Chinese Standards 2035

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The tenth anniversary of the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative last year prompted many questions. Its real achievements and its future are much debated by the same Western commentators who heralded its extraordinary launch in 2013 when Xi Jinping unveiled his plans for the expansion of China's economic dominion to vast swathes of the Eurasian continent. Many have cited the nation's recent financial woes and geopolitical troubles as reasons for the initiative to lose its head of steam, or even to wrap up in the following years. Such doubt is misguided.

One of the main planks of the new economic policy which is taking the BRI further is that of 'China Standards 2035'. It is important because it highlights two of the most important themes in Chinese foreign policy at

present: fear about economic dislocation caused by conflict with Western nations, and a desire to force home the nation's very real economic advantages which have been ever clearer since the rise of the Chinese economy in the 1980s. The arms of the BRI have become tentacles, and signify the reach into every vital part of the global economy which Xi's primary initiative seeks to gain.

The more recent arm of the BRI was launched in 2021, under the aegis of the 14th Five-Year Plan. The overall aim is to develop a civil-military complex in China which would equip it to wage war on a vast scale, and which protects its economy from the geopolitical fragility stirred up by the conflict between the country's allies and those of the United States. Such an overarching aim is not surprising, but the focus on 'standards' truly is.

'China Standards 2035' aims to create and enforce a code of industrial norms which better reflect the Chinese economy across the nations touched by the BRI; in essence, to replace the systems of standards set down by the Western allies in the twentieth century, most specifically the International Standards Organisation. The sheer pace of change in advanced technologies has meant that Chinese companies have come to take a sharper interest and hold a growing influence in the meetings of such standard-setting organisations across the world. Their principal aim has always been to ensure unanimity so that businesspeople and consumers alike do not fall foul of different operational systems and models. It is international standard-setting that should be responsible for your wireless headphone charger working even for a model which isn't your own. The fracturing of that system – or at least its politicisation – has significant ramifications.

It is by a Chinese businessperson that the International Organisation for Standardisation is now led, and Chinese proposals to the International Electrotechnical Commission underline the predominance of Huawei as a leading firm in the Asian technologies market. Such drives by the Chinese government have been charted for years, but Western opposition to firms such as Huawei should not cloud our view of the long-term focus upon technological standards and on control over technological change in the fields of 5G and Artificial Intelligence which lie at the heart of the BRI in this decade. The Chinese government's wider strategy is one that is political as well as economic at heart – to promote Chinese norms and expectations against what they see as the outdated and misplaced institutions of Western finance.

The ambition of the Standards 2035 plan relies on much of the Chinese government's characteristically confident rhetoric. Industrial standards are not as headline-grabbing as AI or a war in Taiwan, and some have doubted the true impact of new systems of standardisation. But the consequences of significant change do not just reflect the diversified aims of the Belt and Road and Xi Jinping's vision; they could well help to shape the economically isolationist and politically uncompromising attitude of the

Chinese government in future years, as it hopes to reshape the institutions which it sees to have strangled Asian ambition in the past.

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