

Exporting Chinese Digital Authoritarianism

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The COVID-19 pandemic has magnified the use of digital technologies in the name of public health and safety and vividly illustrated how societies, even democratic ones, can tolerate the expansion of executive power and accept restrictions on liberties. In China, the pandemic justified the use of such technologies and policies to a further extent, but also served as a proof by the government, that its model of digital control succeeded in handling the coronavirus crisis. China is exporting its model of digital authoritarianism, via the *Digital Silk Road (DSR)*, the technology component of the Belt and Road Initiative. The exportation of the digital authoritarianism model is targeting mainly states in East Asia, Africa and Latin America, but its implications are global, if digital surveillance and social credit systems become the new normal.

The DSR project aims to strengthen digital connectivity in the participating countries, with China as the key player of this process. This digital infrastructure project includes among others terrestrial and underwater data cables, 5G cellular networks, data storage centers, surveillance networks and the launch of global satellite navigation systems. But the DSR is far more than just a digital infrastructure project, it is part of a broader strategy that encapsulates Beijing's views on techno-nationalism, cyber sovereignty and its ambition to shape a more Sino-centric - and less American-centric global order. The later can be achieved by opening new markets for Chinese tech giants like Alibaba, Tencent and Huawei and by fostering the digital connectivity of the developing countries with China – or rather their digital dependence from China. *The DSR is in line with the 'Made in China 2025', which aims to enhance China's domestic tech innovation and thereby ensure greater autonomy.*

By building the digital backbone of many developing countries, China is gaining in many ways, far from the economic one. The global economy is largely data driven. Therefore, the one who controls the data flows will also control the economy. By controlling data, Chinese companies can understand how the market works and identify local and international competitors. By dominating these new markets and by limiting the ability of local or Western companies to gain a share of the market, China is making these countries dependent on any future software or hardware that is critical to their national digital infrastructure and thereby security.

China has constructed data centres in North Africa, Egypt, and Algeria, as well as underground and underwater fibre-optic cables in Pakistan, Vietnam, Indonesia and the Philippines. One of the areas that China has exported aggressively over the last years is that of surveillance technology. Bearing in mind that China is nowadays an economic giant who also succeeded in keeping if not expanding its authoritarian characteristics, it is no wonder that states with similar characteristics turned to Beijing for assistance. A quick survey demonstrates that China has transferred surveillance technology to countries like Vietnam, Pakistan, Uzbekistan, the United Arab Emirates, Ecuador, Venezuela, Bolivia, Angola, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Zambia, Kenya and Zimbabwe. As of January 2021, forty-one African countries have agreed to join China's BRI. Thirteen of them have acquired surveillance capabilities and nine of them - Botswana, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Kenya, Mauritius, Morocco, South Africa, Uganda, and Zambia - are implementing 'safe city' systems produced by Huawei. The latter has signed a 'smart city' contract with Kenya, a cloud data center contract with Pakistan, a 4G high-speed wireless internet contract with Canada and a 5G high-speed wireless internet contract with Thailand. Huawei has also launched a Cloud and AI Innovation Lab in Singapore and is building Latin America's largest public Wi-Fi network in Mexico. Huawei is not only providing advanced, equipment but also offering ongoing technological support to set up, operate, and manage these systems.

China does not only offer the necessary technology to censor and steer public opinion, but also advises authoritarian regimes on how to develop the necessary data and privacy protection legislation, utilize the available data and steer its relations with the media regarding information management. Apart from providing tailored seminars to government officials and media elites, China is accessing overseas data and fostering alliances with like-minded states, in relation to global internet governance. We should bear in mind that such alliances are important in international organizations and fora like the UN, the International Telecommunications

Union (ITU) and regional ones like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), where China promotes a multilateral model of cyberspace governance.

China's intense marketing of surveillance technologies is not simply filling a gap in the global market. Rather this technology and know-how will also be used, or mainly be used to suppress political opposition and limit the rise of democracy in these countries.

The byproduct of the DSR is the spillover of unauthorized surveillance, the suppression of universal human rights and the collapse of democratic standards.

The international community must urgently recognize these developments and develop a comprehensive strategy to deter the rise of digital authoritarianism.