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Islamic Ethics and the Future of Digital Diplomacy: Lessons from China's Digital Silk Road

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Abstract

The evolution of global diplomacy into the digital sphere presents both unprecedented opportunities and profound ethical challenges. China's Digital Silk Road (DSR), as part of its broader Belt and Road Initiative, has become a significant instrument of soft power projection, particularly in the Muslim-majority regions of Southeast Asia. While the DSR emphasises connectivity and technological advancement, it also raises questions related to justice, sovereignty, surveillance, and digital control. This paper seeks to examine these developments through the lens of Islamic ethics, emphasising principles such as adl (justice), shura (consultation), karamah al-insaniyyah (human dignity), and amanah (trust). By critically engaging with China's digital diplomacy strategy, this study argues that Islamic ethical thought offers a robust normative framework capable of guiding more just, transparent, and humane approaches to digital international engagement. In doing so, the paper contributes to the development of an Islamic discourse on digital diplomacy, positioning Islamic ethics as a vital foundation for shaping the future of the global digital order.

INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, global diplomacy has undergone a paradigm shift, increasingly relying on digital infrastructure, data flows, and technological standards as instruments of influence. A striking manifestation of this shift is China's Digital Silk Road (DSR), launched in 2015 as a key component of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Ishak 2023). In Southeast Asia, China's investments in telecommunications infrastructure, e-commerce platforms, cloud computing, and smart cities have been proliferating under the DSR banner, enabling China's tech giants such as Huawei, Alibaba, Tencent, and ZTE to penetrate regional digital economies profoundly (Harding 2019).

This expansion takes place in a region characterised by rapid digital growth: ASEAN is projected to become one of the world's top-five digital economies by 2025, with e-commerce revenues soaring and over half of its population connected online (Yanqi 2023). Governments across Southeast Asia have pursued cooperation with China through mechanisms -such as the ASEAN-China Digital Economy Partnership Initiative, the ASEAN–China Cyber Dialogue, and Smart Cities cooperation, thereby institutionalising DSR engagement in regional policy frameworks (Ishak 2023).

While this digital cooperation offers substantial developmental benefits, it also raises profound ethical and geopolitical concerns. The embedding of Chinese technical standards and norms into national systems may erode digital sovereignty, create dependency, and facilitate surveillance practices aligned with authoritarian governance models. Furthermore, China's push for data localisation and state-controlled internet governance diverges sharply from Western multistakeholder models of digital rights and privacy (Unbound 2021). These tensions highlight a significant normative gap in how global digital diplomacy is conceived and implemented. In response, this article proposes Islamic ethics embodied in principles such as *adl* (justice), *shura* (consultation), *amanah* (trust), and *maslahah* (public interest) as a normative framework for evaluating and guiding digital diplomacy. Drawing on classical and contemporary Islamic thought, this framework offers a moral compass for assessing policies related to digital governance, data privacy, and the equitable application of technology. China's DSR-based soft power strategy in Southeast Asia incorporates Islamic ethical principles, creating a powerful alternative paradigm that emphasizes justice, dignity, and inclusive governance in the digital realm.

The increasing entanglement between digital infrastructure and foreign policy has redefined the way nations exert power and influence. China's Digital Silk Road (DSR), formally introduced in 2015 as a digital extension of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), exemplifies this shift (Sharma 2021). The DSR promotes the export of Chinese technology, standards, and digital governance models to countries across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East many of which have significant or majority Muslim populations

(Pantucci and Lain 2022). Through telecommunications projects, AI development, cloud computing, and e-commerce platforms, the DSR has become one of the most ambitious instruments of digital diplomacy in the 21st century (Sacks 2020). China's strategy is often framed in terms of mutual benefit, infrastructure connectivity, and technological empowerment. However, several scholars have questioned the underlying asymmetries and risks embedded in the initiative, particularly in terms of digital dependency, data sovereignty, and the spread of surveillance technologies (Creemers 2017; Segal 2020).

