

# Digital Silk Road in the Philippines: Normative Observations and Implications for Technological Cooperation

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**Abstract:** The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's unique formula for economic development, has been propelled into global prominence. China now desires to be the leader in global technological development through its Digital Silk Road (DSR) and seeks to drive innovation through its DSR initiatives, prompting the increase of Beijing's role - and access - in shaping the contours of digital infrastructure among BRI-affiliated countries, including the Philippines. Through non-purposive expert engagement with various sectors of the Philippines' digital sector, the paper aims to explore the norm dynamics that exist between the Philippines and China on the DSR. The study attempts to situate this unique dynamic in the existing international relations (IR) literature on norm life-cycles. The study finds that the Philippines' and China's norms over cybersecurity, i.e., governance and regulations, are diametrically opposed on a fundamental level, and that the burden of negotiating the extent of digital and technological embeddedness with China rests on the Philippines.

**Key Words:** Philippines-China; Digital Silk Road; norms; technology

## 1. INTRODUCTION


China now desires to be the leader in global technological development through its Digital Silk Road (DSR) (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2015). Through its DSR initiatives, Beijing seeks to drive innovation and bring the world closer to its vision. This would grant China a bigger role - and access - to the digital infrastructure among BRI-affiliated countries. Country partners, like the Philippines, enjoy preferential economic arrangements with China. However, the export of information and communication technology is also an export of the host nation's norms and practices (Savarimuthu & Cranefield, 2009, 2011).

The juxtaposition between the Philippines' and China's views and approach to international norms are fundamentally different (Wang Tingyou, 2016). China

and the Philippines' norms over cybersecurity - e.g., governance and regulations - are at first glance, diametrically opposed (Kuo, 2024) owing in part to the political values of both countries.

Beijing's attempts at leadership presents a new area of contention in the formula of norms. Southeast Asia, and the Philippines, will have to negotiate the terms of its digital and technological embeddedness with China in a manner that both invites cooperation and upholds the norms it intrinsically values. The Philippines' response to the DSR, which rests on important bifurcations along national security, economic interests, and normative inclinations is explored in this paper.

The research firstly explores the breadth of literature behind important concepts in normative formulation. Secondly, this paper will present a brief case study of the Philippines following extensive



fieldwork involving key informant interviews from the government, the private sector, and the academe. This study aims to advance the point that while the Philippines' digitalization is situated in the broader geopolitical contestation between China and the United States common and consistent with mainstream analyses, the push-and-pull of norm creation and facilitation have largely remained one-sided to the detriment of China and the benefit of the larger West (the US and other US-aligned countries). Lastly, the study outlines the observable challenges to China's norm diffusion in the Philippines and what this means for Manila's broader technological cooperation with other countries.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative approach by utilizing non-probability purposive (expert) sampling techniques. This was done by supplementing the study with thematic findings from direct interviews with experts and practitioners who are involved in the government (uniformed and civilian), private sector (businesses), civil society organizations, and the academe. The topics covered in the interviews include 1) the Philippines' digitalization thrust, 2) the Philippines vis-a-vis regional context, 3) digital norms and practices, and 4) sector-specific inquiries.

## 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 3.1 *International Norms*


This study takes cue from Alexander Wendt's (1999; 1992) constructivist school of thought. There is credence in the idea that states have inherent agency in shaping their destinies. More precisely, in this case, in developing policy responses toward external stimuli. The dynamic of norm formulation, initially developed by Finnemore and Sikkink (1998) and later on expounded by McKeown (2009), Savarimuthu and Cranefield (2009), Hollander and Wu (2011), and Mahmoud et al. (2014), and the more recent works from the likes of Frantz and Pigozzi (2018), Deitelhoff and Zimmermann (2019), Gallagher (2022), and Taggart and Abraham (2022), are important guideposts.

International norms are the basis by which multiagent systems order themselves around (Hollander and Wu, 2011). Savarimuthu and Cranefield (2011) argued that norm dynamics are dependent on relevance, following a somewhat cyclical lifespan where norms emerge and, in turn, spread on the basis of acceptability and utility. Categories of norms were also expounded (Savarimuthu & Cranefield, 2009; Mahmoud et al., 2014). The most recent effort to deliberately synthesize literature on norm cycles shows that norms undergo a maturation process from emergence to acceptability (Frantz & Pigozzi, 2018). Pioneering work on norms have emerged in recent years, employing norm life-cycles in many of the world's important traditional and non-traditional security concerns including the environment (Rosencranz, Janghu, & Reddy, 2019), trade (Kleef, 2020), health (Drope, 2014), human rights (Narine, 2012), defense (Ruble, 2009), and event of the digital domain.

