

“Digital Silk Road” as a Slogan Instead of a Grand Strategy

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Abstract

The rise of the Digital Silk Road has significantly shifted the focus of China’s Belt and Road Initiative. This change in emphasis has produced sizeable political and academic analyses, considering the Digital Silk Road is Beijing’s coherent top-down geopolitical - if not grand - strategy. This article challenges this view. By adopting a slogan politics approach, this article argues that the Digital Silk Road can be better understood as a vague political slogan. Far from a sophisticated top-level design, the rise of the Digital Silk Road was a result of economic and political struggles among domestic actors and the shifting socio-political landscapes. This article also shows that Chinese domestic actors have (un)consciously interpreted the slogan of the Digital Silk Road in their preferred ways to advance their own agenda. Beyond the nationwide support to echo the slogan, there is neither a coherent understanding nor nationally concerted effort to advance a singular geopolitical objective, if there is any. Consequently, company-level interests and agendas, rather than a top-down geopolitical masterplan, have dominated the development of the Digital Silk Road.

“We should pursue innovation-driven development and intensify cooperation in frontier areas such as digital economy, artificial intelligence, nanotechnology and quantum computing, and advance the development of big data, cloud computing and smart cities so as to turn them into a *digital silk road of the 21st century*”.¹

- Xi Jinping’s speech at the opening ceremony of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in 2017 (emphasis added)

Introduction

As Xi Jinping’s signature foreign policy concept and China’s “project of the century,” the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has attracted considerable policy, media and academic attention since being officially announced in 2012. It has been widely interpreted as Beijing’s “clearly-defined”, “top-down” and “well-thought-out” grand strategy to achieve China’s geopolitical objectives.² Critics of this grand strategy interpretation, however, point to the complicated nature of China’s political system and show how the BRI has been shaped by interactions

¹ ‘Full text of President Xi’s speech at opening of Belt and Road forum’, *Xinhua News*, 14 May 2017, <http://2017.beltandroadforum.org/english/n100/2018/0306/c25-1038.html>.

² William A. Callahan, *China’s Belt and Road Initiative and the New Eurasian Order*, (Oslo: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2016); Tom Miller, *China’s Asian Dream: Quiet Empire Building along the New Silk Road*. (London: Zed Books, 2017); Flynt Leverett and Bingbing Wu, ‘The New Silk Road and China’s Evolving Grand Strategy’, *The China Journal*, 77(1), 2017, pp. 110-132.

among domestic and international actors.³ Regardless of the debate, the BRI has been evolving according to shifting international political landscapes. Needless to say, the pandemic is a key variable that has adversely changed the BRI as much as others. The idea of “physical connectivity” – a key selling point of the BRI – has suddenly become much less attractive considering the highly contagious nature of the Covid-19 disease via physical space. In this context, the Digital Silk Road – a Chinese-coined concept to initiate global enhancement of digital connectivity – has gradually risen as a prominent component of the BRI. It is now even hailed by some as a “third” route of BRI, along with “Silk Road Economic Belt” and “21st Century Maritime Silk Road”.⁴

In line with the grand strategy interpretation of the BRI, many academic and policy discussions have adopted a similar “top-down” geopolitical lens to understand the Digital Silk Road, especially given its prominent role in the BRI.⁵ Some, for example, argue that the BRI is “a grand strategy of the most impressive proportions economically, politically, and geographically, and certainly includes the export of the Chinese development model—authoritarian capitalism”.⁶ Hence, as the argument goes, as a critical part of BRI, the Digital Silk Road strategy is first “to promote and export not only its technology companies, products, and standards but also its development model, its governance model, and a China-centric trade and financial system” and then “win the wider global standards competition in 5G, the next-generation information communications technology (ICT) that is widely argued to herald the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the Internet of Things”.⁷ This line of thinking sees the Digital Silk Road as a top-down state strategy created not only to export Chinese digitally enabled products and services but, more importantly, reconfigure digital standards “away from free,

³ Lee Jones and Jinghan Zeng, ‘Understanding China’s ‘Belt and Road Initiative’: beyond ‘grand strategy’ to a state transformation analysis’, *Third World Quarterly*, 40(8), 2019, pp. 1415-1439; Jinghan Zeng, ‘Narrating China’s belt and road initiative’, *Global Policy*, 10(2), 2019, pp. 207-216; Baogang He, ‘The Domestic Politics of the Belt and Road Initiative and its Implications’, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 28(116), 2019, pp. 180-195; Min Ye, ‘Fragmentation and Mobilization: Domestic Politics of the Belt and Road’, *Journal of Contemporary China*, 28(119), 2019, pp. 696-711, DOI: 10.1080/10670564.2019.1580428; Adrian Raftery, ‘Many Belts, Many Roads: How China’s Provinces Will Tweak a Global Project’, *The Diplomat*, 4 February 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/02/many-belts-many-roads-how-chinas-provinces-will-tweak-a-global-project/>.

⁴ Yile He, ‘Shuzi sichou zhilu de qianjing yu tiaozhan’ [The prospects and challenges of Digital Silk Road], *Dongguan Gov. Portal*, 25 September 2020, http://www.dg.gov.cn/zwgk/zfxgkml/smch/qt/gjjmdy/content/mpost_3328174.html.

⁵ Riccardo Bosetti, ‘The Digital Silk Road: Towards a China-Centred Eurasian Tech Ecosystem?’, *Global Policy Institute*, December 2020, <https://gpilondon.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Policy-Report-The-Digital-Silk-Road.pdf>; John Hemmings, ‘Reconstructing Order: The Geopolitical Risks in China’s Digital Silk Road’, *Asia Policy*, 15(1), 2020, pp. 5-21, DOI: 10.1353/asp.2020.0002; Hong Shen, ‘Building a Digital Silk Road? Situating the Internet in China’s Belt and Road Initiative’, *International Journal of Communication* 12, 2018, pp. 2683–701; Tyson Barker, ‘Withstanding the Storm: The Digital Silk Road, Covid-19 and Europe’s Options’, *DGAP*, 30 June 2021, <https://dgap.org/en/research/publications/withstanding-storm-digital-silk-road-covid-19-and-europes-options>; United States Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, ‘The New Big Brother: China and Digital Authoritarianism’, A Democratic Staff Report Prepared for the use of the Committee on Foreign Relations United States Senate, 21 July 2020, <https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/The%20New%20Big%20Brother%20-%20China%20and%20Digital%20Authoritarianism%20-%20SFRC%20Dem%20Staff%20Report.pdf>; Nils Hungerland and Kendrick Chan, ‘Assessing China’s Digital Silk Road: Huawei’s engagement in Nigeria’. Digital IR: Working Paper Series (11/2021), LSE IDEAS, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK; Damien Ma, ‘The Digital Silk Road and China’s grand strategic ambition’, *Adelphi Series*, 60:487-489, 2020, pp. 89-106, DOI: 10.1080/19445571.2020.2151127.

⁶ Hemmings, ‘Reconstructing Order’, p.8.

⁷ Hemmings, ‘Reconstructing Order’, p.9.

democratic values” and promote an alternative model for digital governance - “digital authoritarianism”, which demonstrates “China is executing a long-term plan to dominate the digital space”.⁸

In the relevant analyses, the Digital Silk Road is often considered a specific geopolitical strategy to build a China-centred digital order.⁹ To many, it is designed to contest US technological supremacy and aim to achieve China’s “technological independence at home while moving it toward the center of global networks”.¹⁰ It is argued that China, as America’s “quintessential challenger”, has already been winning this US-China digital race thanks to its Digital Silk Road strategy.¹¹ Thus some have raised concern regarding the rise of China’s alternative model, warning that China, “if left unchecked”, will set the standards and rules for digital governance¹² and that, subsequently, technological competition for global leadership will bring about “a politically illiberal international order”.¹³ Not surprisingly, a policy prescription advocating for an immediate American strategy to compete with China’s Digital Silk Road is recommended.¹⁴ In this regard, this line of analysis is not only eye-catching for media and public attention, but also politically convenient to advance a counter-China agenda and lobby for additional state support in digital sectors.

