

China and the great global AI governance divide

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Beijing already has at its disposal multiple means to shape how the world approaches this technological revolution.



China and a range of democracies are divided on basic questions about how AI will interact with political, economic, and social life (Joel Filipe/Unsplash)

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For all the [common global purpose](#) on the need to manage the risks associated with the rapid development of Artificial Intelligence, deep fissures about how to govern this new technology are emerging between China and a range of democracies.

These are rooted in values, geopolitics, and basic questions about how AI will interact with political, economic, and social life. And beyond contrasting visions of how to govern AI, this contest could also play out in technical standards-setting and international technology markets.

AI has a proven potential to enable [interference in democratic processes](#) and [human rights violations](#). Democracies are therefore seeking to [infuse](#) global AI governance with their values and [prohibit](#) certain anti-democratic and illiberal AI applications.

These governance efforts led by the [G7](#), [United States](#), and [European Union](#) are focused on, among other objectives, strengthening democratic processes and mitigating the risk that AI supercharges disinformation and foreign interference.

According to the [G7](#): “While harnessing the opportunities of innovation, organisations should respect the rule of law, human rights, due process, diversity, fairness and non-discrimination, democracy, and human-centricity, in the design, development and deployment of advanced AI systems.”

In contrast, the protection of democracy and human rights is not a focus of China’s [Global AI Governance Initiative](#), with Beijing instead emphasising developmental objectives that increase “the wellbeing of humanity”.

The Chinese government is already harnessing the power of AI to [monitor and control](#) the lives of millions of its own citizens. In places such as China’s western Xinjiang region, for example, AI has helped implement policies that the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights has [concluded](#) “may constitute ... crimes against humanity”.

China’s expanding footprint in international organisations might present opportunities to block efforts to shape AI standards in accordance with democratic norms.

Moreover, with Beijing determined to “[tell China’s story well](#)” and engage in international “[public opinion struggle](#)”, the Chinese government is also deploying AI

to produce disinformation and sway public opinion, including in January's [Taiwanese election](#).

Beijing's alternative vision of global AI governance also forms part of its effort to push back against Washington. In a thinly veiled broadside at the United States, China's Global AI Governance Initiative [declares](#): "We oppose drawing ideological lines or forming exclusive groups to obstruct other countries from developing AI. We also oppose creating barriers and disrupting the global AI supply chain through technological monopolies and unilateral coercive measures." With advanced semiconductors integral to the future development and deployment of AI, Beijing is seeking to [delegitimise](#) US efforts to restrict access to these technologies, while also casting China as a development partner for the Global South.

But Beijing's efforts to shape global AI governance might not be limited to a clearly articulated alternative vision. As well as releasing a [national strategy for technical standards](#) in 2021 and seeking to [pioneer AI governance](#), China has begun playing a [larger role](#) in international standards-setting organisations [related to AI](#). These include bodies such as the International Electrotechnical Commission, the International Organisation for Standardisation, and the International Telecommunication Union, which [develop standards](#) that specify, among other things, how technologies should perform and connect to each other.

China doesn't dominate these organisations and there's [limited evidence](#) to date of undue influence in the form of shaping technical standards to serve the particular interests of the Chinese government. Still, China's [expanding footprint](#) in these organisations might present opportunities to block efforts to shape AI standards in accordance with democratic norms, albeit without necessarily allowing China to reshape such standards in accordance with its own values.

Beyond direct involvement in standards-setting organisations, the expanding international presence of Chinese technology companies could also emerge as an indirect means of shaping global AI governance.

Leading Chinese technology companies, including Huawei, iFlytek, and Hikvision are partnering with [governments](#), [research institutions](#), and the [private sector](#) internationally to develop and deploy AI and related technologies.

Meanwhile, these and other Chinese companies offer [training](#), including in the application of AI, and associated [technology transfers](#) to a wide range of countries, especially in the developing world. These expanding international partnerships for

China's technology companies and the growing global uptake of Chinese AI will likely give Beijing additional opportunities to embed its preferred standards.

All this demonstrates that China already has at its disposal multiple means to shape global AI governance. Democracies should therefore not solely focus on China's explicit efforts to offer an alternative vision.

They should also be prepared to monitor and respond to the potential spread of Beijing's preferred AI standards via subtler technical and commercial means.

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