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## Strategic Thinking on the Participation of China's Internet Enterprises in the Belt and Road Initiative: Postprint

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### Abstract

The internet industry, through the integration and optimization of multi-format business operations, facilitates the reallocation of resources across economic and social domains for the Belt and Road Initiative, fosters the integration and regeneration of diverse developmental forms in economy, culture, and society within the region, thereby playing an increasingly pivotal role in the Belt and Road construction. Chinese internet enterprises should seize the opportunity to deepen their top-level strategic deployment, advance the international expansion of related businesses, and focus efforts on network information infrastructure construction, digital content service advancement, and cybersecurity ecosystem development. Government agencies must also steadily guide and facilitate the international expansion of Chinese internet enterprises, enhance national leadership and guidance over Chinese internet enterprises' participation in the Belt and Road Initiative, coordinate and advance business operations in countries along the Belt and Road, and provide essential support for the overseas development of Chinese internet enterprises.

### Full Text

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#### Strategic Thinking on Chinese Internet Companies' Participation in the Belt and Road Initiative

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**Abstract**

Through the integration and optimization of multiple business formats, the Internet industry has facilitated the reallocation of resources in both economic and social domains for the Belt and Road Initiative, promoting the fusion and regeneration of various developmental forms in regional economies, cultures, and societies. It plays an increasingly vital role in the construction of the Belt and Road Initiative. Chinese Internet companies should seize this opportunity to deepen their strategic layout from a top-level perspective and expand their businesses globally, focusing on three key areas: network information infrastructure construction, digital content business development, and cybersecurity ecosystem building. Government departments also need to steadily guide and promote Chinese Internet companies' global expansion, strengthen national leadership and guidance for their participation in the Belt and Road Initiative, coordinate business advancement in countries along the routes, and provide necessary support for their overseas development.

**Keywords:** the Belt and Road Initiative, connectivity, Internet Plus, business practice

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## 1. The Implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative Facilitates Information Connectivity

During his visits to Central and Southeast Asia in September-October 2013, President Xi Jinping proposed the major initiatives of jointly building the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” (hereinafter referred to as the “Belt and Road Initiative”), aiming to revive the ancient Silk Road with new vitality. On March 28, 2015, the National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of Commerce jointly issued the “Vision and Actions on Jointly Building Silk Road Economic Belt and 21st Century Maritime Silk Road,” which identified key routes for the Silk Road Economic Belt: from China through Central Asia and Russia to Europe (the Baltic Sea); from China through Central Asia and West Asia to the Persian Gulf and Mediterranean; and from China to Southeast Asia, South Asia, and the Indian Ocean. The key directions for the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road are from China's coastal ports through the South China Sea to the Indian Ocean and extending to Europe, and from China's coastal ports through the South China Sea to the South Pacific. The document outlined the five main areas of Belt and Road cooperation: policy coordination, facilities connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people bonds (the “Five Connects”), emphasizing that “infrastructure connectivity is a priority area in

building the Belt and Road” [1].

The Belt and Road Initiative connects over two-thirds of the world’s population and one-third of global economic output, and is committed to building a comprehensive, multi-layered, and composite connectivity network to achieve interconnectivity across the continents of Asia, Europe, and Africa and their adjacent oceans. From its proposal in 2013 to the present, more than three years have passed, and the Belt and Road Initiative has progressed from initial connectivity implementation, including transportation infrastructure, information, logistics, regulations, and standards. Information connectivity should precede the real economy to establish a solid foundation for industry, finance, trade, and resource integration. As a foundational general-purpose technology and information resource, Internet information construction holds tremendous potential for promoting the real economy, and a region’s degree of “Internet Plus” development will inevitably be reflected at the macro level of economic strategy. Therefore, opening up land and maritime strategic channels requires not only advancing regional infrastructure construction but also undertaking “Internet Plus” transformation across various industries to more effectively promote the formation of regional markets and achieve broader connectivity. In this process, China will inevitably become a driving force and important network node for global connectivity, and Internet—especially mobile Internet—connectivity construction will be equally significant.