A small but growing body of literature, however, starts to point out the loose nature of the Digital Silk Road.¹⁵ In line with this literature, this article challenges the conventional grand strategy interpretation by adopting a slogan politics approach. The main argument is that the concept of the Digital Silk Road is better understood as a political slogan. It is a new slogan that has emerged from the grander slogan of the BRI to carry the BRI’s momentum. Like many other Chinese foreign policy concepts¹⁶, when the Digital Silk Road was first put forward, it

⁸ United States Senate, ‘The New Big Brother’, p. 5.

⁹ Hemmings, ‘Reconstructing Order’; Bosetti, ‘The Digital Silk Road’; Jonathan Hillman, ‘Competing with China’s Digital Silk Road’, *CSIS Commentary*, 9 February 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/competing-chinas-digital-silk-road>.

¹⁰ Hillman, ‘Competing with China’s Digital Silk Road’.

¹¹ Earl Carr, ‘Is China threatening America’s dominance in the digital space?’ *Forbes*, 20 June 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/earlcarr/2020/06/20/is-china-threatening-americas-dominance-in-the-digital-space/?sh=73db539d3cd4>.

¹² United States Senate, ‘The New Big Brother’, p.7.

¹³ Clayton Cheney, ‘China’s Digital Silk Road: strategic technological competition and exporting political illiberalism’, *Council on Foreign Relations Net Politics Blog*, 26 September 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/chinas-digital-silk-road-strategic-technological-competition-and-exporting-political>

¹⁴ Carr, ‘Is China threatening America’s dominance’; Hillman, ‘Competing with China’s Digital Silk Road’.

¹⁵ Some, for example, consider Digital Silk Road a “branding effort” or narrative to promote Beijing’s geopolitical vision. See Paul Triolo, ‘The Digital Silk Road and the evolving role of Chinese technology companies’, *Adelphi Series*, 60:487-489, 2020, pp. 65-88, DOI: 10.1080/19445571.2020.2151126; Paul Triolo et al. ‘The Digital Silk Road: Expanding China’s Digital Footprint’; Robert Greene and Paul Triolo, ‘Will China Control the Global Internet Via its Digital Silk Road?’, *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 8 May 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/05/08/will-china-control-global-internet-via-its-digital-silk-road-pub-81857>. There is no doubt that the concept of Digital Silk Road plays a role in state propaganda. Slogan politics approach suggests that propaganda towards an international audience is a key function of Chinese foreign policy concepts. It provides in-depth analysis over why there is neither a single coherent nor consistent “branding effort” or narrative among even Chinese state actors, let alone corporate actors who have been branding their corporate activities as key part of Digital Silk Road. Moreover, slogan politics approach suggests that Chinese foreign policies concept goes beyond propaganda. Slogans can also be used to test domestic and international support. Although the use or approval of a slogan is only a symbolic political gesture, it would not only bring benefits, but also negative consequences such as foreign pushback, as will be discussed.

¹⁶ Jinghan Zeng and Shaun Breslin, ‘China’s ‘new type of Great Power relations’: a G2 with Chinese characteristics?’, *International Affairs*, 92(4), 2016, pp. 773-794.

was not clearly defined – let alone holding any singular concrete geopolitical objective or implementation plan. The process of giving its meaning and substance happened in an incremental and subsequent manner, one was not only driven by competing interests among Chinese state actors, but also in a way that allowed considerable room for Chinese digital – often private – companies to shape the meaning of the Digital Silk Road for their own corporate agendas. This has produced a wide range of competing narratives about the concept of the Digital Silk Road, which is “less as a government-driven initiative than organically through the activities of China’s domestic tech giants and ICT industry”.¹⁷ As such, the Digital Silk Road has been loaded as an all-encompassing slogan consisting of bottom-up initiatives driven by company-level interests and agendas rather than a top-down geopolitical masterplan.

In this article, a slogan is defined as a short and distinct political phrase used “as a means of focusing attention and exhorting to action”.¹⁸ A slogan starkly contrasts with a multi-faceted geopolitical strategy or agenda because a slogan aims to attract the repetitive expression of a very broad idea, hence allowing for ample room for interpretation and reinterpretation. That is, a slogan can be interpreted in different ways and, thus, accommodate the interests of various domestic stakeholders. Very often, various actors, either political or economic, actively participate in the slogan communication process to seek influence and shape meaning.¹⁹ They enthusiastically support and shape the political slogan of the government to facilitate promoting their own interests in a conscious and unconscious manner.

In the case of the Digital Silk Road, broadly speaking, it represents a Chinese vision, in which China plays a leadership role in the global digital sector. Beyond this broad vision, it consists of neither a clear roadmap nor an implementation strategy, let alone a coherent narrative. Chinese digital actors, however, have enthusiastically advocated for this slogan to maximise their relevance in the BRI. This is quite understandable, given that the Digital Silk Road represents a reinterpretation of the BRI, reflecting the interest of Chinese state and nonstate digital actors who were not quite relevant in the original design of the BRI. This echo of the Digital Silk Road slogan among Chinese digital actors appears to support the grand strategy interpretation because it has further strengthened the inaccurate perception that (a) there is a coherent and consistent Digital Silk Road strategy to achieve a single Chinese geopolitical objective and (b) whatever Chinese digital actors do belongs to a nationally concerted effort in implementing this strategy.

The slogan politics approach, however, does not take China’s digital actors’ enthusiasm and words about the Digital Silk Road concept at face value. The concept of the Digital Silk Road is a generalised slogan to simplify a broad and vague Chinese government idea in relation to anything digital. For a Chinese digital actor to approve or use a slogan means adopting a political gesture rather than a specific government action. After all, there is neither specific government action to be adopted nor a coherent meaning of the slogan. Neither does it mean that China’s digital actors serve as state arms and are driven by national interests. For the digital actors, while claiming to support a national agenda, their company-level initiatives are

¹⁷ David Gordan and Meia Nouwens, ‘The Digital Silk Road: Introduction’, *The International Institute for Strategic Studies*, 6 December 2022, <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis//2022/12/digital-silk-road-introduction>.

¹⁸ Laurence Urdang and Ceila Robbins, *Slogans*, (Michigan: Gale Research Co, 1984), p. 17.

¹⁹ Jinghan Zeng, *Slogan Politics: Understanding Chinese Foreign Policy Concepts*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

primarily shaped by corporate interests. At the same time, while claiming to champion the Digital Silk Road, there remains a very competitive relationship among Chinese digital actors and considerable tension between the state and digital (often private) actors.

The rest of the article proceeds in four parts. The first part discusses how the Digital Silk Road represents a reinterpretation of the BRI and champions the interest of the Chinese digital sector. The second part explores the conceptual evolution of the Digital Silk Road, showing an incremental and subsequent development process. The third part challenges several key assumptions of the mainstream grand strategy analysis of the Digital Silk Road. The fourth part discusses the impact of geopolitics on Chinese digital actors' association with the slogan, which is then followed by concluding remarks.