Some argue that the DSR advances a model of "digital authoritarianism" by exporting a state-centric vision of internet governance and digital control (Polyakova and Meserole 2019). This concern is particularly acute in Southeast Asia, where countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand have engaged with Chinese digital infrastructure projects while also navigating issues of privacy, governance, and strategic autonomy (Lim 2020). Literature on digital diplomacy has grown rapidly in the last decade. Bjola and Holmes (2015) define digital diplomacy as the use of digital technologies for conducting diplomatic activities and engaging with foreign publics. Nye (2004), meanwhile, contextualizes these practices within the broader scope of soft power the ability to shape preferences through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion. In the Chinese context, digital diplomacy serves both as a tool of strategic influence and as a mechanism to project a narrative of technological benevolence and global leadership (Manor 2019).

However, what remains underexplored in the existing literature is the normative dimension of digital diplomacy, particularly from non-Western ethical traditions. While Western scholarship often focuses on liberal values such as privacy, individual autonomy, and freedom of expression, the Islamic tradition offers a distinctive moral framework rooted in values such as *maslahah* (public interest), *adl* (justice), *amanah* (trust), and *shura* (deliberation) (Kamali 2018; Nasr 1968; Abdurrahman 2006). These principles, drawn from Qur'anic sources and classical Islamic thought, can offer critical insights into the ethical foundations of international digital engagement (al-Ghazali 1998; Ibn Khaldun 2005).

This paper seeks to fill this gap by exploring Islamic ethics as a normative response to the dilemmas posed by China's digital diplomacy strategy. Rather than taking an oppositional stance, this study constructively examines the DSR to assess its alignment or lack thereof with Islamic moral imperatives. It considers whether digital connectivity projects serve the broader public interest (*maslahah 'ammah*), protect human dignity (*karāmah*), and uphold the trust of citizens and partner countries (*amanah*).

In a world increasingly shaped by data-driven technologies and transnational digital infrastructure, the question of who sets the rules and whose values underlie them becomes crucial. The dominance of Western liberal norms and, more recently, the rise of state-based digital governance models in China reveal a global normative gap one in

which Islamic ethical frameworks remain marginalized or even absent altogether. This absence is particularly striking given that most of the countries involved in the Digital Silk Road (DSR) are Muslim-majority nations whose political cultures and legal traditions are heavily influenced by Islamic values. As these countries adopt and integrate Chinese digital infrastructure, they risk importing technological systems that may be at odds with fundamental ethical commitments to justice (*adl*), public accountability (*shura*), and the sanctity of individual dignity (*karāmah*).

Furthermore, in many Muslim societies, public trust in digital transformation hinges not only on technical efficacy but also on perceived moral legitimacy. When digital diplomacy is perceived as a vehicle for external surveillance, manipulation, or control, resistance can arise not only on political grounds, but also from religious and ethical concerns. In this context, Islamic ethics can serve as both a diagnostic and constructive framework: diagnostic in identifying the ethical weaknesses of digital diplomacy strategies, and constructive in offering principles that can guide more just and spiritually conscious forms of digital engagement.

Thus, the inclusion of Islamic moral philosophy in debates on digital diplomacy is not simply a cultural gesture; it is a strategic necessity. It enables Muslim-majority countries to assert ethical agency in shaping digital-era governance shifting from passive recipients of technological imports to normative contributors to the international system. By articulating how principles such as *maslahah*, *amanah*, and *adl* apply to data sovereignty, algorithmic governance, and cross-border digital collaboration, Islamic ethics provides a meaningful vocabulary for reimagining digital diplomacy beyond the binary of liberalism versus authoritarianism.

METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative analytical approach grounded in conceptual analysis and normative critique. It draws on primary Islamic ethical texts and key contemporary works on Islamic political ethics, alongside secondary literature on China's Digital Silk Road and digital diplomacy. The method involves three stages. This analysis describes China's DSR and its application in Southeast Asia. It critically examines digital diplomacy literature, highlighting gaps in ethical discussions. Additionally, it synthesises normative perspectives by applying specific Islamic ethical principles to digital diplomacy, using China's DSR as the main case study. This approach enables a bridge between empirical geopolitical developments and normative Islamic perspectives, providing a fresh, context-sensitive understanding of ethics in the digital age.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Applying Islamic Ethical Principles to China's Digital Diplomacy

As China's Digital Silk Road (DSR) expands its footprint in Southeast Asia, the need for ethical evaluation becomes critical, especially for Muslim-majority countries navigating the intersection of development, technology, and sovereignty. The Chinese strategy, while framed as mutual cooperation, often leads to significant asymmetries in control over data, infrastructure, and digital governance. In this section, we apply Islamic ethical principles to evaluate the normative challenges posed by the DSR.

