CHINESE NET STATES AND PLATFORM-BASED GOVERNANCE IN CHINA: IMPLICATIONS FOR COMPARATIVE NET-STATE ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT
This study applies Imaginative Public Administration (IPA) and digital sovereignty as analytical frameworks to investigate Chinese net states within platform-based governance. Drawing on a qualitative, theory-driven literature review and conceptual synthesis, it examines Tencent, Alibaba Group, Baidu, and Huawei as net states that perform state-like functions through platform infrastructures. The findings demonstrate that China has institutionalized a party-state capitalism model in which political authority is embedded within major technology firms, enabling net states to function as strategic branches of the party-state. In contrast, Russia relies primarily on coercive regulation rather than infrastructural integration. The study advances net-state analysis by positioning platform governance as central to digital sovereignty.
Keywords: Digital Sovereignty, Platform Governance, Net States, Party-State Capitalism, Authoritarian Governance, State-Platform Relations, China

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INTRODUCTION

According to kakistocryptocracy, net states are fundamentally disrupting established theories of international relations and public administration. By exercising control over information flows and governance capacities once monopolized by the state, these platforms now function as powerful non-state actors that defy conventional market regulations. Preserving sovereignty in a digital era necessitates a transition from individual country analyses to a comprehensive, comparative framework. Ongoing studies are predominantly focused on Russia, considering net states as instrumental assets for sovereignty in a state-monopoly capitalism framework. Nonetheless, this limited perspective does not offer a comprehensive framework for other non-liberal systems. To bridge this knowledge gap, this study elaborately expands its analysis to include politically diverse contexts.

China constitutes a particularly significant case because it represents one of the most comprehensive integrations of digital platforms into state governance. Unlike Russia, where platforms are primarily regulated and instrumentalized by the state, China demonstrates a more advanced model in which digital infrastructures are embedded within governance processes themselves. Shared techno-nationalist orientations reinforce this distinction—both countries prioritize technological sovereignty, data control, and state-centered digital architectures as responses to perceived international vulnerabilities—yet China manifests a more internally coherent and institutionalized version of this logic. From an international relations perspective, China provides a decisive empirical setting for examining how non-state actors are incorporated into authoritarian governance systems without relinquishing sovereign authority. Within the Imaginative Public Administration (IPA) framework, which conceptualizes governance as a dynamic process shaped by strategic imagination, power coordination, and adaptive institutional design, the Chinese case becomes analytically salient. China exemplifies a system in which net states are not peripheral anomalies but core components of the governing architecture, yet IPA-based analysis has not been sufficiently applied to explain this integration. **Therefore, the objectives of this study are: 1) to analyze Chinese net states as core components of platform-based governance, drawing on the Imaginative Public Administration (IPA) framework to explain how digital non-state actors perform state-like functions; and 2) to explore the implications of the Chinese case, in comparison with Russia, for understanding how different state traditions incorporate net states into governance systems** (Capri, 2020; Gohwong, 2017, 2020, 2023, 2025; Jermsittiparsert et al., 2023; Kaufman, 2022; Sørensen et al., 2022; Wichowski, 2020; Wu & Zhang, 2019).

LITERATURE REVIEWS

This study reviewed the literature by establishing digital sovereignty as an overarching framework for power and governance, using Imaginative Public Administration (IPA) as its primary analytical lens to shift academic focus from International Relations toward the practicalities of state-led digital design. It identified net states as the operational tools of this sovereignty—deployed via Governmental Power Market-ing (GPM) in volatile contexts—and situated these dynamics within the techno-nationalist strategies of China and Russia. By incorporating a kakistoscryptocratic examination of the risks posed by concentrated digital power, the analysis provided a clear framework for understanding how digital infrastructure was deliberately harnessed as an instrument of modern governance.

Digital Sovereignty

Rooted in Saskia Sassen's globalization studies, the notion of digital sovereignty reconceived sovereignty as a relational capacity transformed by transnational informational networks and the reallocation of core state functions over time (Sassen, 1996, 1998, 2001, 2006). Pierre Bellanger later defined it as a political framework: a state's ability to control its present and future through governance of digital technologies, data, and networks (Bellanger, 2014).

Sovereignty was thus redefined as relational autonomy grounded in infrastructure protection, data regulation, and platform enforcement.