From the Slogan of “Belt and Road” to “Digital Silk Road”

“One Belt One Road” – the former English translation of Belt and Road – was first introduced by Xi Jinping in September and October of 2013 respectively during his state visits to Kazakhstan and Indonesia. It consisted of the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road.” The former refers to proposed land routes via central Asia such as Kazakhstan - similar to China’s historical Silk Road - while the latter was about the Indo-Pacific sea routes from Southwest Asia such as Indonesia. The original idea was to promote China’s physical connectivity with the rest of the world via large-scale investment and infrastructure projects.

As previously mentioned, many have interpreted China’s BRI as a clearly defined, top-down “grand strategy”, driven by Beijing’s global ambition to reshape, or even dominate regional and international orders. This kind of analysis, however, fails to take sufficient consideration of its domestic complexity.²⁰ Given the nature of China’s political system, the design and implementation of the BRI involves a fragmented, internationalised and decentralised policy process in which different actors have participated and exerted their influence.²¹ Nowadays, the concept of the BRI has become a catchall slogan for Chinese domestic and international actors to load their own favoured interpretations.²² The competition over political and economic resources, for example, has led Chinese domestic actors to produce a wide range of competing and conflicting interpretations of the BRI.²³ A further example of this interpretation is the Digital Silk Road.

Indeed, the Digital Silk Road represents the Chinese digital sector’s favoured interpretation of the BRI, signalling a very different policy focus from the BRI’s original design. In other words, the Digital Silk Road is a reinterpretation of China’s BRI, shifting its focus from physical to virtual reality. When the BRI was first introduced, it was all about a physical world with a geographical focus to push for “physical connectivity”. Precisely because of the BRI’s conceptual ambiguity, the geographical coverage of the BRI expanded from China’s peripheral countries in 2013, Asia, Eastern Europe and Africa in 2014, to a global initiative

²⁰ Ye, ‘Fragmentation and Mobilization; Jones and Zeng, ‘Understanding China’s ‘Belt and Road Initiative’; He, ‘The Domestic Politics of the Belt and Road Initiative and its Implications’.

²¹ Jones and Zeng, ‘Understanding China’s ‘Belt and Road Initiative’.

²² Zeng, *Slogan Politics*, p.11.

²³ Zeng, ‘Narrating China's belt and road initiative’.

removing all geographical exclusiveness in 2015.²⁴ Hence, the virtual world championed by the Digital Silk Road did not exist in the original design of the BRI.

In this context, traditional infrastructure, especially transportation such as railways, roads, airports and bridges, was the soul of the BRI's original design; this was linked to China's steel overcapacity, in which the BRI was supposed to be one of the key solutions to address.²⁵ As such, the original version of the BRI was financed and implemented mainly by Chinese state-owned enterprises (SOEs)²⁶ who were regarded as the "main force" and "bellwether" in BRI development. In other words, SOEs, such as China State Construction and China Railway Group Limited, were at the centre of the BRI, which, at this point, had very little to do with the digital sector. Even when some BRI projects were communication infrastructure related, it was SOEs such as China Mobile leading those projects.²⁷ Consequently, private digital enterprises had limited relevance in China's "project of the century". Needless to say, this irrelevance was very undesirable for China's private digital actors, who were eager to be included in the BRI. As then Alibaba CEO Ma Yun pointed out in 2017, the BRI was mainly about SOEs; however, the BRI needed to be complemented by the participation of private companies such as Alibaba.²⁸

While the focus has gradually shifted from the physical to virtual space, the digital sector has come into the spotlight as a key participant in the BRI's development.²⁹ Private enterprises, in particular, have emerged as a significant force motivated by the state to play a larger role. For instance, the State Council issued a guideline on supporting the reform and development of private enterprises in 2019, which speaks highly of "the irreplaceable role" of private enterprises in China's development, innovation and opening up, encouraging the private sector to actively participate in major projects including the BRI.³⁰

²⁴ Zeng, *Slogan Politics*

²⁵ Zhongxin Ni, Xing Lu and Wenjun Xue, 'Does the belt and road initiative resolve the steel overcapacity in China? Evidence from a dynamic model averaging approach'. *Empirical Economy*, 61, 2021, pp. 279–307. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00181-020-01861-z>.

²⁶ Rafiq Dossani, Jennifer Bouey and Keren Zhu, 'Demystifying the Belt and Road Initiative: A Clarification of its Key Features, Objectives and Impacts', *RAND Working Papers*, May 2020, https://www.rand.org/pubs/working_papers/WR1338.html.

²⁷ Xun Yang, 'Yidayilu kan guoqi: Zhongguo Yidong zai Bajisitan de gush' [SOEs Hightlights in BRI: China Mobile in Pakistan], *People's Daily*, 3 April 2015, https://www.sohu.com/a/9362596_118321; 'Zhongguo Yidong canyu yidayilu gongjian qingkuang' [China Mobile's participation in the joint construction of BRI], *State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission*, 15 June 2017, <http://www.sasac.gov.cn/n4470048/n4470081/n4582104/c4594156/content.html>.

²⁸ Meng Liu, 'Mayun: eWTP shi yidayilu zhanlue de minjian tansuo' [Ma Yun: eWTP is the private exploration of the Belt and Road strategy], *CRI Online*, 24 March 2017, <https://www.yidayilu.gov.cn/xwzx/gnxw/9996.htm>.

²⁹ Rong Xiao, 'Zhongguo hulianwang yu yidayilu jianshe' [China's Internet Enterprises and the Belt and Road Construction], *Renminwang Lilun Pindao* [People's Daily Theory], 17 March 2016, <http://theory.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0317/c386965-28207641.html>; Lin Su, 'Wang Yongqing: Minying qiye shi yidayilu jianshe de zhongyao lilian' [Wang Yongqing: Private enterprises as an important force in the construction of BRI], *Jingji Ribao* [Economic Daily], 12 December 2018, http://www.ce.cn/xwzx/gnsz/gdxw/201812/12/t20181212_31019611.shtml.

³⁰ The State Council, 'Zhonggong zhongyang guowuyuan guanyu yingzaogenghao fazhan huanjing zhichi minying qiye gaige fazhan de yijian' [Opinions of the State Council on creating a better development environment to support the reform and development of private enterprises], 4 December 2019, <http://www.mofcom.gov.cn/article/b/g/202003/20200302947443.shtml>.

Table 1: Comparison Between the Original BRI and the Digital Silk Road

	Focus	Vision	Operation	Key domestic stakeholders
Original BRI	Traditional infrastructure such as highways, bridges and ports	“Physical” Connectivity	Government-level projects such as cross-regional public transportation project	Governmental actors SOEs
Digital Silk Road	“New” infrastructure such as AI, data center and Internet of Things	“Digital” Connectivity	Corporate-level projects such as e-commerce, education, and financial technology	Digital companies Private actors

Table 1 compares the original BRI and the Digital Silk Road, showing their differences in focus, vision, operation and key stakeholders. The rise of the Digital Silk Road from the BRI further confirms that the BRI has not been a well-defined, consistent and coherent “grand strategy” with concrete plans. Instead, it is a political slogan that is open to interpretation and subject to change.³¹ In this regard, the Digital Silk Road represents a reinterpretation of the BRI, advocating for the interests of the Chinese digital sector, whose agendas were neglected in the original design of the BRI. This birth context of the Digital Silk Road shows that the concept succeeds in key characteristics of the BRI: an all-encompassing slogan lacking conceptual coherency and consistency, which is further demonstrated by how the Digital Silk Road has emerged, as the following section will discuss.