While the Digital Silk Road (DSR) presents itself as a pathway toward connectivity and development, its implementation raises foundational ethical questions about power asymmetry, data sovereignty, and the moral integrity of international cooperation. These questions become particularly salient when analyzed through the lens of Islamic ethics, which emphasizes not only functional outcomes but also moral intentions, procedural justice, and the preservation of human dignity.

Taken together, these five ethical principles (*mashlahah, Amanah, adl, shura, and karamah*) offer a comprehensive evaluative framework for Muslim-majority countries engaging with China's Digital Silk Road. They invite a rethinking of digital diplomacy not merely as a technical or strategic process, but as a **moral engagement**, grounded in justice, transparency, public welfare, and human dignity.

1.1 *Maslahah* (Public Interest)

The principle of *maslahah* demands that any policy or technological intervention must serve the common good and prevent harm (*mafsadah*). In countries like Indonesia and Malaysia, Chinese technology, such as 5G networks by Huawei and cloud services by Alibaba has significantly expanded connectivity. However, concerns persist over data localization, long-term digital dependency, and job displacement. From an Islamic perspective, if these initiatives do not enhance the holistic well-being (*maslahah 'ammah*) of the society, including its political, economic, and moral dimensions, then their ethical justification is questionable.

The tradition of Islamic ethical governance provides a robust framework for assessing such complex challenges. At the heart of this framework lies the principle of **maslahah** the public interest or common good which serves as the primary aim of policy-making and collective action. The Qur'anic imperative to "promote good and prevent harm" (*al-amr bi-l-ma'ruf wa-nahy 'an al-munkar*) underscores the importance of evaluating whether digital initiatives genuinely serve the well-being of society, or merely reinforce techno-political dependencies under the guise of development.

1.2 *Amanah* (Trust)

Trust in governance and technology is central to Islamic ethics. The deployment of surveillance tools, like facial recognition systems exported from China to several Asian and African states, raises issues of privacy violations and social control. *Amanah* obliges those in authority to be transparent and responsible in the use of power. If citizens are unaware of how their data is collected or used, and governments fail to ensure transparency in foreign tech partnerships, they may violate this principle.

Closely linked is the principle of **Amanah** (trust or trustworthiness) which obligates state and corporate actors to uphold public confidence, act transparently, and safeguard the responsibilities entrusted to them. In digital contexts, this includes the ethical handling of data, algorithmic governance, and respecting the autonomy of partner nations. When digital infrastructure is deployed in ways that centralize control, obscure accountability, or enable surveillance, the ethical fabric of *amanah* is undermined.

1.3 *Adl* (Justice)

Justice in Islam is not only distributive but also procedural and structural. The DSR should ideally be a platform for fair digital exchange. Yet, critics argue that Chinese firms often dominate local markets, suppressing indigenous innovation and creating monopolistic environments. An ethical evaluation through *adl* would call for equitable contracts, fair access to digital markets, and reciprocal benefits not just economic gain for the stronger partner.

Similarly, the principle of 'adl (justice) requires that all digital partnerships and technological engagements be guided by fairness, equity, and mutual respect. Justice in diplomacy is not limited to the distribution of physical resources but extends to equitable access to digital tools, protection from exploitation, and empowerment of marginalized voices. A digital initiative that prioritizes one party's strategic gain over the sovereignty and interests of others must be interrogated against this ethical backdrop.

1.4 *Shura* (Consultation)

Shura promotes inclusive decision-making. In digital infrastructure projects, consultation with civil society, religious authorities, and local stakeholders is often bypassed. Islamic ethics requires deliberation, especially in matters that have long-term socio-political effects. Countries adopting DSR technologies must ensure participatory governance to avoid elite-driven agreements that disregard public interest. Moreover, Islamic ethics emphasizes shura, or participatory consultation, as a core component of just governance. In the context of diplomacy and digital development, this means involving a broad spectrum of stakeholders government bodies, civil society, religious institutions, and the public in shaping policy and

negotiating agreements. The top-down nature of many DSR projects, with limited transparency or input from local communities, stands in tension with this principle.

