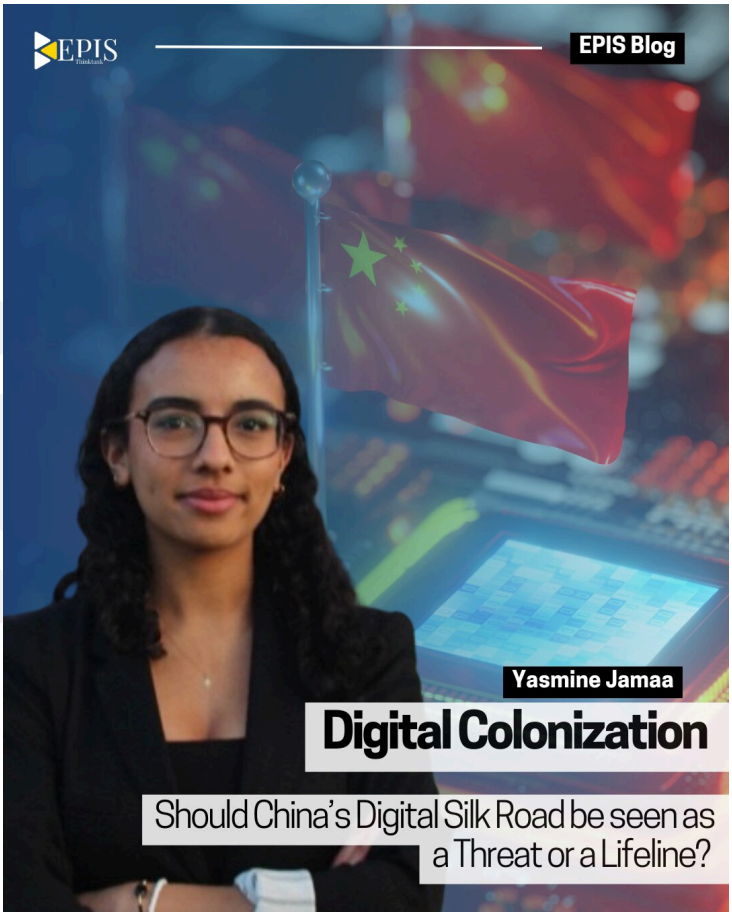
Digital Colonization

28 JUNE 2025

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A Growing Influence

For some developing countries, the digital infrastructure enabled by China is essential to their development. As is the case for Pakistan or Kenya, where China implemented companies like Huawei or ZTE that provide affordable infrastructure, such as 5G networks or data centres in these nations. China is one of the few investors in these areas, while some Western firms refrain from investing in these markets, as they judge them risky and less profitable. However, the Chinese exports are not fully altruistic, because the transfer of software ecosystems and data architectures necessary for the construction of the new infrastructure create a growing strategic dependency on

the Chinese digital backbones and their protocols, even in places with no military presence, which not only positions China as a digital provider but also as a connectivity gatekeeper.

A tool of empowerment

From a different perspective, countries that Western tech firms historically left behind, consider the DSR as an empowering resource that contributes to the emergence of digital economies in those countries, skipping analogue stages of development. For instance, Chinese investments of undersea cables and mobile networks in Africa not only represent a simple connectivity help but a significant economic participation, as the continent registered a population access to the internet of only 36% in 2022. Another example is the smart city surveillance and 5G development from Huawei in Pakistan that shows how the DSR can accelerate modernization and public service efficiency. These examples demonstrate that many countries are deliberately choosing Chinese partnerships that dismiss the purely exploitative nature of the DSR.

From soft power to strategic leverage

Nevertheless, China is exporting soft power along with digital infrastructure, which helps to widen narratives that agree with the country's governance model. The different Chinese surveillance technologies spread around different countries can be used to reinforce authoritarian control and limit democratic freedom, as they allow real-time monitoring of the public. Consequently, the more countries adopt Chinese networks, the more access it has to internal data and the more influence it has over the information flow in the long term, which can be seen as a form of strategic leverage. This subtle form of soft power affects the digital sovereignty of the Chinese allies by regulating access to information.

Jeopardized sovereignty

The biggest risk of this infrastructure export is that states will lose their ability to control their data and make independent digital policy decisions, because even though these countries may own the infrastructure on paper, all the built software and technical support is managed by Chinese firms and their protocols. For example, in 2024, Pakistan began testing a Chinese-assisted national internet firewall. While operating domestically, the reliance on Chinese technology undermines national autonomy by limiting independent control over digital governance. Moreover, the growing expansion of Chinese platforms becomes embedded in the daily life of entire populations that go under foreign digital norms, whether their governments realize it or not. This situation would therefore raise a larger question of what happens when ownership means control.