

## The Digital Silk Road

Jonathan E. Hillman, 'The Digital Silk Road,' *Centre for Strategic and International Studies*, (2020) 320.

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Jonathan E. Hillman offers an engrossing and discerning insight that sheds light on China's ambitions to dominate the global digital infrastructure in his book, "The Digital SILK Road." Hillman is a Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies. He has scientifically cross-examined the genesis and perspective of China's economic statecraft and technology policy.

The book covers technical and economic aspects of China's digital infrastructure and dilates as to how China is leveraging its state-owned enterprises and strategic investments to build and control digital networks around the world. Through his analysis, he gives compelling insight into geopolitical prognosis of the events in the past responsible for the genesis of structural changes in the global economy.

The book is divided into seven chapters. It discusses how the digital age is dawned in 1990, through 'Techno optimism approached techno-evangelism.' The current state of global telecommunications infrastructure, and the competition between China and the USA for control over it is analysed threadbare. It discusses China's digital Silk Road initiative which seeks to expand its influence by building telecommunication networks, and providing digital infrastructure across the developing world.

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The book goes on to explain that the export restrictions that prohibit high-tech telecommunications equipment exports to China was lifted on March 31, 1994. Respected elites from the public and corporate sectors on both sides participated in this technocratic illusion. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is constructing a vast surveillance state within its borders with the assistance of the US tech corporations. The fact that the CCP made its objectives clear makes the narrative even more surprising.

In chapter three, the author notes that Western companies provide China with access to the latest technologies and best business practices, allowing it to establish the largest social monitoring network. With the US destruction of Iraqi telecommunications in 2003, Huawei secures a \$275mn contract for wireless services in the country and later do something familiar in Afghanistan. As Jon Alterman, a Middle East scholar whom Hillman references, painfully points out, the US is fighting but not winning in the Middle East, the Chinese are winning but not fighting.

China's growing surveillance state and the role that advanced technologies such as Artificial Intelligence and facial recognition is well explored in the fourth chapter of the book. The author has worked on the estimated number of surveillance cameras that are expected to be installed in China by 2021. He has intricately observed the potential risks and concerns associated with China's growing use of surveillance technologies and their impact on privacy and human rights.

In Chapter Five, the author discusses the various networks that China is building as part of its digital Silk Road initiative. As part of this initiative, China is investing in a number of digital infrastructure projects, including fiber optics and data centers. In the author's view, the major development of the telecommunication network in China is to become a leader in 5G technology and to build undersea cables that

connect countries around the world. If China is building these cables, it is particular in pursuing to expand its global connectivity and reduce western-owned cables.

Hillman has discussed the contestation over global standards for Information and communication technologies (ICT) and China's quest to develop and promote its own standards in chapter six of the book. He explains that the precipitated historical nexus between US-China's telecommunication companies remain a continued challenge. China's rapid technological advancement and its growing dominance in areas such as 5G, artificial intelligence, and cloud computing has enabled China to play a leading role in shaping the future of the digital economy.

The technology is also expected to promote democracy in the world but things are going anti-clock because digital authoritarianism has supremacy. It is generally assumed that democracies are promoting technology. Democrats & Republicans, both are of the opinion to group together with democracies to compete with China.

To conclude, the author postulates that "Connecting China and the World by the Digital Silk Road; China's quest to wire the world and win the future," provides insightful observations into one of China's most significant efforts to expand its global connectivity through the area of economics, data governance, cyber security, and intellectual proper rights, and its potential impact on the future of digital governance and international relations. On one hand, this initiative has the potential to promote economic growth and connectivity between China and other countries, which could help in bridging the digital divide and create new opportunities for innovation and cooperation. It also raises important questions about data governance, cybersecurity, intellectual property rights, and technology transfer as well as concerns about China's growing digital influence. As China's push to become a leader in technology and innovation has been accompanied by allegations of intellectual property theft and forced technology

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transfer from Western companies, these issues could limit the potential benefits and create tension between China and Western countries.

Finally, the author gives a well-balanced analysis and his perception should be viewed positively instead of being prejudiced. All stakeholders should get benefits from China's success instead of sabotaging its efforts. A sense of fraternity should prevail in the world through which the deprived and weaker countries can get their share too. If any intervention is made with the intention to disturb the peace of other countries, it must be rejected. The author suggests that all the leading democracies and major emerging markets need to collaborate with China in research and development by setting up open technical standards and ethical norms related to emerging digital technology. Since COVID-19 has exposed the world to newer economic challenges, such a joint collaboration, particularly with the private sector would not only ensure high-quality equipment, the competitive price would make the technology accessible to all consumers. ■