1.5 *Karāmah* (Human Dignity)

Surveillance and algorithmic control can undermine *karāmah* if used for social manipulation or political repression. Islam upholds the inviolable dignity of the individual. If DSR-associated platforms enable misinformation, censorship, or intrusive monitoring, they conflict with this foundational principle. Finally, the principle of karāmah (human dignity) is foundational in Islamic thought. The Qur'an affirms that "We have certainly honored the children of Adam" (Qur'an 17:70), establishing dignity as a divine gift that must not be violated. Technologies that compromise individual privacy, enable mass surveillance, or manipulate public opinion without consent directly contradict this moral imperative. Digital diplomacy must be structured to preserve or not undermine the inherent dignity of all individuals and communities it touches.

2. Lessons from China's Digital Silk Road for Future Digital Diplomacy Strategic Integration of Technology and Foreign Policy

China's DSR illustrates how digital infrastructure can serve as a powerful foreign policy tool. Rather than treating technology and diplomacy as separate arenas, China strategically integrates digital development with its broader geopolitical agenda. Telecommunications, data centers, smart city systems, and artificial intelligence projects are embedded within bilateral and multilateral agreements that enhance China's influence across Southeast Asia and beyond.

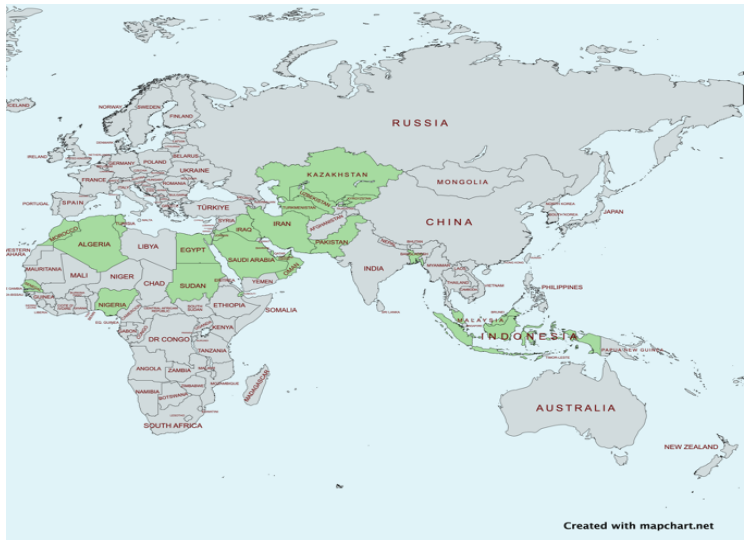

Figure 1. Muslim-Majority Countries Participating in the Belt and Road Initiative(BRI)

Source: MapChart.net, compiled by author

This map illustrates the geographic distribution of Muslim-majority countries that have officially joined China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Among the over 140 BRI partner nations worldwide, approximately half have significant Muslim populations, and more than 35 can be categorized as Muslim-majority states. These countries span strategic regions, including Southeast Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, and North and West Africa, indicating the substantial reach of China's digital and economic engagement in the Islamic world.

The participation of Muslim-majority countries in the BRI carries significant geopolitical and ethical implications. These states are not merely recipients of Chinese investment; they are also active arenas where questions of technological sovereignty, data governance, and value-based diplomacy intersect. Many of these countries have integrated components of the Digital Silk Road (DSR) into their national development agendas, such as 5G networks, cloud computing infrastructure, and smart surveillance technologies, raising normative questions about the alignment of these initiatives with local ethical, religious, and legal norms.

This spatial representation thus supports a key premise of the paper: that Islamic ethics, deeply embedded in the political cultures of these countries, should play a more central role in shaping digital diplomacy frameworks. The map underscores the urgency of developing an ethical model of digital engagement rooted in principles such as *maslahah* (public benefit), *amanah* (trust), and *karāmah* (human dignity) to evaluate and guide the implementation of digital initiatives across the Global South.

In particular, these nations need to develop frameworks that are not only technically robust but also ethically grounded. Guided by Islamic principles such as *amanah* (trust), *maslahah* (public good), and *adl* (justice), digital strategies can be positioned to empower rather than dominate. This would require strategic state planning, ethical governance models, and an investment in indigenous digital infrastructure.