## 2. Strategic Thinking on Chinese Internet Companies’ Participation in the Belt and Road Initiative

The United States is the birthplace of the Internet, with companies like Microsoft, Google, and Facebook dominating global market share. Although China’s Internet industry started later, its development over the past two decades has been remarkable. China’s overall Internet strength surpasses many developed countries in Europe, Japan, and South Korea, and even exceeds the United States in certain aspects. Meanwhile, most countries along the Belt and Road routes are “Internet developing nations,” where China enjoys significant comparative advantages. In the information age, while Internet development drives political and economic prosperity, cyberspace has also become an important platform for human activity. China’s Internet industry has played a tremendous role in leading economic development, promoting social progress, and fostering innovation. The country boasts a massive Internet user base and market scale, with Internet technology achievements benefiting people’s livelihoods, accelerating integration with traditional industries, and deepening international exchanges and cooperation. The competitiveness and influence of Chinese Internet companies continue to grow. As of December 2016, China’s Internet user population reached 731 million, with an Internet penetration rate of 53.2 percent—3.1 percentage points above the global average—while mobile Internet users alone reached 695 million [2].

As a prominent global Internet innovation center, China currently occupies

seven seats among the world's top 20 Internet market leaders, with Tencent, Baidu, Didi, and JD.com among them. Chinese Internet application services expanding overseas are becoming a new calling card for “Intelligent Manufacturing in China.” Unlike other infrastructure, the Internet is closely tied to user habits, industry penetration rates, and regional culture. Once a company gains first-mover advantage in the initial stage, it becomes extremely difficult for subsequent entrants. Therefore, Chinese Internet companies must seize this opportunity and prioritize deep participation in the Belt and Road Initiative from the following key aspects.

### **2.1 Accelerating Construction of Information Network Infrastructure to Consolidate Connectivity Foundations**

Strengthening network infrastructure construction for the Belt and Road Initiative is essential to achieve genuine information technology connectivity. Infrastructure connectivity is both the foundation and a weak link constraining deeper connectivity among countries. Accelerating infrastructure connectivity requires strengthening coordination in infrastructure planning and technical standard systems among nations to gradually form an infrastructure network connecting various Asian regions and linking Asia with Africa and Europe. China has already established a solid foundation for cooperation with Belt and Road countries, particularly in infrastructure development. Data shows that among capital projects and transactions in 66 countries and regions under the Belt and Road Initiative (B&R), projects and deals in seven core infrastructure sectors (utilities, transportation, telecommunications, social infrastructure, construction, energy, and environment) totaled approximately \$494 billion in 2016, with China accounting for one-third of this amount [3]. The Internet serves as a crucial foundation for network and information connectivity, and cloud computing support is indispensable for connectivity between countries along the routes and China. As the Belt and Road Initiative gains full momentum, network infrastructure construction will inevitably accelerate, providing a fundamental platform for Chinese Internet companies' development while profoundly influencing their future strategic positioning.

Chinese Internet companies should actively integrate into and influence infrastructure development from the early stages, adopting forward-looking strategies by establishing cloud computing facilities and data centers as part of future-oriented Internet “soft infrastructure” to create favorable conditions for future business growth. Cloud computing providers such as Tencent Cloud, Alibaba Cloud, and Baidu Cloud have already accelerated their international expansion, actively exploring overseas markets by deploying data nodes globally and offering comprehensive cloud services. These initiatives not only enable domestic enterprises to extend their services overseas but also provide localized cloud services for customers in more countries, generating positive spillover effects that help advance the “Internet Plus” transformation across various industries and drive the upgrading of traditional industries toward informatization in Belt and

Road countries.

## 2.2 Leveraging Digital Content Industry Competitiveness to Gain Dominance in Global Cultural Industries

Implementing the Belt and Road Initiative to develop China's cultural industry, tell Chinese stories well, and enhance national cultural soft power will facilitate exchanges and integration among different cultures in Belt and Road countries and globally, providing “soft” support for national strategy. Currently, digital content products account for an increasing share of international cultural services trade, with online platforms becoming crucial venues for creation, dissemination, and exchange. Developed countries and regions in Europe, America, Japan, and South Korea have made digital content industry development a key strategy to enhance their discourse power in global cultural exchanges.