The rise of the Digital Silk Road: an incremental and subsequent process

Relevant grand strategy interpretations often imply that Chinese foreign policy ideas have some sort of grand, sophisticated master vision whose realisation will be achieved by specific predesigned actions. Previous studies, however, have shown that Chinese foreign policy concepts, including the BRI, are not often complete ideas when first introduced;³² instead, their conceptual development follows an incremental and subsequent process. In other words, they are not “envisioned and planned thoroughly, then completed according to that design”.³³ Instead, they “are first announced to big fanfare, structures erected as declarations of intent, and only then filled with content”.³⁴ This article argues that this is also the case for the Digital Silk Road. It is an inconsistent idea that has been constantly evolving. Indeed, the Digital Silk Road has risen to the current prominence within the BRI largely thanks to the Cyberspace

³¹ Zeng, *Slogan Politics*.

³² Zeng and Breslin, ‘China’s ‘new type of Great Power relations’; Jinghan Zeng, Yuefan Xiao, and Shaun Breslin, Securing China’s Core Interests: The State of Debate in China, *International Affairs*, 91 (2), 2015, 245-266; Jinghan Zeng, Chinese views of global economic governance, *Third World Quarterly*, 40 (3), 2019, 578-594; Zeng, 'Narrating China's belt and road initiative'.

³³ Ian Johnson, *The Souls of China: The Return of Religion After Mao*. (Pantheon, 2017), p.79.

³⁴ Ibid.

Administration of China's own ministerial agenda, the rapid development of the Chinese digital sector and the unexpected shifting socio-political landscapes, instead of the BRI's top-level geopolitical masterplan.

The idea of the digital BRI first emerged in the name "Information Silk Road." In March 2015, the "Information Silk Road" was first proposed by the central guideline of the BRI. The "*Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road*" issued by the National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce, states the following:

"We should jointly advance the construction of cross-border optical cables and other communications trunk line networks, improve international communications connectivity, and create an *Information Silk Road*".³⁵

At the time, the central guideline refers to the Information Silk Road as communication network construction, especially optical cables.³⁶ This means that the focus of connectivity was drawn upon by building the fundamental communication infrastructure. By then, the key players were SOEs such as China Mobile, China Telecom and China Unicom, with a few roles for private actors such as Alibaba and Tencent.

This version of the digital BRI, however, was immediately challenged by the Cyberspace Administration of China³⁷ - China's national Internet regulator that previously had little to no role to stakes in the original BRI. In July 2015, only a few months after "Information Silk Road" was announced, the Cyberspace Administration of China made a public effort to expand and redefine the digital BRI to link it with its own jurisdiction, that is cyberspace. The Cyberspace Administration of China also chose the "Digital Silk Road" as the new name for the digital BRI. During the 1st China-EU Digital Cooperation Roundtable in Brussels on 6 July 2015, then-Director of the Cyberspace Administration of China Lu Wei publicly introduced the concept of the "Digital Silk Road":

"The Cyberspace Administration of China is committed to promote the digitalization, information, exchange and collaboration of cyberspace between China and the European Union. We will facilitate more Chinese Internet companies going out to Europe, and more European enterprises entering the Chinese market. We will build *cyber and digital Silk Road* together."³⁸

Lu's remarks do not only tie cyberspace with the digital BRI, but also highlight the critical role of Internet companies. Thus, this redefined digital BRI has paved a conceptual path for Chinese private digital actors such as Alibaba, Tencent, Xiaomi and Baidu to be part of the plan. Lu's version of the Digital Silk Road clearly departed from the previous "Information Silk Road" given by the National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and

³⁵ Emphasis added. The State Council, 'Tuidong gongjian sichou zhilu jingjidai he 21 shiji haishang sichou zhilu de yuanjing yu xingdong'[Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road], *Xinhua News*, 28 March 2015, <http://www.scio.gov.cn/31773/35507/35519/Document/1535279/1535279.htm>.

³⁶ Likang Wang, 'Xinxi sichou zhilu' [Information Silk Road], *Belt and Road Portal*, 25 October 2016, <https://www.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/zchj/rcjd/2176.htm>.

³⁷ Robert Koepp, 'Locating the Digital Silk Road in the Belt and Road Initiative', *Adelphi Series*, 60:487-489, 2020, pp. 37-50, DOI: 10.1080/19445571.2020.2151124.

³⁸ Jing Fu, Jia Liu and Shuang Hao, 'Lu Wei cu zhongou shenhua hezuo zao shuzi sichou zhilu' [Lu Wei promotes the further collaboration between China and Europe and make "Digital Silk Road"], *China Daily*, 6 July, 2015 https://www.guancha.cn/strategy/2015_07_07_325897.shtml

Ministry of Commerce, which focused on communication network construction and that was dominated by SOEs.

Since then, the Cyberspace Administration of China has launched a public campaign to promote its version of the Digital Silk Road.³⁹ On 17 July – only 11 days after Lu’s remarks, the Deputy Director of Cyberspace Administration of China Ren Xianliang delivered a keynote speech on “Jointly Build Digital Silk Road” at the 15th Forum on Internet Media of China – a forum guided by the Cyberspace Administration of China.⁴⁰ Ren’s speech encouraged China’s Internet media to be a good “communicator, narrator, champion and facilitator” of the BRI and jointly build the Digital Silk Road. The Cyberspace Administration of China also linked the Digital Silk Road with Internet Plus – a national strategy proposed by the then Chinese premier Li Keqiang in early 2015 that represented a Chinese version of Internet of Things.⁴¹ This further elevated the strategic significance of the concept by securing an additional endorsement from the top.⁴²

In December 2015, the Cyberspace Administration of China took advantage of its organised high-profile Second World Internet Conference to promote its Digital Silk Road idea. The conference not only had a “Digital Silk Road” subforum,⁴³ but it also produced the “Digital Silk Road” Construction Cooperation Declaration, which was considered one of its key achievements.⁴⁴ Because World Internet Conferences represent China’s efforts to promote its cyber governance idea, this move not only gave the Digital Silk Road another strategic edge by connecting it with China’s positions on global cyber governance, but it also further allowed the Cyberspace Administration of China to justify its growing role in the BRI. Needless to say, Xi Jinping’s participation in this conference gave considerable weight to endorse the idea of the Digital Silk Road.

Nonetheless, in March 2016, the State Council’s 13th Five-Year Plan on National Informatization continued to stick to the aforementioned version of the “Information Silk Road”, focusing on a traditional communication network construction. The digital BRI was mentioned with specific reference to “online Silk Road with the Arab countries” and “the China-ASEAN Information Harbor” in the context of developing high-speed, fibre-optic networks and promoting regional technological collaboration.⁴⁵

Despite this, the Cyberspace Administration of China’s Digital Silk Road and its expanded content gradually took the upper hand. In May 2017, the concept of the “Digital Silk Road” was officially used by Xi Jinping during the first Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, emphasising the essential role of innovation-driven development and frontier technologies.⁴⁶ At this stage, the content of the Digital Silk Road had significantly expanded beyond fibre-optic networks. As quoted at the beginning of the article, Xi elaborated on the concept to focus on digital economy, artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, quantum

³⁹ Koepp, ‘Locating the Digital Silk Road’.

⁴⁰ Guangming Daily, Di shiwu jie zhongguo wangluo meiti luntan zai Zhanjiang juxing, [The 15th Forum on Internet Media of China was organized in Zhanjiang], *Guangming Daily*, 18 July 2015, https://epaper.gmw.cn/gmr/html/2015-07/18/nw.D110000gmr_20150718_2-02.htm

⁴¹ Koepp, ‘Locating the Digital Silk Road’.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Yiran Liu, Junjing Wang and Xiaojun Liu, ‘Di erjie shijie hulianwang dahui: baihua hulianwang jingcai weilai’ [The Second World Internet Conference: Drawing a Wonderful Future of the Internet], *Xinhua News*, 18 December 2015 http://www.xinhuanet.com/world/2015-12/18/c_128546042.htm.