Imaginative Public Administration

Imaginative Public Administration depicted the state as a cognitive-symbolic actor, able to imagine and co-design futures in collaboration with AI and citizens. Its structure relied on three main components: cognitive foresight, symbolic validity, and collaborative engagement. These were reinforced by two strategic extensions that protected against governance failure and enabled stable capital allocation. This structure allowed the state to maintain its governing capacity and navigate the complexities of a volatile digital landscape (Gohwong, 2025).

This study used Imaginative Public Administration to expose how power concentrates within state governance, challenging the reduction of digital sovereignty to a simple policy goal. IPA framed public administration as power alignment, with states intentionally designing and enforcing new governing arrangements. The view emphasized a high potential for misuse, since state-driven digital experimentation often bypassed conventional oversight. Under conditions of uncertainty, the state's drive for adaptive governance frequently superseded established checks and balances, allowing for the implementation of digital architectures that operated outside of public scrutiny or democratic accountability. Digital sovereignty became a vehicle for expanding state reach, allowing for the construction of governing architectures that prioritized regime control over democratic accountability.

IPA was ideally suited for studying digital sovereignty as it shifted the focus from formal bureaucracy to the architectures of governance. As digital authority became more prevalent through algorithms and platforms that crossed the public-private boundary, conventional administrative models proved inadequate. IPA provided the necessary framework to explain how states strategically integrated technological actors into their governing processes, allowing governments to construct new modes of control that operated through the very infrastructural systems that mediated modern life.

In this framework, platform-based governance served as the central mechanism for digital sovereignty, where the state governed through—and as—a platform. IPA demonstrated that embedding authority within digital infrastructure to shape behavior was a calculated administrative design rather than a technological coincidence. Utilizing IPA, this research viewed digital sovereignty as a tangible governance initiative, exploring the allocation of resources and the tactical incorporation of digital non-state participants. This analytical shift explained how platform-based architectures transitioned from technical innovations to the primary instruments of modern state power. By focusing on these administrative realities, the study clarified the mechanisms through which states exercise sovereign control in an interconnected digital environment.

Net states

Significant governance risks associated with the rise of net states, emphasizing how powerful digital non-state actors eroded state authority and destabilized conventional governance. Gohwong conceptualized this condition as kakistoscryptocracy, in which state capacity was weakened by net-state actors operating partly beyond state control, thereby undermining effective governance (Gohwong, 2023). Russian case studies demonstrated that foreign and domestic platforms intervened in information and public services, constraining or consolidating state power at accountability's expense (Gohwong, 2020, 2023). Wichowski further demonstrated that major technology firms increasingly performed state-like roles in security, infrastructure, and public services, reshaping governance and amplifying the risks of unaccountable digital power (Wichowski, 2020).

Governmental power market-ing in the vu-chaos world

Governmental Power Market-ing blended Public Administration with storytelling and symbolic interactionism to manage extreme chaos via Crea-Innovation. The model refined

governance in three key areas: Vital Practices (adaptability), Strategic Thinking (policy alignment), and Tactics and Tricks (narrative control). By synthesizing these domains, governments attempted to preserve authority and execute public functions amidst increasing digital volatility. This framework provided a roadmap for how states transitioned from traditional legal commands to more fluid, platform-based governance architectures. In this study, GPM is not conceptualized as a primary analytical framework of digital governance, but as a logic of state action that explains how states strategically deploy net states under conditions of chaotic settings. In fact, GPM was a mode through which the government exercised power beyond coercion or formal legal command, emphasizing instead strategic positioning, communication, and the legitimation of authority through market-like mechanisms, branding, and platforms (Jermsittiparsert et al., 2023). Within this logic, platforms and net states were explicitly identified as power instruments that enabled states to influence information flows, social behavior, and public perception without expanding traditional bureaucratic structures (Jermsittiparsert et al., 2023). Empirical literature on Russia showed how this logic operated in practice: the Russian state strategically expanded ownership, imposed legal control, and integrated domestic net states into national digital strategies—such as the Sovereign Runet—to manage information discord and sustain governmental power in the digital domain (Gohwong, 2023). Complementarily, Bellanger demonstrated that digital sovereignty became effective through control over networks, data, and platforms, indicating that state authority in the digital sphere relied on strategic governance mechanisms rather than law alone (Bellanger, 2014). Taken together, this body of literature positioned GPM as a strategic logic that clarified how governments used net states and platforms to operationalize digital sovereignty, without elevating GPM to an ideological doctrine or the article's core theoretical framework (Jermsittiparsert et al., 2023; Bellanger, 2014).

