Silk Road

The concept of the Health Silk Road was first introduced by China in 2015 during the second meeting of health ministers between China and Central and Eastern European countries (CEEC). The initiative gained momentum starting in 2017 when China included health cooperation as a crucial element of the Belt and Road Initiative at the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation. The Health Silk Road aims to leverage the extensive infrastructure and connectivity projects of the Belt and Road Initiative to improve health outcomes in participating countries.

China's motivations for the Health Silk Road stem from its desire to enhance its soft power and global influence, increase responsiveness to global health emergencies, and address the interconnected nature of health threats in an increasingly globalized world. By promoting health cooperation, China also aims to foster goodwill and build strategic partnerships that can translate into political and economic benefits.

Objectives of the Health Silk Road

The Health Silk Road includes several key objectives:

1. **Improving Health Infrastructure:** One of the main goals is to improve health infrastructure in Belt and Road Initiative countries. This includes building hospitals, clinics, laboratories, and providing essential medical equipment and technology.
2. **Enhancing Disease Surveillance and Control:** By establishing a network of disease surveillance and control centers, the Health Silk Road aims to improve countries' abilities to detect, respond to, and control infectious diseases.

3. **Facilitating Medical Research and Innovation:** The initiative encourages cooperation in medical research, the development of new treatments and vaccines, and the sharing of medical knowledge and best practices.
4. **Developing Human Resources in Healthcare:** Training health-care professionals and improving the capacity of local health systems is a crucial component. This includes offering scholarships, organizing training programs, and facilitating the exchange of medical personnel.
5. **Improving Public Health Systems:** By supporting health policy reforms and enhancing health governance, the initiative seeks to build stronger public health systems.
6. **Promoting Health Security:** The initiative focuses on enhancing health security by boosting preparedness and response capabilities for health emergencies, particularly for epidemics and major health crises.

In our view, these stated objectives of the program are consistent with Egypt's goals in developing its health system. Egypt can benefit from available resources and accumulated experience in this initiative in promoting health security, increasing research and innovation capabilities, as well as developing medical teams in all its specialties. It can also benefit from joining this group of countries, health expertise, and institutions in disseminating its expertise and experience in several areas such as the elimination of virus (C) and 100 million health initiatives, thus enhancing Egypt's soft power in this country.

Achievements and Initiatives

China-Pakistan Health Corridor: This notable achievement involved constructing medical facilities, providing medical equipment, and training Pakistani healthcare personnel.

African CDC Headquarters: China committed to building the headquarters of the Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC), emphasizing its commitment to improving health infrastructure in Africa.

Traditional Chinese Medicine Centers: Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) centers have been established in various countries under the Belt and Road Initiative, including Serbia and Laos, promoting the integration of traditional medicine into local health systems and providing alternative treatment options.

COVID-19 Response: China provided significant medical aid during the COVID-19 pandemic, including masks, ventilators, and vaccines to several countries, showcasing the Health Silk Road's capabilities.

Ebola Outbreak Response in Africa: China participated in efforts to combat the Ebola outbreak in West Africa by deploying medical teams and building treatment centers, demonstrating its ability to contribute to global health emergencies.

In our view, what Egypt can work to replicate as a successful and influential model is to benefit from China's response to epidemics such as the COVID-19 pandemic and Ebola in developing its health capabilities and enhancing health security in terms of preparedness and response to health emergencies associated with public health. It

can also attract Chinese investments to enter the Egyptian market especially the medical equipment market within the framework of a strategic general erosion, namely the localization of medical industry and technology.

Challenges and Criticisms

Despite these achievements and international initiatives, the Health Silk Road has faced several challenges and criticisms, including:

Geopolitical Concerns: Some analysts raise concerns that the initiative is a tool for China to expand its geopolitical influence, potentially at the expense of the sovereignty of recipient countries. There are also concerns about dependency that might arise from heavy reliance on Chinese aid and infrastructure.

Quality and Sustainability: There are questions regarding the quality and sustainability of the provided health infrastructure and services. Ensuring the maintenance and integration of these projects into local systems is a significant challenge.

