

The International Cooperation Along the Digital Silk Road forum is held in Wuzhen, Zhejiang Province in east China, on November 8, 2018.



Digitalizing the Silk Road

The digital Silk Road under the Belt and Road Initiative framework is off the ground and gaining popularity

By Liu Yushu

The Pakistan-East Africa submarine fiber optic cable connects Pakistan with Kenya via Djibouti and it will also connect Europe via a terrestrial cable system, building a new digital economic highway for Africa, Europe and Central Asia. This is just one example of a wide range of cooperation taking place among countries participating in the Belt and Road Initiative, which has laid a solid foundation for the development of an open, inclusive and transparent global digital economy in the future and attracted worldwide attention.

Popular initiative

Currently, China is working with both hardware and software connectivity in the construction of the digital Silk Road. Along with providing its own development experience in hardware connectivity, such as the creation of the world's leading high-quality smart grid, it is also helping Belt and Road participating countries to bridge the digital divide through digital infrastructure construction and the digitalization of traditional infrastructure. These cooperation projects are extensive and are writing a new chapter in history.

In terms of software connectivity, China has carried out substantial cooperation with Belt and Road participants in digital trade and e-commerce, among other things. Future cooperation will be further strengthened through digital ethical, cultural and educational exchanges. In the next five years, China will support 5,000 Chinese and foreign innovative personnel to carry out exchanges, training and cooperative research in this sector. In

addition to strengthening the connection between digital and social infrastructure, and promoting sustainable innovation and the development of new technologies, increasing the exchange and cultivation of talent will be a focus.

Joint innovation

The rise of digital China has attracted global attention, while China is also willing to share new experiences and models in its digital economy development and help to cultivate participating countries' own new digital energy. On April 25, at the Digital Silk Road Sub-Forum of the Second Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, 15 enterprises from eight countries signed eight new cooperation projects. China is also willing to share its experience in innovation-driven development, promotion of the digital economy and the construction of artificial intelligence and smart cities in order to narrow the global digital divide.

The digital Silk Road is also a road of intellectual property rights (IPR) protection. China attaches great importance to the IPR protection of Belt and Road participating countries and jointly promotes the development of localized innovation capability. In recent years, the China National Intellectual Property Administration (CNIPA) has held several high-level meetings on Belt and Road IPR protection and established an online communication mechanism with Belt and Road participants. The initiative is committed to improving the global IPR protection system. China's local governments are also

taking various measures to further strengthen the IPR protection system and related Belt and Road work. For example, the Lanzhou Intellectual Property Tribunal was formally established in January in northwest China's Gansu Province to actively promote the construction of the International Intellectual Property Port of the Silk Road. Other provinces in China are conducting similar IPR protection construction based on their local laws and regulations.

According to data published by the CNIPA, the number of patents among Belt and Road participants has continued to grow. At the end of the first half of 2018, the number of patent applications by China in Belt and Road participating countries was 2,759, an increase of 26.9 percent over the same period the previous year, while there were 2,681 patent applications in China submitted by Belt and Road participants, an increase of 31.6 percent over the prior year.

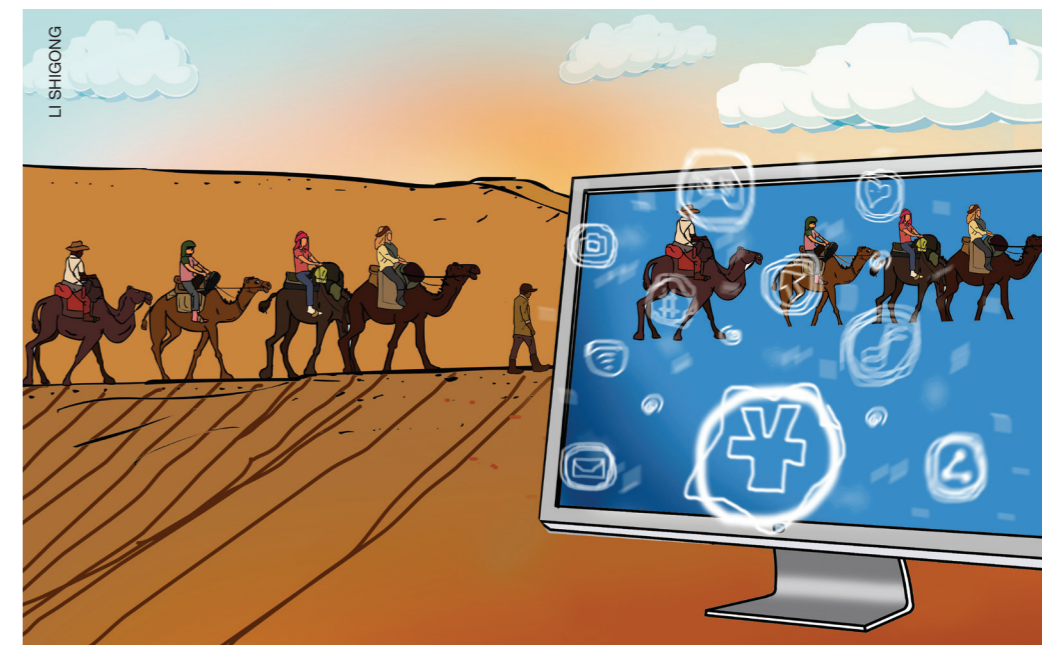
Going forward

At present, the development of the digital Silk Road is facing some challenges: the massive global digital divide and increased instability in the international order that are affecting participating countries. Following are four suggestions to address these issues.

First, the gap in digital development among Belt and Road participants must be further narrowed. Data from the Belt and Road Information Development Index showed that the information development of relevant countries is generally at the mid-level. Results showed that the overall level of information development in central and eastern European countries is relatively high; the development gap among 20 countries in West Asia and North Africa is relatively large; and there is still a lot of room for information development among South Asian countries. The digital divide has become a prominent manifestation of the global North-South imbalance. There is a huge demand for information infrastructure construction throughout Belt and Road participating countries. Thus, China is hoping that more countries will participate in the construction of the digital Silk Road to promote the governance of the digital economy, cultivate a digital economy ecology, build a digital economy cooperation platform and build a digital economy support system.

Second, Belt and Road participating countries should establish a product certification system for the digital Silk Road. Currently, more than 150 countries and international organizations have signed Belt and Road cooperation documents, with the number bound to increase. Belt and Road related concepts have also been widely accepted and recognized. A digital Silk Road product certification system would be helpful for trade relations among Belt and Road participants.

Third, participants should speed up the integration of 5G technologies, the Internet of Things (IoT), IPR protection and technical standards. The development and promotion of



the technology market are closely related to the limitation of patent technology. IoT patent distribution is very dispersed, while the top-level patent applicant in this sector accounts for about 5 percent of the total number of patents. China's Huawei Technologies Co. Ltd. has consistently ranked among the top in the world in terms of IoT patents for several consecutive years. Its massive amount of technology patents provides favorable conditions for China to enter the IoT market and implement digitalization.

Fourth, Belt and Road participants should jointly launch the Digital Silk Road Initiative. Since the Belt and Road Initiative was launched over six years ago, it has exceeded all expectations, thus, China has laid a good external policy environment for the development of the digital Silk Road. However, there are also issues related to differences in political, religious, cultural and legal systems, among other things. These matters need to be addressed and coordinated at the national level as an important guarantee and encouragement for enterprises to take part in the development of the digital Silk Road. It is a necessary compass for the global development of the digital Silk Road to formulate its construction initiative at the multinational level and clarify governments' responsibilities and standards for enterprises.

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