Techno-nationalism

Techno-nationalism literature framed digital sovereignty as a geopolitical issue by treating technological capability and autonomy as central to national power and security rather than domestic regulation. It defined techno-nationalism as the belief that technological strength shaped national power in competitive environments, prompting states to control knowledge production, standards, and infrastructures. Platforms thus evolved into security assets, not neutral markets. Digital statecraft studies showed that techno-competition disrupted global flows, encouraging domestic standards to reduce dependency. This logic explained convergent Chinese and Russian digital sovereignty approaches (Capri, 2020; Wong, 2023; Wu & Zhang, 2019).

China-Russia Relations in Digital Governance

China-Russia relations had a long history of pragmatic alignment marked by persistent tension. Cooperation emerged primarily when both states sought to protect strategic autonomy from external pressure, producing a post-Cold War partnership based on coordination rather than ideology (Snow, 2023). International relations scholarship showed that cooperation and rivalry coexisted without formal alliances, with digital governance functioning as a securitized domain enabling coordination despite enduring divergence over time (Reus-Smit, 2020; Sørensen et al., 2022; Kaufman, 2022; Berridge, 2022; Roach & Barder, 2024).

Kakistoscryptocracy

Significant governance risks associated with the rise of net states, emphasizing how powerful digital non-state actors eroded state authority and destabilized conventional governance. Gohwong conceptualized this condition as kakistoscryptocracy, in which state capacity was weakened by net-state actors operating partly beyond state control, thereby undermining effective governance (Gohwong, 2023). Russian case studies demonstrated that foreign and domestic platforms intervened in information and public services, constraining or consolidating state power at accountability's expense (Gohwong, 2020, 2023). Wichowski further

demonstrated that major technology firms increasingly performed state-like roles in security, infrastructure, and public services, reshaping governance and amplifying the risks of unaccountable digital power (Wichowski, 2020).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative, theory-driven design based on a systematic literature review and conceptual synthesis to explain how digital sovereignty is operationalized through platform-based governance, focusing on net states as digital non-state actors performing state-like functions. This interpretive approach suited the study's emphasis on governance architectures, strategic behavior, and power relations that require conceptual analysis rather than direct measurement. The analysis was anchored in Imaginative Public Administration (IPA) as the primary analytical framework. IPA enabled the examination of digital governance as a deliberately designed, adaptive process in which the state functions as a cognitive-symbolic actor, exercising authority through governance architectures rather than solely through formal institutions. Digital sovereignty served as the overarching analytical framework, encompassing data sovereignty and cyberspace sovereignty. Within this framework, net states were examined as operational mechanisms embedded in platform-based governance. Governmental Power Market-ing (GPM) complemented this analysis by explaining how states strategically deploy and stabilize these mechanisms amid digital volatility. China was selected as the primary analytical case due to its distinctive model of state-led, platform-based governance and its explicit emphasis on digital sovereignty. Russia was employed as a comparative reference, allowing the study to highlight similarities and divergences in how different state traditions integrate net states into governance architectures. International Relations perspectives served as contextual background for understanding China-Russia technological dynamics, complementing rather than displacing the study's governance-centered approach. To assess net-state governance risks, the study employed kakistoscryptocracy as a lens for examining how concentrated digital power distorts accountability and enables governance failure. Analysis combined systematic categorization of literature, conceptual integration within the IPA framework, and interpretive case application examining China with Russia as a comparative reference. **In sum, the literature was selected based on conceptual relevance to digital sovereignty, platform governance, and state-technology relations rather than chronological exhaustiveness. The analysis proceeded from conceptual synthesis to case application.**

RESEARCH RESULTS

Chinese Net States and Platform Governance: Applying the IPA Framework

This section demonstrated how Tencent, Alibaba Group, Baidu, and Huawei exemplified Chinese net states through Wichowski's (2020) four defining characteristics: international reach, technological orientation, ideologically driven pursuits beyond profit, and expansion into state domains including defense, diplomacy, infrastructure, and citizen services. The analysis then examined how these net states functioned as core governance components within China's platform-based system (Sassen, 1996, 2001, 2006; Bellanger, 2014; Gohwong, 2017, 2020, 2023, 2025; Wichowski, 2020; Capri, 2020; Wong, 2023; Wu & Zhang, 2019; Snow, 2023; Reus-Smit, 2020; Sørensen et al., 2022; Kaufman, 2022; Berridge, 2022; Roach & Barder, 2024).