Transparency and Accountability: The governance of these projects and initiatives through the Health Silk Road faces criticism for a lack of transparency in funding mechanisms and project implementation. Ensuring accountability and preventing corruption are vital for the initiative's success.

Cultural Sensitivity and Acceptance: Promoting traditional Chinese medicine and other Chinese health interventions may face resistance or skepticism in some regions due to cultural differences and varying levels of acceptance.

Building Local Capacities: While the initiative aims to build local capacities, there are concerns about whether it genuinely strengthens local health systems and competencies or creates dependency on Chinese expertise and resources.

Competition with Other Health Initiatives: The Health Silk Road operates in an environment already saturated with global health initiatives led by other countries and international organizations, potentially creating a competitive atmosphere. Coordinating efforts and ensuring integration rather than competition is a challenge.

In our view, these fears and criticisms are reversed in terms of the need for the participating country to act to avoid these fears through strong negotiation and a clear agenda with clear health priorities to be included in any common health agreements. This in fact applies to all global health initiatives. These same concerns are always raised in all global agreements and initiatives regardless of the initiative's dependence on either State/State/international organization. This is natural because of the overlap between global public health issues and States' foreign policy objectives. In order to resolve this overlap, the participating States must strengthen their position and objectives on acceding to these global initiatives and agreements as clearly and robustly as we have already mentioned.

The Role of International Cooperation in the Success of the Health Silk Road

International cooperation is a fundamental pillar of the Health Silk Road, emphasizing partnerships with countries, international organizations, and other stakeholders. Several aspects highlight the importance of this cooperation:

Partnerships with International Organizations: China has sought to align the Health Silk Road with the goals of the World Health Organization (WHO) and other global health institutions. This alignment aims to ensure that efforts are complementary and contribute to broader global health objectives.

Bilateral and Multilateral Agreements: The initiative has led to numerous bilateral and multilateral agreements focusing on health cooperation. These agreements often include provisions for sharing medical knowledge, joint research projects, and coordinated health emergency responses.

Educational Exchange Programs: Providing educational exchange programs and scholarships for students and medical professionals helps build stronger bridges between countries, enhancing mutual understanding and cooperation in the healthcare sector.

The Future of the Health Silk Road

Future sustainability and success of the Health Silk Road depend on several factors:

Adaptation and Innovation: The initiative must adapt to emerging global health challenges and integrate innovative solutions, such as digital health technologies and telemedicine, to remain relevant and effective. China's significant adaptability and innovation, demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlight its capability in this regard.

Sustainability and Local Integration: Ensuring that the provided health infrastructure and services are sustainable and well-integrated into local health systems is crucial for long-term success.

Enhancing Transparency and Accountability: Increasing transparency in funding and project implementation, along with effective accountability mechanisms, is essential to address the aforementioned criticisms and build trust among partner countries.

Promoting Global Health Governance: The Health Silk Road should contribute to strengthening global health governance by encouraging cooperation with international organizations and aligning efforts with global health goals.

Focusing on Equity: Ensuring that the benefits of the Health Silk Road reach the most vulnerable populations and contribute to reducing health disparities is vital for its credibility and impact.

Conclusion

The Health Silk Road represents a significant and ambitious effort by China to promote global health cooperation and improve health outcomes in participating countries. While the initiative offers numerous potential benefits, including enhanced health infrastructure, improved disease surveillance, and the development of human resources in healthcare, it also faces substantial challenges. Addressing geopolitical concerns, ensuring quality and sustainability, and fostering genuine cooperation are essential for the initiative's success.

As the world continues to confront complex and interconnected health challenges, initiatives like the Health Silk Road that promote international collaboration and solidarity will become increasingly important. By focusing on transparency, accountability, and equitable access to healthcare, the Health Silk Road can contribute to building a more resilient and healthier global community. In the lo-

cal context, although the executive program for the years 2024-2028 was not available for our review, it can be inferred that the Egyptian health system has a significant opportunity in this strategic partnership. Egypt can leverage the achievements of the Health Silk Road to achieve its health system goals, including enhancing health security, improving emergency response capabilities, developing medical teams, attracting foreign investments, and localizing technology. Additionally, it can strengthen Egyptian health diplomacy and soft power through the mechanisms of the Health Silk Road.

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