Thus, China's model invites both emulation and critique. While its centralized vision and resource mobilization offer practical insights, Muslim-majority states are uniquely positioned to frame digital diplomacy through a moral lens, one that seeks equitable cooperation and respects both sovereignty and dignity in the digital age. The issue is not only *who* builds the digital infrastructure, but *how* it is built and governed. From the perspective of Islamization of technology and diplomacy, the central question becomes: are the values embedded in digital governance aligned with justice (*adl*), trust (*amanah*), and the public good (*maslahah*)? This moral

inquiry transcends national borders and applies universally to all digital diplomacy efforts.

Digital infrastructure is not a neutral medium; it is inherently political and moral, shaped by the intentions and values of its architects. In this regard, Islamic ethics provides not only a spiritual compass but also a concrete framework for evaluating modern technological power. By foregrounding principles such as *niyyah* (intention), *adl* (justice), and *karāmah* (dignity), Islamic thought challenges the dominant narrative that technological superiority implies moral legitimacy. The replication of China's Digital Silk Road without moral scrutiny risks perpetuating asymmetrical dependencies and digital colonialism. Therefore, a critical approach is essential to ensure that digital diplomacy in the Global South is rooted in mutual respect, transparent intentions, and ethical governance.

3. Institutional Coordination and Centralized Vision

China's success in advancing the Digital Silk Road (DSR) offers a compelling example of how effective digital diplomacy is deeply rooted in strong institutional coordination. The DSR reflects a well-integrated system where state-owned enterprises, major technology firms such as Huawei and ZTE, and key government ministries operate in strategic alignment. This synergy demonstrates that digital diplomacy is not merely about exporting technology or infrastructure but also about mobilizing cohesive institutions to project influence and safeguard national interests in the digital sphere.

This model offers valuable lessons for Islamic countries seeking to advance their digital transformation agendas while upholding Islamic ethical values. One key takeaway is the need to establish institutions that not only prioritize digital development but also embed normative and ethical dimensions into policy-making processes. In the context of Islamic countries, this means crafting digital institutions that are not only technologically competent but also guided by Islamic principles such as justice, transparency, and social responsibility.

In an era of global technological competition and rising concerns over digital sovereignty, it is no longer sufficient for Islamic countries to be passive recipients of foreign technology. They must assert agency in shaping their own digital architecture systems that reflect their identities, values, and strategic interests. The Chinese model of institutional integration, while context-specific, can be adapted to suit the sociopolitical realities of the Muslim world. Ministries of communication, for instance, could partner with Islamic universities, religious councils, and domestic tech firms to develop policies that are both ethically grounded and technologically forward-looking.

Moreover, in the realm of global digital diplomacy, Islamic countries could contribute to shaping international norms on data privacy, cybersecurity, and digital

rights in line with *maqasid al-shariah,* the higher objectives of Islamic law, which include the protection of life, intellect, property, and dignity. This would position Islamic countries not merely as consumers of global tech standards but as normative producers and active participants in shaping the global digital order. In short, China's DSR success should be viewed not only as a technological and economic achievement but also as an institutional model that can inspire Islamic nations to develop their own ethically informed, strategically coherent digital diplomacy frameworks.

4. Soft Power via Technological Narrative

The Digital Silk Road (DSR) is not merely an infrastructure project it is also a strategic effort to shape narratives around progress, modernity, and digital empowerment. China has carefully framed its technology as beneficial, non-intrusive, and sovereignty-respecting. This narrative sets China apart from Western powers, whose digital engagements are often portrayed through the lens of security concerns, surveillance, and political conditionality.

Such narrative framing serves as a powerful form of soft power, influencing how partner countries perceive their digital cooperation with China. By presenting its technology as "neutral" and primarily developmental, China expands its influence without overt political or economic coercion. Islamic nations can learn from this narrative strategy by crafting their own digital narratives rooted in Islamic ethical values. Concepts such as amanah (trust), maslahah (public good), and karāmah (human dignity) can serve as foundational principles in framing digital diplomacy as a value-driven mission. By emphasizing that digital technologies must serve the collective good, uphold human dignity, and be governed with integrity and responsibility, Islamic countries can foster trust both domestically and internationally.

