China Scores Ideological Coup As It Exports Social Engineering Technologies

Cheap manufactured products are not China's primary exports, but social engineering technologies are. Authoritarian regimes are eagerly adopting China's dystopian surveillance and censorship technologies, using data and manipulation to maintain their power. ⬜ TN Editor

A swathe of the world is adopting China's vision for a tightly controlled internet over the unfettered American approach, a stunning ideological coup for Beijing that would have been unthinkable less than a decade ago.

Vietnam and Thailand are among the Southeast Asian nations warming to a governance model that twins sweeping content curbs with uncompromising data controls — because it helps preserve the regime in power. A growing number of the region's increasingly autocratic

governments watched enviously the emergence of Chinese corporate titans from Tencent Holdings Ltd. to Alibaba Group Holding Ltd. — in spite of draconian online curbs. And now they want the same.

The more free-wheeling Silicon Valley model once seemed unquestionably the best approach, with stars from Google to Facebook to vouch for its superiority. Now, a re-molding of the internet into a tightly controlled and scrubbed sphere in China's image is taking place from Russia to India. Yet it's Southeast Asia that's the economic and geopolitical linchpin to Chinese ambitions and where U.S.-Chinese tensions will come to a head: a region home to more than half a billion people whose internet economy is expected to triple to $240 billion by 2025.

"For authoritarian countries in general, the idea of the state being able to wall off to some extent its internet is deeply appealing," said Howard French, author of "Everything Under the Heavens: How the Past Helps Shape China's Push for Global Power. "This is about the regimes' survival in an authoritarian situation. So that's why they like to do this. They want to be able to insulate themselves against shocks."

The Chinese model is gaining traction just as the American one comes under fire. Facebook and Twitter were used to manipulate the 2016 U.S. election, YouTube was criticized for failing to detect child porn, and American social media allowed a gunman to live-stream the worst mass shooting in New Zealand's history for 10 minutes or more before severing it. Against the backdrop of wider fears about U.S. social media failings, Beijing's approach now seems a reasonable alternative, or reasonable enough that self-serving governments can justify its adoption.

Vietnam's controversial version went into effect Jan. 1 — a law BSA/The Software Alliance, which counts Apple Inc. and Microsoft Corp. among its members — called chilling and ineffectual. Indonesia, the region's largest economy, already requires data be stored locally. The Philippines has stepped up what critics call a media crackdown, arrested the head of media outlet Rappler Inc. after it grew critical of President Rodrigo Duterte. And last year, the government of former Malaysian Prime

Minister Najib Razak introduced a fake news law used to probe his chief opponent, though the current government may yet repeal it.

One of the latest to buy into the rationale is Thailand, which on Feb. 28 passed a cyber security bill modeled on China's that grants the government the right to seize data and electronic equipment without a court order in the interests of national security. Introduced just weeks ahead of Thailand's first democratic election since a 2014 military coup, it stoked concerns it could be used to stifle dissent, though the government says it shouldn't affect companies "with good conduct." The Asia Internet Coalition, an organization that groups the likes of Alphabet Inc.'s Google, Amazon.com Inc., Facebook Inc. and Twitter Inc., condemned a bill Amnesty International warns could be used to "cage the internet."

The crux of a Chinese internet model is data sovereignty: information of citizens must be stored in-country and accessible on demand to the authorities, a concept enshrined in Chinese law since 2017. That's raising hackles in Washington, which aims to counter Beijing's sway — a longer-term struggle that may be the single most important episode in world affairs since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Escalating tensions between the two richest economies will impact just about every country across the planet — economically and socially.

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