### 3.2 *Digital Silk Road and International Norms in the Context of the Philippines*

The Philippines' approach to digital normative formulation is not so different from global observations, yet distinct considerations arise from China's DSR initiatives. Mindful of its geopolitical context within the technological rivalry between China and the US, the Philippines is primarily influenced by political orientation. This, in and of itself, immediately sets parameters that outrightly contrast Manila and Beijing. In this light, the Philippines' pursuit of strengthened economic ties with China is perceived as a delicate balance (Rabena, 2018), especially that Beijing still poses as one of Manila's principal security concerns in the region. The Philippines is cognizant of these political parameters with China, especially in technological thrusts that do not augment (and even sometimes subtract from) global norms in significant ways (Chhabra et al., 2020).

Any democratic country, as Kurlantzick (2020) opined, would be worried that "...DSR projects could help the Chinese government gain access to sensitive data." The Philippines is also aware that China's DSR,



and the larger BRI, is more than just an infrastructure project. Congruent to the bifurcations raised earlier, the DSR "...engenders a less U.S.-centric and a more Sino-centric Asian global digital order... by strengthening the world's digital connectivity with China" (Ghiassy & Krishnamurthy, 2021; Wheeler, 2020). Chhabra et al. (2020) further makes the contention that China's increasing international role belies its ambitions for the world and the ways it will achieve this end - even the interpretation of global norms and international law.

Political orientations are the preliminary battleground for norm acceptance (Rosert, 2020). This plays favorably into the creation of norms that balances well between achieving country needs and achieving bare minimums from international best practices. Estrada (2017) for instance shared that the Philippines almost always ensures that the enabling environment is well established before commencing projects with China. This ensures that the success of Chinese projects is not subjected to the state of bilateral ties and hinges these more on "...the efficient and clean undertaking of infrastructure plans".

## 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *4.1 The Philippines Grapples with China's Technology and Norms*

The Philippines is caught between the technological rivalry of China and the US (Amador et al., 2021). As highlighted by Kastner (2021) although seemingly harmless at first, technologies themselves are imbued with normative implications in standard setting (Rühlig, 2023), interoperability (Kerber & Schweitzer, 2017), and compliance (Governatori & Rotolo, 2010). Both the interviews and the examination of available literature alike point to China's fixation with hardware exports to the Philippines. This has largely been welcomed by the general Filipino public.

Security practitioners however are not as welcoming. Because foreign technologies fall within the purview of traditional national securitizations (Buzan, Wæver, & de Wilde, 1997), the Filipino security sector, especially when dealing with Chinese technologies, has

adopted the cautiously optimistic phrase, as one interview shared, "Trust but verify". The tendency to approach Chinese technologies with caution stems from a number of factors, not least of which comes from the general distrust of China among the Filipino people (Luna, 2022). The disparate approaches to and appreciation of Chinese technologies between the government and the wider public stifles the Philippines' creation of a unique normative position in the digital norm formulation. This suggests two important points.


Firstly, the Philippines as a whole is not yet aware of the role it is playing in the formation of global digital norms. Manila is expected to enjoy the outpouring of technologies from both China and the US (should Washington amass its tech firms), but will steadily feel the external pressures of broader strategic strong-arming from both major powers (Walker, 2023).

Secondly, the tension between the general acceptability of Chinese technologies juxtaposed with the distrust of China as a whole reflects the larger narrative of geopolitical contests in the region (Gupta & Patil, 2024). While the US is winning hearts and minds, China is winning pockets left and right. In other words, the Philippines is increasingly becoming a battleground for global digital norm creation (Rabena, 2022). The challenge of reconciling disparate appreciations of China shows that the Philippines is still grappling with the "new" norms associated with Chinese technologies.

### *4.2 Challenges to China's Norm Diffusion in the Philippines*

As Manila increasingly becomes a battlefield for technological sandboxing, China faces domestic pushback from the Philippines. China's diffusion of its norms to the archipelago is stunted due to five important observations.

***The DSR is limited because it is infrastructure-intensive.*** The general view among interviewees found that China's outreach in the Philippines is infrastructure-driven and that China specializes in material/physical transfers. Unlike Beijing, the West specialize in capacitating Filipinos, on top of



the infrastructure it develops for the country. While the West cannot compete with the largesse of Chinese technological exports to the Philippines, capacity-building initiatives afford them the opportunity to diffuse and transmit globally acceptable norms on technologies and its uses including important values such as free and democratized internet (Komaitis, 2023), responsible digital governance (Ramanujam & Runde, 2021), ethical use of artificial intelligence (UNESCO, 2021), and so much more - something China has not effectively done despite being a dominant economic player in the Philippines.