Major Chinese digital firms with pervasive platform infrastructures now operate as transnational actors, Tencent has leveraged WeChat to create a global ecosystem that structures daily communication and payments, while Alibaba Group has embedded algorithmic coordination and digital finance into international trade and logistics. By delivering quasi-public services and shaping everyday social and economic practices, these firms function as

net states, extending the reach of platform-based governance far beyond domestic borders. Baidu exercised information governance as the primary knowledge gateway, using AI-driven search to structure visibility, shape user behavior, and provide public information services. Huawei supplied foundational telecommunications, cloud, and smart-city infrastructures across more than 170 countries, performing infrastructure-level functions traditionally associated with states (Alibaba Cloud Intelligence GTS, 2021; Bellayoni, 2020; Chen, 2022; Cui & Liu, 2019; Dou, 2025; Duong, 2017; Erisman, 2015; Leng, 2017; Liu & Avery, 2016; Lowrey, 2016; Pan & Wang, 2014; Rogers & Ruppersberger, 2012; Shen, 2024; Song, 2019; Tang, 2020; Wen, 2020; Xiong, 2013; Yang, 2017; Yeo, 2023; Zhang et al., 2018, 2021; Zeng, 2018; Zhou, 2012).

Guided by a qualitative, theory-driven methodology grounded in systematic literature review and conceptual synthesis, this analysis examined Chinese net states as operational mechanisms of platform-based governance within a digital sovereignty framework. Anchored in IPA, the analysis conceptualized governance as a purposefully crafted and adaptive process, in which authority is exercised through digital architectures, not just formal state institutions. Through this lens, the analysis treated net states as central governance actors rather than marginal market participants. These digital non-state entities carried out state-like functions that were integrated into the core of modern governance systems. By centralizing these public roles, the platforms became indispensable operational layers of the net state, blurring the lines between private corporate services and official sovereign authority.

From the perspective of digital sovereignty, Chinese net states exemplified how control over infrastructure, data, and platforms translated abstract sovereignty claims into practical governing capacity. Unlike conventional regulatory models that relied on external oversight, China demonstrated a governance configuration in which digital platforms were structurally integrated into state functions themselves. This integration reflected an internally coherent model of platform-based governance, in which sovereignty was enacted through infrastructural design and operational coordination rather than through legal command alone.

Applying IPA clarified why Chinese net states constituted core components of governance rather than anomalies. Within IPA, the state appeared as a cognitive-symbolic actor deliberately constructing governance architectures to manage complexity, uncertainty, and strategic competition, with net states functioning as extensions of this cognitive and operational capacity. Governance thus operated through information systems, algorithms, and platform ecosystems that structured social and economic behavior—a perspective that explained how Chinese platforms were embedded within governance processes themselves, not simply regulated or instrumentalized after their establishment.

Tencent, Alibaba Group, Baidu, and Huawei collectively illustrated this pattern. All firms exhibited the four hallmarks of net-statehood: global reach, technical centricity, mission-driven agendas, and the appropriation of governmental roles. Tencent created a unified environment for messaging and payments that assumed the responsibilities of public coordination and financial infrastructure. Alibaba Group mirrored this state-like authority by managing logistics and market coordination through data-driven systems rather than traditional bureaucracy. As an information utility, Baidu governed knowledge flows and search visibility within the digital domain. Huawei extended its influence into material and digital infrastructures, constructing telecommunications networks and smart-city systems across more than 170 countries, thereby entering domains long monopolized by state actors. All cases demonstrated that state-like functions were enacted through platform governance and infrastructure provision, not formal authority. By centralizing these public functions, these entities became indispensable operational layers of the net states, blurring the lines between private corporate services and official governance.

As a logic of action, the GPM explained the strategic deployment of digital architectures to maintain stability in the face of volatility. The Chinese government exerted influence through

platforms that structured information flows and public perception rather than relying solely on formal legal authority. Net states acted as instruments of power, strengthening sovereignty via infrastructure. By bypassing bureaucracy, platforms became the core operational layer of modern governance.

Compared with Russia—where net states were regulated and used within state-monopoly capitalism—China followed a different path. Both countries emphasized techno-nationalism, but China adopted a more institutionalized model, embedding platforms into governance itself. From an international relations perspective, this configuration demonstrated how non-state actors could be incorporated into authoritarian governance systems without relinquishing sovereign authority.

Lastly, through a kakistoscryptocratic lens, concentrated digital power was seen as a threat to accountability and governance. China managed these risks by embedding net states into administrative structures instead of regulating them externally. This confirmed platforms as governance infrastructure, stabilizing authority, and preventing disruptive control. Chinese net states thus functioned as operational pillars of platform-based governance, performing state-like functions that operationalized digital sovereignty within the IPA framework.