⁴⁴ Sheng Xu and Zheng Wang, ‘Di erjie shijie hulianwang dahui fabu 20 duo xiang chengguo’ [The 2nd World Internet Conference published over 20 achievements], *Xinhua News*, 18 December 2015, http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2015-12/18/content_5025691.htm.

⁴⁵ The State Council, ‘Shisanwu guojia xinxihua guihua’ [The 13th Five-Year Plan for National Informatization Development], 15 December 2016, http://www.gov.cn/zhengce/content/2016-12/27/content_5153411.htm.

⁴⁶ ‘Full text of President Xi’s speech at opening of Belt and Road forum’.

computing, big data, cloud computing and smart cities so as to turn them into a *Digital Silk Road* of the 21st Century.⁴⁷

Following this, in April 2018 at the National Conference on Cyber Security and Informatization organised by the Cyberspace Administration of China, Xi further stressed the concept of Digital Silk Road, highlighting the necessity to strengthen cooperation with the BRI countries, especially with the developing ones, in network infrastructure construction, digital economy, cyber security and other aspects and promote global cyber governance.⁴⁸ In 2019, at the opening ceremony of the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, more focus was placed on the Digital Silk Road. The forum spotlighted the role of the fourth industrial revolution and opportunities for digital, networked and intelligent development.⁴⁹ A separate forum dedicated to the Digital Silk Road was held to discuss development in areas such as digital economy, artificial intelligence and smart cities.⁵⁰ The idea of “new infrastructure” has attracted growing attention since 2019, which is reflected in the linkage between infrastructure and informatised, networked and innovative technology, hence pointing to the need to promote digital transformation and technological innovation.⁵¹

The rapid advancement of digital technologies at home and the international context for technological competition also contributed to the rise of the Digital Silk Road. Against the backdrop of heightened US-China tensions, the role of digital infrastructure and the economy became more important than ever. The pandemic also shed light on digital technology by necessitating distance learning, e-commerce and working from home. The new lifestyle and work requirements during the pandemic empowered China’s digital actors and, thus, the idea of the Digital Silk Road. Meanwhile, the pandemic also made major physical infrastructure projects less attractive and financially difficult. Thus, “digital connectivity” became a vital alternative to carry on the momentum of the BRI. Some even highlight the different characteristics in its focus, scope and state-business relationship, claiming that the Digital Silk Road is “a larger initiative” that might be less dependent on the development of the BRI.⁵²

As shown in Table 2, while the Digital Silk Road emerged from within the BRI, Chinese state actors fed new meanings into the new slogan. It is an incrementally evolving process with a shifted focus from *physical* to *virtual* connectivity, from *traditional* to *new* infrastructure. When the digital dimension of the BRI was first raised in the official document, it was simply concerned with the communication network infrastructure, optical cable in particular. Gradually, new meanings - such as advanced technology, innovation, cyber security and digital

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ ‘Xi Jinping chuxi quanguo wangluo anquan he xinxihua gongzuo huiyi bing fabiao zhongyao jianghua’ [Xi Jinping attended and addressed the National Conference on Network Security and Informatization], *Xinhua News*, 21 April 2018, http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2018-04/21/content_5284783.htm.

⁴⁹ ‘Xi’s keynote speech at the opening ceremony of the second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation’, *Xinhua News*, 27 April 2019, <https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/home/rolling/88233.htm>.

⁵⁰ Miaomiao Lin, ‘Shuzi sichou zhilu fenluntan jujiao chuangxin qudong shuzi jingjideng lingyu fazhan’ [Digital Silk Road Sub-Forum focuses on innovation-driven development in areas such as the digital economy], *Xinhua News*, 26 April 2019, http://www.gov.cn/xinwen/2019-04/26/content_5386440.htm.

⁵¹ ‘Getting to know China’s new infrastructure projects’, *CGTN*, 6 May 2020, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-05-06/Getting-to-know-China-s-new-infrastructure-projects-QfIOLy9khq/index.html>; ‘Xin Jijian jiuqing xin zai hechu? Yinggai cong hechu fali?’ [What is new about New Infrastructure? Where should effort be taken?], *People’s Daily*, 7 June 2020, <https://tech.sina.com.cn/it/2020-06-07/doc-iirczymk5660292.shtml>.

⁵² Meia Nouwens et. al., ‘China’s Digital Silk Road: Integration into National IT Infrastructure and Wider Implications for Western Defence Industries’, *The International Institute for Strategic Studies*, February 2021, p.7, https://admin.govexec.com/media/china_digital_silk_road_-_iiss_research_paper.pdf.

transformation - were added to infrastructure construction, closely associating infrastructure with the digitalised, innovative development of the BRI.

Moreover, the conceptual evolution of the Digital Silk Road should not be understood as driven by a coherent move but by different state actors with their own ministerial agendas. After all, the documents and conferences indicated in Table 2 were organised by different state actors. As new state actors became involved in agenda setting, new content was fed into the concept of the Digital Silk Road. The success of the Cyberspace Administration of China's Digital Silk Road secured this state actor's prominent and growing role in the BRI. This example shows how state actors in regulatory statehood can influence central guidelines by direct and indirect approaches to advance their own departmental interests and agendas.⁵³ As such, the final foreign policy outcomes are not necessarily a result of top-level design but rather are a form of struggle among various actors over power and resources.⁵⁴ This domestic competition over power and resources is more visible among Chinese market actors who claim to be champions of the Digital Silk Road, as will be discussed in the following section.

Table 2: The evolving process of the Digital Silk Road concept

Conceptual Term	Time	Occasion	Focus	Key State Actors
Information Silk Road	March 2015	“Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st-Century Maritime Silk Road”	communication network construction especially optical cables	National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce (under the State Council)
Online/Cyber and Digital Silk Road	6 July 2015 17 July 2015 Dec. 2015	1 st China–EU Digital Cooperation Roundtable in Brussels 15 th Forum on Internet Media of China 2 nd World Internet Conference	digitalisation, cyber development and cyberspace security	Cyberspace Administration of China/ Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Office of the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission
Online/Cyber Silk Road	March 2016	The 13 th Five-year plan	high-speed fibre-optic networks	The State Council

⁵³ Jones and Zeng, 'Understanding China's 'Belt and Road Initiative'; Lee Jones and Shahar Hameiri, *Fractured China: How State Transformation is Shaping China's Rise* (Cambridge University Press, 2021)

⁵⁴ Ibid

Digital Silk Road	2017	The 1 st BRI Forum	innovation-driven development and frontier technologies	National Development and Reform Commission, Development Research Center of the State Council, Ministry of Transport, Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Finance, People's Bank of China, International Department of the CCP, Publicity Department of the CCP
Digital Silk Road	2018	National Conference on Cyber Security and Informatization	network infrastructure construction, digital economy, network security and other aspects	Cyberspace Administration of China/ CCP Office of the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission
Digital Silk Road	2019	The 2 nd BRI Forum	the fourth industrial revolution and the opportunities for digital, networked and intelligent development	National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Transport, Ministry of Commerce, Ministry of Finance, People's Bank of China, International Department of the CCP, Publicity Department of the CCP, Ministry of Science and Technology, Office of the Central Cyberspace Affairs Commission, Ministry of Ecology and Environment, Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries, Beijing Municipal Government

National teams with collective interest in the Digital Silk Road?

