Review – The Digital Silk Road

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The Digital Silk Road: China's Quest to Wire the World and Win the Future
By Jonathan E. Hillman
Harper Collins, 2021

The 21st Century is witnessing a rapid evolution of technology. China's technological advancement and economic progress have added a new dimension to the geopolitical arena. Jonathan E. Hillman's book is a sketch of China's influence in the digital world and its quest to dominate the technosphere. It takes its readers on a journey of digital footprints on global networks. The author reveals connections between the physical and digital worlds and the struggle between great powers vying to control them.

The theme of the book is the ongoing technological competition between the West and China. In this context, Hillman discusses the case of China's Huawei and former Canadian tech giant Nortel. The author focuses on the Huawei-Nortel joint venture of 2006 offering high-speed broadband that lasted only four months after its announcement. The book mentions how Huawei was circling Nortel 'first as a dove, then as a hawk, and finally as a vulture' (pg.51) during the latter's final years as a tech giant. In 2007, Huawei had already surpassed Nortel's annual revenue, and eventually, the Canadian firm filed for bankruptcy in 2009.

Going further, the book reveals that China's technological rise was also a result of the greed of Western firms in capturing larger and richer markets, which resulted in a global digital divide. Hillman stresses that the construction of communication networks opened avenues for China for accumulating and exercising its soft power. China turned these fault lines into an opportunity and became a stronger and more reliable source for the procurement of communication technologies by developed and developing countries.

Hillman also identifies the errors made by the West that paved the way for Chinese companies to reach Western markets, and subsequently dominate the digital world. For instance, Hillman argues that Western companies were eager to access the Chinese market and unwittingly authorized their technology to be copied and controlled by Chinese companies (pg.22). He further notes that by 2017, China's Hikvision had already captured 12% of the North American market and by 2019 it had produced nearly a quarter of the world's surveillance cameras. Criticising the United States, the author notes that although the US contribution to China's technological advancement is immense, Washington and Silicon Valley keep blaming China for cheating its way to the top instead of acknowledging their own failure (pg.6).

Giving a detailed account of global surveillance technology Hillman notes that China is acquiring access to markets in Asia and Africa. For instance, Chinese subsea cables connecting Pakistan with Djibouti will become the shortest Internet link between Asia and Africa – the two regions where international bandwidth has been growing the fastest in recent years.

Hillman rejects the notion that technology only flourishes with freedom. Instead, he observes that digital authoritarianism is on the march (pg.206). For instance, he notes that Beijing has invested, and used emerging technologies, in enhancing communication security, such as AI-based facial recognition systems. These limit the freedom of Chinese society and societies that China has permeated.

The author has flagged the possibility of China becoming the world's leading network operator and reaping commercial and strategic benefits. He underlines that China has become world's largest provider of communications technology, having operations in more than 170 countries. Two Chinese companies Hikvision and Dahua produce around 40% of the world's surveillance cameras. Stating these facts, the author stresses that if China is allowed to continue to heavily influence the technosphere, it could give Beijing the power to set hardware and software standards for future equipment and further expand its network.

However, the author argues that China's digital supremacy is still not guaranteed as it remains vulnerable in various key areas. Innovation remains a strength of the West, especially the United States, which gives it an opportunity to offer better alternatives to the world. Hillman insists that the US should make a push into lower-income countries, provide competitive space for new businesses to flourish, educate and attract the next generation of innovators and protect citizens' privacy and security.

The author proposes a coalition of democracies to offset the scale of China's global operations. He encourages major democracies to invest in R&D, commercialize their research and sell it widely, develop technical standards and ethical norms in order to advance their shared interests and promote freer societies.

Hillman provides a well-researched analysis of the strategic and economic advantages gained by China through the DSR. However, he places more emphasis on the security aspects, instead of the socio-economic aspects, of the DSR, including achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Thus, the author's choice to root the analysis in exclusively security-based considerations, leaves the reader unaware of the many socio-economic advantages the DSR offers.

The book is a timely contribution in the field of political science and is highly suggested for emerging scholars as well as policy practitioners. The book argues that China's technological rise challenges the West's dominance in the global digital order. However, it must be noted that for a balanced perspective future research is required to offer insights on the opportunities that the DSR offers for the developing world in areas such as environment, health and education.

It must be added that the book highlights aspects in international political economy the DSR enhances, such as global connectivity. However, further comparative studies of developing and developed countries should remain a priority. This allows for further examination of the choices these countries make when choosing China or the US.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has now been incorporated into the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Through the DSR, China has been able to harness sustainable development by reducing inequality, stimulating rural growth and supporting Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) in developing countries. What the author further overlooks in the book is that the BRI project, especially the DSR, has broadened economic transitions and reinforced regional integration, for the benefit of political stability and the strengthening of global multilateralism. These developments have helped greatly in linking countries economically, geographically and socially.

The underlying prospects outlined by the author depicts Chinese technology as a threat to Western dominance. However, Hillman underemphasizes the benefits of Chinese technology. China's DSR has been able to provide technology, accessibility and innovation at a cheaper cost to the world, especially developing countries, that in the past could only depended on the scarce and costly alternatives of the West. Chinese digital firms are helping to build smart city projects, implement e-governance, smart education, smart agriculture and digital health projects. This could be seen during the COVID-19 crisis, as Chinese companies were able to develop an AI-enabled COVID-19 diagnostic system that assisted hospitals, such as those in Ecuador. Moreover, access to big data is helping developing countries address social, economic and environmental challenges. At micro and meso levels, the DSR has helped promote connectivity between businesses and between businesses and their consumers.

Importantly, since the DSR is currently dynamic in nature, it is important to understand how the DSR structure would shape the structure of global politics. Would it result in a shift towards bipolarity, or would the international system remain unipolar? The author's arguments throughout the book revolve around the challenge China poses to the

West. It is argued that the prospects of China becoming a hegemonic power in the technology industry could set Chinese technological norms as a standard for the future. However, it must be taken into consideration that at present, the digital economy is on an evolving path. Therefore, any definite conclusions such as author's assumption that 'China's rise has completely reversed a causal arrow that guided US foreign policy' (pg. 208) may undermine theoretical, empirical and methodological social science standards as nothing is permanent in politics. At best, academics must vigilantly follow the emerging trends in the digital world and assess how the global technology structure is being shaped.

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