From State-Monopoly Capitalism to Platform Governance: Operational Divergences of Net States under Chinese and Russian Regimes

The analysis identified two contrasting governance systems, as shown in Table 1. Although both China and Russia pursued techno-nationalist projects of digital sovereignty, China institutionalized party-state capitalism by embedding the Communist Party within private firms. This arrangement enabled net states to function as extensions of the party-state, with platforms serving ideological ends that transcended profit-making. Russia, in contrast, followed state-monopoly capitalism, relying on legal mandates and ownership to control firms, which functioned mainly as order receivers. The Russian state prioritized stability through coercion and law rather than ideological shaping.

Table 1 The Comparison between China and Russia

Dimension	Russia	China
Model	State Monopoly Capitalism	Party-State Capitalism
State Relationship	Ownership and Law	Party Penetration
Data Control	Sovereign Runet	Great Firewall
Corporate Role	State Order Receiver	Strategic Branch
Flexibility	Context-dependent Adaptation	Highly Centralized
Goal	Managing Disorder	Creating Ideological Order

Source: Alibaba Cloud Intelligence GTS (2021), Bellanger (2014), Bellayoni (2020), Berridge (2022), Capri (2020), Chen (2022), Cui & Liu (2019), Dou (2025), Duong (2017), Erisman (2015), Gohwong (2017, 2020, 2023, 2025), Kaufman (2022), Leng (2017), Liu & Avery (2016), Lowrey (2016), Pan & Wang (2014), Reus-Smit (2020), Roach & Barder (2024), Rogers & Ruppersberger (2012), Sassen (1996, 2001, 2006), Shen (2024), Snow (2023), Song (2019), Sørensen et al. (2022), Tang (2020), Wen (2020), Wichowski (2020), Wong (2023), Wu & Zhang (2019), Yang (2017), Yeo (2023), Zeng (2018), Zhang et al. (2018, 2021), Zhou (2012)

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

This section distinguishes the roles of net states in China and Russia by setting the Chinese Strategic Branch framework against the Russian Order-Receiver model. While China's approach reflects a Party-State Capitalism where platforms function as integrated extensions of the sovereign apparatus (Atkinson, 2024; Li et al., 2025; Pan & Wang, 2014; Pearson et al.,

2021), the latter relies primarily on external state mandates and coercive legal pressure in the state monopoly capitalism (Caporaso & Levine, 1992; Ibrahim et al., 2019). China's platform governance was user-centric, treating the entire population as its base. Tencent and similar firms built ecosystems meeting daily needs in communication and finance. With universal adoption, platforms became governance infrastructure through which the party-state exercised authority via soft power and digital coordination rather than coercion. Consequently, the platform functions not merely as a commercial entity but as an infrastructural extension of the state, aligning sovereign objectives with routine digital practices.

By contrast, in the Russian context, technology firms were more often treated as external actors subject to legal control and regulatory pressure rather than as integrated components of governance architecture. State-digital firm relations operated through confrontational compliance using legal mandates, ownership, and coercion. External regulation constrained flexibility and innovation, preventing organic governance integration. Russian net states thus served as order enforcement instruments rather than adaptive systems for ideological and behavioral governance through everyday digital life (Capri, 2020; Gohwong, 2020, 2023; Jermsittiparsert et al., 2023, Pan & Wang, 2014; Snow, 2023; Wong, 2023; Wu & Zhang, 2019). In sum, this study elaborately examines the role of Chinese net states within platform-based governance, using Imaginative Public Administration (IPA) as the primary analytical framework and digital sovereignty as the overarching lens of power and governance. The comparative analysis reveals divergent state-platform integration models in China and Russia. In China, party-state capitalism embeds political authority within technology firms, enabling Tencent, Alibaba, Baidu, and Huawei to operate as strategic party-state extensions and governance infrastructures rather than as independent market actors. By contrast, Russia follows a state-monopoly capitalism model that treats platforms primarily as legally regulated order receivers. The findings argue that Chinese net states are not merely economic actors but central mechanisms through which digital sovereignty is operationalized in both structural and ideological terms.

Limitation

While subsequent European scholarship has expanded digital sovereignty toward multi-level and multi-actor frameworks, this study deliberately confines its scope to state-level data sovereignty, consistent with Bellanger's original conceptualization.

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