Meanwhile, China's digital content industry has maintained rapid growth for over a decade, with a distinctive “pan-entertainment” ecosystem taking initial shape. China has become one of the world's largest digital content production, distribution, and consumption markets. Companies like Tencent, Wanda, and Alibaba have continuously expanded their global content ecosystems, accumulating rich commercial experience and capital strength to evolve into global digital content enterprises. Chinese digital content products are gradually gaining recognition in international cultural markets. Take online literature as an example: after more than 20 years of accumulation, China's online literature industry has produced numerous outstanding writers and high-quality works. Through secondary dissemination via overseas translations, Chinese online literature has emerged as a notable phenomenon in the global cultural and creative landscape. Wu Wenhui, CEO of China Literature—the country's largest online literature platform—stated in an interview that Chinese online literature began its overseas expansion around 2010, with its fan and reader base growing steadily. Its influence extends from Southeast Asian countries like Thailand and Vietnam to the entire Asian cultural sphere including Japan and South Korea, and further to the United States, United Kingdom, France, Russia, and Turkey, covering over 20 countries and regions. China Literature alone has authorized 200 works for overseas distribution [4].

The digital content industry plays a unique role in transforming development patterns, adjusting economic structures, stimulating consumption, and expanding employment. Vigorously developing and strengthening this industry represents a crucial measure for advancing supply-side structural reform and cultivating new drivers of growth. As the central government vigorously promotes the Belt and Road Initiative, China should fully leverage its digital content industry competitiveness, actively position itself in the global cultural industry market, promote Chinese culture and enterprises going global, seize dominance in the global cultural industry, and create a world-class brand for China's cultural industries.

### 2.3 Addressing Networked Security Issues and Building a Security Ecosystem

The rapid development of mobile Internet has ushered in a new era of intelligent connectivity, accompanied by unprecedentedly complex security challenges. In this era, diversified operating systems, varied smart devices, and three-dimensional usage scenarios have multiplied entry points for security threats, which have evolved from individual acts on single terminals to organized gang operations. Increasing synergy among different industries and cross-sector collaboration and penetration have become the norm, making security prevention and response more difficult. Traditional cybersecurity protection, dominated solely by security software vendors, cannot address the security transformation of the “Internet Plus” era. Only by confronting this security transformation can we embrace the new era of intelligent connectivity.

Consequently, building a new security ecosystem across the industrial chain is imperative. Cybersecurity encompasses a broad scope requiring joint maintenance by the state, military, and enterprises. By providing cybersecurity products and services such as firewalls, antivirus software, and virus database updates, Chinese Internet companies have constructed a crucial foundational defense line against network intrusions and crimes, becoming the main force in national cybersecurity protection. Internet giants like Tencent and Baidu have actively entered the cybersecurity field, and after several years of development, have established comprehensive security product matrices covering PC security, mobile security, and cloud security, developing antivirus software, security guards, browsers, and other security products that have rapidly risen in China’s cybersecurity landscape. For Internet enterprises, cybersecurity is like air to humans—indispensable. Every Internet company strives to advance cybersecurity while enhancing national cybersecurity capabilities.

Taking Tencent’s cybersecurity business layout as an example, the company has opened its mobile security capabilities and data from Mobile Manager, its proprietary antivirus engine, and security cloud database to industrial chain partners, establishing comprehensive cooperation with 50 major partners including Huawei, Lenovo, Xiaomi, and China Telecom, and creating joint security laboratories with the National Computer Virus Emergency Response Center and China Financial Certification Authority to explore cutting-edge security technologies. Tencent also launched the “No Thieves Under Heaven” anti-information fraud alliance, establishing the world’s largest information fraud database with industry-standard specifications and opening the platform to benefit hundreds of millions of Internet users and industrial chain partners, helping tens of thousands of people recover approximately 2.5 billion RMB in economic losses over the past two years.