Furthermore, constructing a value-based technological narrative serves as a form of resistance against the dominance of Western digital discourses, which often prioritize commercialization, data extraction, and cultural penetration. By offering an ethical and inclusive alternative, Islamic nations not only reinforce their own digital identities but also contribute to a more pluralistic and equitable global digital order.

In this way, digital diplomacy shaped through a narrative of ethical technology is not merely a matter of communication strategy it becomes a broader effort to advocate for a just and dignified digital future.

5. Engagement with Global South Partners

China's strategic engagement with countries across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East through the Digital Silk Road (DSR) signals a deliberate pivot toward the

Global South. This outreach is not merely transactional; it reflects a broader diplomatic vision that seeks to establish long-term partnerships based on shared developmental goals and alternative governance models to those promoted by Western institutions. Through technology transfer, infrastructure investment, and capacity building, China positions itself as a partner that understands the priorities and sensitivities of the Global South, particularly in contexts where historical experiences with Western powers have left legacies of mistrust and asymmetry.

Country	Digital Silk Road Projects	Key Partners
Indonesia	5G rollout, smart city platforms (Jakarta), cloud computing center, fintech via Ant Financial	Huawei, Alibaba, JD.com
Malaysia	Digital Free Trade Zone (DFTZ), AI surveillance, 5G testbed, smart logistics	Alibaba, Huawei
Pakistan	China-Pakistan Fiber Optic Cable, e-payment system, smart border control, Safe City Islamabad	Huawei, ZTE, China Telecom
Bangladesh	National Data Center, e-governance rollout, Smart Bangladesh vision support	ZTE, Huawei, Alibaba Cloud
Egypt	Huawei North Africa HQ, AI surveillance, digital governance systems, smart university infrastructure	Huawei, ZTE, China State Grid
Saudi Arabia	Cloud computing joint ventures, smart city integration in NEOM, AI energy efficiency tools	Huawei, Alibaba Cloud, Tencent
UAE	AI lab partnerships (Abu Dhabi), digital ports, 5G infrastructure	Huawei, Alibaba
Turkey	E-commerce platform integration (AliExpress), fiber optic development, drone & AI cooperation	Alibaba, Huawei
Iran	ICT cooperation agreements, digital currency talks, AI and cyber training programs	Huawei, ZTE, Iran ICT Ministry
Nigeria	Safe City Abuja & Lagos, broadband expansion, e-government system	Huawei, ZTE, Galaxy Backbone Ltd.
Algeria	National broadband network, satellite imaging, AI surveillance systems	Huawei, ZTE, China Satcom
Morocco	5G infrastructure pilots, smart logistics, blockchain in customs management	Huawei, Alibaba
Kazakhstan	Cross-border data integration with China, smart port system, DSR-aligned logistics corridors	Huawei, ZTE, China Unicom

Table 2. *Chinese Digital Silk Road projects in selected Muslim-majority countries*

For Islamic countries, this emerging landscape presents an opportunity to promote a model of digital cooperation grounded in Islamic ethical traditions. Central to Islamic political ethics is the concept of ***shura*** (consultation), which emphasizes participatory decision-making, mutual respect, and collective well-being. When applied to the digital realm, shura offers a normative foundation for equitable partnerships in which all parties are heard, benefit-sharing is transparent, and technological advancement aligns with the needs of communities rather than the interests of dominant powers.

This approach resonates with the broader aspiration for South-South cooperation, a framework that seeks to redefine global relations on the basis of solidarity, mutual benefit, and reduced dependency on the Global North. Rather than replicating hierarchical structures or conditionalities, Islamic countries can champion digital partnerships that prioritize ethical cooperation, with knowledge sharing, respect for digital sovereignty, and the co-creation of technologies as central principles.

Furthermore, Islamic nations can act as cultural and diplomatic bridges within the Global South, particularly between African, Arab, and Asian regions, many of which share historical ties, cultural affinities, and overlapping development challenges. By fostering inclusive digital ecosystems through investments in digital literacy, localized innovation, and infrastructure that serves rural and underserved communities these countries can demonstrate a commitment to a digital future that is not only technologically advanced, but also morally grounded. In essence, engaging with the Global South through the lens of Islamic ethics offers a compelling model for digital diplomacy: one that resists domination, values mutual consultation, and aspires to uplift communities through trust-based, value-conscious technological collaboration.