As previously mentioned, the BRI has brought enormous business opportunities that Chinese digital actors are eager to explore, and the Digital Silk Road provides a conceptual basis for

them to stay relevant. Not surprisingly, Chinese digital actors have actively echoed the slogan of the Digital Silk Road to signal their support. This response can be easily interpreted as a nationally concerted effort to faithfully advance geopolitical goals, and thus being used as empirical evidence to support the grand strategy interpretation of the Digital Silk Road. To some extent, it highlights the role of China's major technology companies recruited as "national teams" in participating in the state's new infrastructure campaign, promoting Chinese state-defined interests and exporting the "top-down" "state-centric" digital governance model.⁵⁵ This line of analyses, however, over-interprets the strategic intention of the Digital Silk Road and is based on a series of misguided assumptions including (a) a top-down translation of state agenda into company-level actions, (b) a command-obedience relationship between Chinese state and business actors and (c) a harmonious and well-coordinated Chinese business community to advance singular state goals.

The first problematic assumption of grand strategy interpretation is that what Chinese digital business actors claim to do under the umbrella of the Digital Silk Road is a top-down translation of the central state's will to advance Beijing's geopolitical objectives. A grand strategy analysis even mistakenly considers every Digital Silk Road project as a product of "top-level policy design".⁵⁶ This has taken the words of China's digital actors at face value and neglected their private capitalist nature. Indeed, company-level actions in the Chinese digital sector are not simply guided by the state agenda but are considerations involving their private corporate interests. Take Alibaba, a Chinese e-commerce giant, and its Electronic World Trade Platform (eWTP) as an example. The eWTP has been exaggerated by an analyst as "the last instalment of a long-standing grand strategy, the Digital Silk Road."⁵⁷ However, in fact, it was Alibaba's bottom-up company initiative to expand its business in the global e-commerce market by supporting small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in developing countries to lower the barriers to global trade.

To associate its own business plan with the Digital Silk Road, Alibaba has put forward a narrative to define the Digital Silk Road as a road for "global free trade" with support from digital technology.⁵⁸ This is hardly surprising given that Alibaba's core business lies in e-commerce, specifically with the goal of creating the largest electronic trade platform in the world. Since Alibaba initiated eWTP in 2016, it has been trying to brand the idea of eWTP as a part of the BRI. For example, when asked how to view the fact that Malaysia simultaneously joined eWTP and the BRI – an interesting question implying a competitive relation between eWTP and the BRI –, Ma Yun answered that eWTP is a folk exploration of the BRI, which

⁵⁵ Fergus Ryan, Audrey Fritz and Daria Impiombato, 'Reining in China's technology giants', *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, Report No. 46, 2021, <https://www.aspi.org.au/index.php/report/mapping-chinas-technology-giants-reining-chinas-technology-giants>; Martijn Rasser, 'Networked: Techno-Democratic Statecraft for Australia and the Quad', *Center for a New American Security*, 19 January 2021, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/networked-techno-democratic-statecraft-for-australia-and-the-quad>; Hungerland and Chan, 'Assessing China's Digital Silk Road'.

⁵⁶ Bosetti, 'The Digital Silk Road', p. 6.

⁵⁷ Bosetti, 'The Digital Silk Road', p.22.

⁵⁸ Wenli Gu, 'Alibaba tuiguang jianshe shuzi sichou zhilu' [Alibaba promotes the development of Digital Silk Road], *Xinhua News*, 19 April 2017, <https://www.imsilkroad.com/news/p/17007.html>.

“*can be*” interpreted as Alibaba’s participation in and support of the BRI.⁵⁹ To Ma, the BRI lacked the participation of private companies⁶⁰:

“eWTP has paid great attention to the strategy and implementation of the ‘Belt and Road’ from the first day. We believe that with the participation of eWTP, the ‘Belt and Road’ can be made more lovely. This is *our own initiative*, and we *hope to be* part of the ‘Belt and Road’ strategy” (emphasis added).⁶¹

Meanwhile, Alibaba has also put forward narratives to link its eWTP with the ancient silk Road. Song Juntao, the director of Alibaba Group and head of the eWTP, for example, has argued the following:

“The ancient Silk Road was connected through stations, and the digital road of eWTP consists of many digital hubs - digital free trade zones, which are interconnected and provide one-stop services, conveniently serving global SMEs”.⁶²

All of these have shown that, rather than an initiative translated from Beijing’s political will, eWTP is a company initiative that self-claims to be a part of the BRI and the key pioneer of the Digital Silk Road. To highlight its relevance to the Digital Silk Road for its corporate interests, Alibaba makes a connection between eWTP and the state initiative while promoting the link between a physical Silk Road and virtual one. In other words, it is a bottom-up business initiative trying to promote its relevance to and shape the meaning of the Digital Silk Road.

The second inaccurate assumption is considering profit-driven business actors as loyal state subordinates driven by grand state goals and national interest⁶³ and under the CCP’s “absolute power”.⁶⁴ On the contrary, to pursue their own corporate interests, even Chinese SOEs have often diverged from the will of Beijing’s central state agencies, as previous Belt and Road studies have shown.⁶⁵ Although there is little doubt that the Chinese state has a considerable influence over the private business sector, Chinese digital actors are not faithful order-takers of their government. Indeed, the Chinese state and digital tech companies have developed a complicated interdependent relationship, in which powerful tech giants have considerable influence over state agendas. On the one hand, the state depends on digital actors to support China’s digital development and champion the Digital Silk Road. Some national policies, including the National Informatization Development Strategy, Made in China 2025 and Internet Plus, also highlight the state’s dependence on the digital sector in developing capabilities in digital technologies and services and achieving greater technological autonomy. Thus, a favourable environment is provided by the state for private, digital companies to grow

⁵⁹ Yang Zuo, ‘Mayun dingyi eWTP: yidayilu changyi de minjian tansuo’ [Ma Yun defines eWTP: the folk exploration of BRI], *Wuhan Evening News*, 24 March 2017, <http://finance.china.com.cn/roll/20170324/4148535.shtml>.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Gu, ‘Alibaba tuiguang jianshe shuzi sichou zhilu’.

⁶³ For example, becoming a “cyber superpower”. See Hungerland and Chan, ‘Assessing China’s Digital Silk Road’, p. 4.

⁶⁴ Ryan et al., ‘Reining in China’s technology giants’; Samantha Hoffman, ‘The U.S.-China data fight Is only getting started’, *Foreign Policy*, 22 July 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/07/22/data-tiktok-china-us-privacy-policies/>.

⁶⁵ Jones and Zeng, ‘Understanding China’s ‘Belt and Road Initiative’.

at home and abroad, which helps them form partnerships with local governments and expand their overseas market in the existing digital ecosystem.⁶⁶

On the other hand, digital actors have relied on the state for the leeway to influence state policy and opportunity to operate and grow “as lightly regulated national oligopolies”.⁶⁷ In the expanding digital landscape, state interests have become tangled with those of the private digital sector; thus, the state business partnership has increasingly shaped policy-making regarding digital development in China and potentially beyond.⁶⁸ As Yu Hong puts it, “Private cyber giants...have gained considerable political influence, have parlayed into a cyber-business-friendly legal and regulatory approach ...”.⁶⁹