The Belt and Road Initiative’s advancement equally requires cybersecurity and the construction of a security ecosystem covering all participating countries and regions. The successful experiences and security capabilities accumulated by

Chinese Internet companies over the years can serve Belt and Road countries and regions, working with local governments, enterprises, and individuals to jointly build a cybersecurity ecosystem. This will not only provide cybersecurity guarantees for the Belt and Road Initiative but also create a clean cyberspace for investment and trade development in related industries.

### **3. Collaborative Advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative by Government and Enterprises**

A September 2016 article in The New York Times Chinese edition argued that “the notion of China copying the United States is outdated; now it’s America’s turn to copy China.” As China steadily advances Belt and Road construction, its Internet companies also shoulder the important mission of “going global.”

#### **3.1 Government Should Guide and Promote Domestic Internet Companies to Go Global and Enhance International Competitiveness**

In a sense, Chinese Internet companies “going global” supports and safeguards the globalization of real economy industries, together forming the dual drivers and twin wings of the Belt and Road grand strategy. However, both the “thunder” and “rain” of Chinese Internet companies’ overseas expansion remain relatively modest, due to timing and conditions, as well as insufficient atmosphere and support.

The government must steadily guide and promote Chinese Internet companies’ global expansion, strengthen national leadership and guidance for their participation in the Belt and Road Initiative, coordinate issues related to communication network infrastructure development, and provide necessary support for their overseas growth. This requires creating a more favorable overseas policy environment for enterprises, including active participation in formulating international rules and security standards and aligning domestic policies and legislation with international norms. It also entails strengthening policy support for Internet companies going global, encouraging overseas promotion and application of new Internet products, and enhancing government service functions abroad.

Instant messaging tools and social media platforms like WeChat and Weibo have become “connectors” and “loudspeakers” for netizens at home and abroad. It is recommended that Internet regulatory authorities, from the cutting-edge perspective of international mobile Internet development, incorporate national Internet leading enterprises and premium applications into the overall framework of China’s external cultural publicity, support domestic Internet companies in going global to actively disseminate excellent Chinese culture, and encourage online literature, games, TV dramas, and other works to enter international markets. The government should support qualified Internet companies in exploring overseas markets through mergers and acquisitions, joint operations, and establishing branches; increase support for expanding foreign trade,

copyright exports, and cooperative publishing channels for outstanding online cultural works; and provide policy support for technological and platform innovation in mobile Internet products to build more independent intellectual property rights-based technical standard systems, actively seizing dominance and initiative in mobile Internet.

### **3.2 Chinese Internet Companies Need to Elevate Their Strategic Position in the Belt and Road Initiative and Deepen Top-Level Planning**

Chinese Internet companies need to strengthen their internal capabilities and accelerate industrial cooperation and innovation. For Internet application service enterprises to sail overseas, they must “cultivate internal strength,” particularly by enhancing technology research and development and product iteration capabilities, while also possessing the strategic perseverance and international talent reserves needed to deeply cultivate overseas markets. Furthermore, strengthening industrial cooperation is essential. Advancing Internet development requires a group of comprehensively strong, internationally influential, and competitive Internet companies, as well as powerful and innovative Internet products.

China should accelerate exchanges and cooperation between its Internet companies and Belt and Road countries, advancing concrete projects promptly. In integrating with Belt and Road construction, Chinese Internet companies should focus not only on e-commerce, cybersecurity, and digital content but also on promoting the Belt and Road Initiative itself to participating countries. They should leverage the Internet’s “instant dissemination effect” to implement the neighborhood diplomacy principles of “amity, sincerity, mutual benefit, and inclusiveness,” launching multilingual Belt and Road-themed websites and various social tools represented by WeChat and QQ to create an international platform for ideological and cultural exchange. This will enhance mutual understanding and trust, facilitate comprehensive communication, increase identification with, affinity for, and support of China among Belt and Road countries, promote consensus and consultation on concepts, decision-making, and cooperation mechanisms, and strengthen mutual trust and shared development among Belt and Road nations.

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*Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.*

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