6. Critical Ethical Reflections on China's DSR from an Islamic Perspective

As China's Digital Silk Road (DSR) expands its footprint in Southeast Asia, the initiative brings not only promises of digital development and connectivity but also complex ethical and political considerations, particularly for Muslim-majority countries. These nations, while seeking to accelerate technological growth and close digital divides, are also confronted with pressing questions about sovereignty, equity, and long-term dependency. Although China presents the DSR as a model of mutual cooperation and South-South solidarity, the reality on the ground often reveals asymmetries in decision-making power, data governance, and technological control.

For Muslim-majority countries, these dynamics demand a deeper normative inquiry, one that moves beyond cost-benefit analysis and into the realm of values, principles, and long-term ethical accountability. Islamic ethics, with its emphasis on justice (*'adl*), trustworthiness (*amanah*), consultation (*shura*), and the public

interest (*maslahah*), provides a robust framework through which to assess the DSR not merely as a geopolitical strategy, but as a moral and social challenge. The following section, "Critical Ethical Reflections on China's DSR from an Islamic Perspective," offers a value-based analysis of the DSR by applying core Islamic ethical principles. It seeks to interrogate how digital infrastructure projects should be evaluated not only in terms of economic outcomes, but also in light of their implications for human dignity (*karāmah*), autonomy, and collective well-being in the digital age. Taken together, these concerns underscore the need for a deeper, value-driven framework when engaging with global digital initiatives like the DSR. Islamic ethics, far from being abstract or dogmatic, offers concrete moral tools for evaluating power dynamics, accountability, and justice in digital diplomacy. By applying principles such as *karāmah, shura, 'adl*, and *niyyah*, Muslim-majority countries can advocate for a model of digital development that is not only technologically empowering but also morally sound and socially just.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the ethical implications of China's Digital Silk Road (DSR) through the lens of Islamic moral philosophy, focusing particularly on the values of *maslahah* (public good), *amanah* (trust), *adl* (justice), *shura* (consultation), and *karāmah* (human dignity). The main outcome of this research is the identification of a critical ethical gap in current digital diplomacy practices and the proposition of Islamic ethics as a normative framework for evaluating and reshaping the future of digital infrastructure governance. While China's DSR has succeeded in integrating digital technology with foreign policy objectives, particularly in the Global South, it has also raised substantial concerns about surveillance, transparency, and technological dependency. These concerns necessitate a reassessment of digital development strategies not only from a technical and geopolitical standpoint but also from a moral and ethical perspective rooted in universal values.

The significance of this research lies in its interdisciplinary contribution, bridging international relations, digital diplomacy, and Islamic ethical philosophy. By introducing Islamic moral values into the discourse on digital governance, this study enriches existing scholarship that has often been dominated by Western liberal paradigms focused solely on individual privacy and freedom of expression. The research is particularly relevant in Muslim-majority countries that are deeply engaged with Chinese-led digital infrastructure projects but often lack indigenous ethical frameworks for assessing their long-term implications. Furthermore, it provides a reference point for scholars and policymakers seeking alternative moral paradigms that resonate with local cultural and spiritual traditions.

However, this study also acknowledges several limitations. It primarily employs a normative-philosophical approach, and thus, lacks empirical fieldwork or statistical validation of how Islamic ethics is currently being operationalized in digital diplomacy practices. Additionally, the scope of the analysis is limited to selected Muslim-majority states and does not capture the full diversity of Islamic ethical interpretation across regions and schools of thought.

Despite these limitations, the application of Islamic ethics in evaluating the DSR is promising. It opens space for more inclusive, participatory, and morally grounded digital diplomacy. By adopting values such as *shura* and *adl*, states can ensure that digital policies serve the public good rather than geopolitical agendas alone. Policymakers should consider institutionalizing ethical review mechanisms in digital foreign policy, incorporating scholars of Islamic ethics into diplomatic advisory boards, and fostering South-South cooperation that centers on value-based innovation. Future research should empirically examine how Islamic values are interpreted and applied in digital governance across Muslim-majority states and explore comparative models with other non-Western ethical systems such as Confucian or African Ubuntu ethics.

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