Indeed, the influence of tech giants in Chinese society and the economy has risen to a point that leads of considerable concern from the Chinese government’s perspective. Not surprisingly, tensions between the state and powerful digital actors have rapidly grown in recent years. To assert state control, the Chinese government has issued new guidelines and laws to tighten its control over the digital sector and launched a campaign to set up new regulations and rules, targeting the monopoly of top digital actors. Both Alibaba and Tencent, for example, were fined for violating the Anti-Monopoly Law.⁷⁰ To comply with new laws, Chinese tech giants have undergone painful transformation. Some in the Chinese digital sector openly expressed their concerns about the tightening of state restrictions. For example, soon after Ant Group’s US\$34.5bn initial public offering was scuttled by the Chinese government in 2020, Fred Hu, an investor in Ant Group who sits on Ant’s board, warned, “You can either have absolute control or you can have a dynamic, innovative economy. But it’s doubtful you can have both.”⁷¹ State-business relations are more complicated when it comes to the Digital Silk Road because it is more exposed to transnational business and capital. As such, the company initiatives under the all-encompassing slogan of the Digital Silk Road are likely to be shaped by the “complex and sometimes unpredictable power relations between different state agencies and various units of capital”.⁷²

The third misguided assumption of the grand strategy interpretation is that Chinese business actors in the digital sector are well coordinated by the state to work collaboratively for the sake of national interest. It is argued that Chinese tech companies take “a concerted effort” to reach the “state-mandated targets in emerging technologies”⁷³, imposing tighter

⁶⁶ Elisa Oreglia, Hongyi Ren and Chia-Chi Liao, ‘The Puzzle of the Digital Silk Road’, in Kassenova, Nargis and Duprey, Brendan (eds) *Digital Silk Road in Central Asia: Present and Future*, (Cambridge, MA: Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies, 2021), https://daviscenter.fas.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/files/2021-10/Digital_Silk_Road_Report_2021.pdf.

⁶⁷ Chunmeizi Su and Terry Flew, ‘The rise of Baidu, Alibaba and Tencent (BAT) and their role in China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)’. *Global Media and Communication*, 17(1), 2021, pp. 67–86. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742766520982324>.

⁶⁸ Lianrui Jia, ‘Going Public and Going Global: Chinese Internet Companies and Global Finance Networks’, *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, 13(1), 2018, pp. 17–36, <https://doi.org/10.16997/wpcc.280>.

⁶⁹ Yu Hong, Pivot to Internet Plus: Molding China’s digital economy for economic restructuring?, *International Journal of Communication*, 11, 2017, pp. 1486-1506.

⁷⁰ ‘China’s revised Anti-Monopoly Law to come into effect on August 1’, *Global Times*, 24 June 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202206/1268947.shtml>.

⁷¹ Li Yuan, ‘Why China Turned Against Jack Ma’, *The New York Times*, 24 December 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/24/technology/china-jack-ma-alibaba.html>.

⁷² Shen, ‘Building a Digital Silk Road?’, p. 2695.

⁷³ Lara Williams, ‘Advantage China? Digital Silk Road looks to upset US tech supremacy’, *Investment Monitor*, 9 March 2021, <https://www.investmentmonitor.ai/features/advantage-china-digital-silk-road-looks-to-upset-us-tech-supremacy/>.

Internet control via the “Belt and Router” of the Digital Silk Road⁷⁴ and expand China’s digital influence both regionally and globally.⁷⁵ This has taken the high-profile support of the Digital Silk Road at its face value, neglecting the capitalist nature of the Chinese digital sector. In China’s profit-driven market, digital corporations are driven by competing economic interests rather than shared geopolitical agendas. Despite championing the same slogan of the Digital Silk Road, Chinese digital actors have fiercely competed over the market and state resources.

Tencent, for example, has put forward a different narrative than that of Alibaba to define the Digital Silk Road. In line with Tencent’s digital culture business strategy, the CEO of Tencent, Pony Ma Huateng, has argued that China’s digital cultural products are “new silk”, so China should actively develop international collaboration via digital cultural industry to enhance “connectivity” that Tencent’s current oversea business activities can support.⁷⁶ In other words, Alibaba and Tencent have put forward competing narratives of the Digital Silk Road, that is, digital cultural exchange versus global e-commerce. Although both appear to champion the same slogan, Alibaba and Tencent are advancing different agendas driven by their own corporate preferences. In other words, digital companies take different approaches to understanding and implementing the slogan of the Digital Silk Road, one tailored to their own strengths and interests.

Beyond the different narratives, both Tencent and Alibaba have been competing to secure state resources, not to mention the existing race and intricate dynamics between the two tech giants, even though they have increasingly similar portfolios after a series of merging and acquisition measures.⁷⁷ In a wide range of digital areas, from mobile payment and e-commerce to smart city initiatives, they rival each other and other counterparts for funding and government support to develop their business both in the domestic and international markets. At home, the war between them has touched all sectors of the Chinese technology ecosystem, from mobile payment and delivery platforms to cloud services and smart cities.⁷⁸ For instance, they have fiercely competed over the partnership with the Hainan government after the official announcement of the Hainan Pilot Free Trade Zone plan in 2018 because Hainan is taken as “a vital node” in the BRI projects and “on the forefront of China's integration with Southeast Asian countries”.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Stewart M Patrick and Ashley Feng, ‘Belt and Router: China Aims for Tighter Internet Controls with Digital Silk Road’, *Council on Foreign Relations Blog*, 2 July 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/belt-and-router-china-aims-tighter-internet-controls-digital-silk-road>.

⁷⁵ David F. Gordon, Haoyu Tong and Tabatha Anderson, ‘Beyond the Myths – Towards a Realistic Assessment of China’s Belt and Road Initiative: The Security Dimension’, *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, 16 September 2020, <https://www.iiss.org/research-paper//2020/09/beyond-the-myths-of-the-bri>

⁷⁶ ‘Ma Huateng: shuzi jingji wei zhongguo qiye pule yitiao xin sichou zhilu’ [Ma Huateng: The digital economy has paved a new "Silk Road" for Chinese enterprises], *The Paper*, 28 May 2017, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1696229

⁷⁷ For instance, between Alibaba and Tencent, the contest is exemplified in Alipay v.s. WeChat Pay in mobile payment, Elema v.s. Meituan in food delivery, AliCloud v.s. Tencent Cloud in cloud computing and WeChat Work and Dingtalk in social media and messaging. See for example, ‘Diguozhengba: Tengxun Ali juezhu neidi huliangwang bazhu’ [Rivalry between Tencent and Alibaba, competing for the mainland Internet hegemony], *Ifeng Tech*, <https://tech.ifeng.com/internet/special/qqsali/>; Eustance Huang and Aijun Kharpal, ‘Tencent falls from fresh record high as it battles Alibaba for title of Asia’s biggest company’, *CNBC*, 24 June 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/06/24/tencent-and-alibaba-in-a-battle-for-title-of-asias-biggest-company.html>

⁷⁸ A.J. Cortese, ‘Alibaba vs. Tencent: The War Shaping China’s Tech Industry’, *Pandaily*, 12 August 2019, <https://pandaily.com/alibaba-vs-tencent-the-war-shaping-chinas-tech-industry/>.

⁷⁹ ‘Hainan FTP along China's Belt and Road’, *CGTN*, April 18, 2021, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2021-04-18/Hainan-FTP-along-China-s-Belt-and-Road-ZoCJVSL5g4/index.html>.

This domestic contest between Tencent and Alibaba has spilled onto the global digital landscape along with the rise of the Digital Silk Road. The Southeast Asian market, for example, is a battleground, with the contest between Lazada and Shopee in Southeast Asia largely exemplifying the Alibaba-Tencent race. To expand their overseas markets in Southeast Asia, Alibaba acquired a controlling stake of Lazada with a total investment of approximately USD-1 billion in 2016⁸⁰, while Tencent has invested in the parent company SEA of Shopee in 2015. Although it is expected that the online retail market in Southeast Asia has considerable growing potential, Lazada and Shopee, as the top two e-commerce platforms in Southeast Asia that are backed by Alibaba and Tencent respectively, have been fighting for business opportunities in the region.⁸¹

In commercial competition, the digital sector often uses the slogan of the BRI or the Digital Silk Road to win domestic political support and gain market access.⁸² In other words, in the name of the Digital Silk Road or BRI, fierce domestic competition among Chinese tech giants has taken place, here driven by zero-sum corporate rather than collective national interest - a reality against the grand strategy analysis of “a nationally concerted effort”.

