THE CHINESE DREAM OF DIGITAL SILK ROAD

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With the aim of transforming China into a leading and influential state in cyberspace through digital development, the government of China has been working on the coordination and integration of digitalization, cyber security and informatization in military, politics, society and economy.[1] The "perfection of the cyberspace leadership mechanism" was one of the 60 reform tasks announced by the 18th CPC Central Committee at its 3rd plenum in 2013.[2] After 5 years of robust implementation of top-level framework, China achieved its dream of perfecting national development and cyberspace governance. The Chinese dream for decades to come is distributing this advancement across the globe leading to extremely interconnected network of information silk roads along with the Silk Road Economic Belt and Maritime Silk Road under One Belt and One Road (OBOR) initiative.

According to *Report on China Internet Development 2017*, China ranked first in the world with 20.61 million² registered domain names (.CN) and second with respect to number of IP addresses. By June 2017, the Chinese bandwidth exceeded 100 Tbps and number of the internet broadband access ports reached 739 million which resulted into 7974.779 Gbps of international exports and 322 million fixed broadband users. In China, all townships and approximately 93.5% of administrative

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[1] "Report on China Internet Development 2017," World Internet Conference, accessed December 25, 2017, www.wuzhenwic.org/download/ReportonChinaInternetDevelopment2017overview.pdf

[2] Ibid.

villages have access to broadband. The total mobile communication is 1.36 billion which includes 890 million 4G users. This extensive digital network became a "new engine" of the economic development of China. The digital economy contributes 30.3% of China`s GDP (22.58 trillion Yuan) which is second largest in the world. It is ranked first with respect to the volume of online retail sale of 5.2 trillion Yuan. Today, there are 467 million online customers of China with online transaction volume of 26.1 trillion Yuan.[3]

China is promoting and sharing development of things, internet and digital economy with other countries to increase its influence in cyberspace. The government of China co-launched "The Belt and Road Digital Economy International Cooperation Initiative" with seven other countries at the 4th World Internet Conference in Wuzhen, Zhejiang province in China on December 3, 2017. Egypt, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Serbia, Thailand and Laos decided to extend their collaboration with China to strengthen trust and confidence for secure, peaceful, open and regulated cyberspace and digital economy. The objectives of this initiative[4] are to:

   i.   Encourage internet-based entrepreneurship and investment in ICT innovation.

   ii. Expand access to high quality broadband.

   iii. Enhance digital inclusion, transparency and bridge the gaps in global digital development.

   iv. Establish multi-level exchange system among industries, policy makers, scientific research organizations and legal community to formulate and promote international standardization.

   v.   Strengthen digital capacity building mechanisms.

At the occasion, Chinese President Xi Jinping said that, "China hopes to work with the international community to respect cyberspace sovereignty and carry forward the spirit of partnership to commonly advance development, safeguard security, participate in governance, and share the benefits."[5] Addressing the first China – EU Digital Co-operation Roundtable in Brussels, the head of the Cyberspace Administration of China, Mr. Lu Wei also said that

> "We are ready to invest because there are infinite opportunities. We can build a digital
> Silk Road, a Silk Road in cyberspace…On the basis of respecting their network

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[3] Ibid.
[4] Guo Yiming, "Digital economy cooperation to empower Belt, Road," *China.org.cn*, December 4, 2017, http://www.china.org.cn/world/2017-12/04/content_50083923.htm
[5] "Global delegates laud Xi's messages to World Internet Conference," *ECNS.cn*, December 4, 2017, http://www.ecns.cn/2017/12-04/283017.shtml

sovereignty, history, culture and religious belief, Chinese Internet companies should forge closer links with their counterparts in the countries…"[6]

Under OBOR, Beijing established first "digital free trade zone" in collaboration with the Malaysian government. ZTE Corporation and Huawei started initiative "Data Belt, Information Road" with Singapore's Star Hub telecommunications to build "Smart Cities" in OBOR nations like Malaysia, Kenya, Pakistan and Germany. ZTE Corporation is also working on fiber optic cable network in Afghanistan.[7]A China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) fiber optic project worth $44 million is under construction in Pakistan by Huawei from Gwadar to Khunjerab Pass. It will be connected to the Trans-Asia-Europe (TAE) cable which is a competitor of maritime cables.[8] In addition to cable networks and Smart Cities, China aims to build "space-based silk road" through Beidou satellite network which is a competitor to Global Positioning System (GPS).[9]

In a global digital landscape, this increased connectivity will open new avenues of e-commerce for Chinese companies. If China succeeds in connecting with other countries through timely implementation of digital Silk Road projects, it will limit the power of US and western multinational companies to influence the global markets. Besides commercial benefits, the rise of digital Silk Road has strategic and geopolitical implications. It will decrease the ability of US and other western intelligence agencies to intercept the critical data of China and Russia. The other countries critical of US electronic surveillance will also join China leading to "digital Balkanization."[10].

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[6]   Zhao Huanxin, "Web companies asked to support 'digital Silk Road'," *Telegraph*, July 27, 2015, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sponsored/china-watch/technology/11764541/tech-companies-to-build-digital-silk-road.html

[7]   Rachel Brown, "Beijing's Silk Road Goes Digital," Council on Foreign Relations, June 6, 2017, https://www.cfr.org/blog/beijings-silk-road-goes-digital

[8]   "$44m Pakistan-China optic fiber project," *Dawn*, August 3, 2013, https://www.dawn.com/news/1033788

[9]   "Nation considers space-based 'Silk Road of satellites' to provide data services," *Global Times*, May 31, 2015, http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/924600.shtml

[10]   Nadège Rolland "A Fiber-Optic Silk Road," *The Diplomat*, April 2, 2015, https://thediplomat.com/2015/04/a-fiber-optic-silk-road/