***The Philippines is at the core of geopolitical contests.*** Manila knows the value of its posturing between China and the US, and will navigate between the two powers (Banlaoi, 2023). This means the Philippines seeks to enjoy the best of both worlds: China's advanced technologies and the West's normative values around digital technologies. Both major powers do not seem to want to lose the Philippines to the other (Papadavid., 2021) and could potentially result in an outpouring of support from both sides to sway allegiance.

***Security affiliations with the West.*** China is cognizant of the Philippines' bilateral security relations with the US (Popioco, 2023). This positions the Philippines at an advantage, affording Washington to leverage the hubs-and-spokes alliance model from East Asia (Japan and South Korea), Southeast Asia (Vietnam and Singapore), and Oceania (Australia and New Zealand). This limits China's operational pragmatism in the region, and in the Philippines (Grossman, 2023). This, in turn, compels Beijing to instead use economic initiatives more than securitized ones (Yin Yeping, 2023).

***The South China Sea disputes and domestic perceptions of China.*** China is narratively disadvantaged on account of its behavior in the region (Clancy, Huang, & Silver, 2023) and the measured transparency strategy (Ibarra & Arugay, 2024; US Philippine Society, 2023) of the Philippines casts a searing light on the stark difference between China's words and actions (Goldenziel, 2023). While some important connectivity initiatives, e.g. subsea cables,

are stifled because of tensions in the South China Sea, the Philippines have tapped its other partners to assist on this front. Domestic perceptions of China are negative (Luna, 2022) and have not improved since the 2012 Scarborough Shoal (Inquirer, 2012). This negative view has only worsened in spite of the Philippines' pro-China shift in 2016 (Malindog-Uy, 2021). This further limits China's options between aggression (already internationally frowned upon since the release of the 2016 Arbitration Award) and cooperation.

***Technological practicality and interoperability.*** Interviews have hinted at interoperability as a common concern. Because the geopolitical contest between China and the US also results in the creation of bifurcated technological ecosystems, developmental states like the Philippines (Bayudan-Dacuycuy & Serafica, 2023) cannot afford transitioning to new systems. One interviewee cited how the Philippines has generally benefited from existing systems made available by more reputable Western brands prior the entrance of the Chinese alternative. Apart from security concerns associated with Chinese-controlled technological ecosystems, the Filipino sensibility is to be practical: to choose and prioritize a system it is already familiar with.

### ***4.3.3 Implications to the Philippines' Broader Foreign Technological Cooperation***

China has a remarkable economic imprint and presence in the Philippines' digital domain and digital value chain, thanks in part to the longstanding economic ties between the two countries. However, the national security risks inherent in illiberal technologies have now come into national prominence. The transfer of Chinese technologies was transactionally enabled by the Philippines' lack of preparedness and forward-thinking that would have diluted and filtered the kinds of technologies that entered the country. The unique case of the DSR in the Philippines alludes to the lingering consequences (and threat) of adopting illiberal technologies from illiberal countries, mainly China.

Technology and norms are two important sides of the debate, and this largely applies to various subsets of issue-areas including artificial intelligence (Jain, 2022ADD CITATIONS), quantum technologies (Lewis & Wood, 2023ADD CITATIONS), critical



technologies (OSTP, 2024~~ADD CITATIONS~~) and critical infrastructures (IBM, 2024~~ADD CITATIONS~~), cloud computing technology (Smalley & Susnjara, 2024~~ADD CITATIONS~~), digital infrastructure (Bandura, McLean, & Sultan, 2023~~ADD CITATIONS~~), and industrial modernization (IBM, 2024~~ADD CITATIONS~~). ~~ADD MORE / OR IMPROVE~~

The recent pronouncement of the National Cybersecurity Plan 2023-2028 is but the first step in ensuring national security in the digital domain (DICT, 2024). For the Philippines to properly safeguard its norms and values in relation to the technology it utilizes, it will need more careful study and further policy pronouncements to achieve that goal.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

The persisting proclivities of the Philippines and the absence of any formal discussion surrounding the normative standards and guidelines for technology between Manila and Beijing cannot and does not advance norm creation between the two countries. However, China's dominant economic presence in the country still gives it a wide berth to engage Manila in a norm-creation process *sans* the United States and the broader West, if the Philippines obliges.

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