The slogan politics approach provides a simple explanation of the above dynamics. The Digital Silk Road is a generalised slogan whose meanings are open to interpretation. Precisely because of this, the slogan is able to accommodate the diverse interests of Chinese digital actors. Although all echo the same slogan of the Digital Silk Road, Chinese digital companies have been advocating for very different agendas. This makes the Digital Silk Road an all-encompassing slogan, consisting of various bottom-up company initiatives. Hence, the slogan communication of the Digital Silk Road is not simply a top-down approach but a two-way, dynamic process, involving central, subnational, local, international and market actors, reflecting their diverse and sometimes conflicting agendas.

Political Backfire?

For Chinese digital actors, politically binding with the slogan of the Digital Silk Road offers them opportunities to access state resources and ways to influence national agendas. To rebrand their overseas business activities under the umbrella of the Digital Silk Road seems to be a very cost-effective strategy because, as they continue to do what they are already doing, it not only boosts the profile of those company initiatives, but it also enhances business-state bonds and appeals to China’s patriotic market. This strategy, however, has become increasingly problematic in international markets, especially Western liberal democratic countries, in light of the growing US-China tensions into which Chinese digital actors have been increasingly dragged.

The US-China tech war has contributed to the rising national security narrative that

⁸⁰ ‘Alibaba Acquires Controlling Stake in E-commerce Platform Lazada’, *Alibaba*, 12 April 2016, <https://www.alibabagroup.com/en-US/document-1491525894831865856>.

⁸¹ Shi Ling, ‘Dongnanya kuajing dianshang zhengduo zhan: Shopee xiangzuoLazada xiangyou’ [Southeast Asia’s cross-border e-commerce battle: Shopee to the left, Lazada to the right], *qq.com*, 19 January 2021, <https://new.qq.com/rain/a/20210119A01BS800>; Rebecca Ren, ‘Lazada, Shopee Battle It out as Backer Alibaba, Tencent Shift Power in Southeast Asia’, *Pingwest*, 15 November 2019, <https://en.pingwest.com/a/4088>.

⁸² Laraib Farhat, ‘BAT and the BRI: A dive into China’s Digital Economy’, *Institute of Regional Studies Islamabad*, February 2021, <http://irs.org.pk/Focus/12FocusFeb21.pdf>.

Chinese digital actors operate as the arms of the Chinese government to achieve its geopolitical ambition. Their high-profile association with the slogan of the Digital Silk Road has further strengthened this narrative, regardless of the reality. Nowadays, the overseas business activities of Chinese tech enterprises, both SOEs and private ones, have been under tremendous pressure as a result of geopolitical and security concerns in the West. For example, Chinese tech giant Huawei, a national champion of the Digital Silk Road, has been crippled by the sanctions of the US and its allies in recent years. For Ant Group, before the Chinese government scuttled its initial public offering in 2020, it was forced to abandon its purchase of MoneyGram because of US concerns about national security in 2018.⁸³ Under America's "Clean Network" programme, Chinese applications are cornered, and Chinese companies are prohibited from accessing US cloud systems. Also, under the US's Digital Connectivity and Cybersecurity Partnership framework, Chinese digital tech companies have to face a barrage of issues amid a backdrop of the US-China rivalry that has hindered the development of China's digital plans.⁸⁴

Moreover, the growing US-China tensions have put increasing weight on value-driven technology development. Given the heavy use of digital means, including facial recognition technology, grid management in smart cities and virtual passports commonly known as "health code" in pandemic prevention and surveillance in China, this form of a digital governance model is liable to be attached a label such as "digital authoritarianism" or even "digital illiberalism", which points to the oppressive and abusive use of digital technologies in monitoring society. These narratives would severely damage the image of the Digital Silk Road and associated Chinese digital companies, which are considered faithful executors of "digital authoritarianism". Under these international circumstances, relating Chinese digital tech companies' activities to the political slogan of the Digital Silk Road is not cost free. As some scholars have noted, the slogan of the Digital Silk Road may turn out to have side effects on the commercial opportunities of Chinese companies to expand overseas in the changing international context.⁸⁵

Concluding Remarks

As this article has shown, despite a broad Chinese aspiration to be a global leader, the concept of the Digital Silk Road consists of neither coherent nor consistent specifics. As a slogan, it is open to interpretation, leaving room for Chinese digital actors to shape its meaning in their preferred ways and, thus, accommodate their interests. Chinese digital actors have actively echoed the slogan to advance their own interests. Hence, the Digital Silk Road is not behind a nationally concerted effort for Beijing's geopolitical objectives, but its practices are promoted by some state agencies and formed by various self-claimed company-level initiatives driven by diverse company interests. This suggests that a harsh warning about how this

⁸³ Alex Rolfe, 'Ant Financial forced to abandon MoneyGram purchase due to US regulatory pressure', *Mobile Payments World*, 3 January 2018, <https://www.mobilepaymentsworld.com/ant-financial-forced-abandon-moneygram-purchase/>.

⁸⁴ Feng Jiang and Qingxin Lan, 'Shuzi yidayilu jianshe de jiyu tiaozhan ji lujing yanjiu' [Research on the opportunities, challenges and paths of digital BRI construction], *Dangdai jingji guanli* [Contemporary Economic Management], 22 October 2020, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_9680978.

⁸⁵ Yushu Liu and Yuwen Liu, 'Shuzi sichou zhilu xiangguan gainian yu fazhan mailuo' [The Concept and development of Digital Silk Road], *Juece yu xinxi* [Decision and Information], 11, 2018, pp. 78-84; Shen, 'Building a Digital Silk Road?'

umbrella slogan has helped China win its digital race with the US has been a vast exaggeration and produced unnecessary anxieties. Thus, a countermeasure strategy to compete with such an umbrella slogan is an overreaction that mistakenly identifies an extremely loose, shifting target to aim for.

This does not deny either the geopolitical impact of the Digital Silk Road or the rise of the Chinese digital sector. On the contrary, the aggregated Chinese digital actors' transnational activities have no doubt increased state influence at the global stage. The rise of China's digital sector has already attracted considerable admiration from some developing countries, who view China's digital governance as an ideal role model. Nonetheless, at the time of writing, the concept of the Digital Silk Road is not a coherent, geo-strategic masterplan that has unfolded in a top-down manner to produce this reality.

In the near future, with growing geopolitical tensions and the development of China's digital sector, the Chinese government may adjust its approach regarding the Digital Silk Road. Instead of keeping it as a loose slogan, an option is to make more state efforts to sponsor and coordinate Chinese private companies' engagement in the Digital Silk Road. The state may further tighten its control over the pivotal realm of China's digital sector because some consider it "too important to leave in private hands".⁸⁶ These policy directions may help advance specific policy agendas and, thus, achieve certain foreign policy objectives regarding the digital realm; however, it will no doubt paint more geopolitical colours on the slogan of the Digital Silk Road and its associated Chinese companies, which will further legitimise counter China strategy from countries that are anxious about China's growing influence in the global digital sector.

⁸⁶ Shaoshan Liu, 'The Future of State-Sponsored AI Research in China', *The Diplomat*, 25 March, 2023, <https://thediplomat.com/2023/03/the-future-of-state-sponsored-ai-research-in-china/>.