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Leading a 'Fourth Industrial Revolution': Implications of China's Approaches to AI Strategy and Regulation

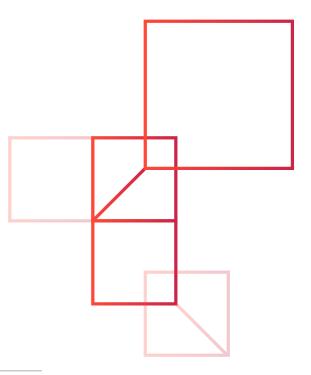ADARGA.AI

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Executive Summary

- China aims to become a major Artificial intelligence (AI) power by 2030, and has made it clear that AI is crucial to its goal of revolutionising the economy via a 'fourth industrial revolution'.

- This involves Beijing implementing AI systems across the economy, governance and administration, and the provision of government and social services.

- China's approach to AI governance and regulation reflects these strategies, with technology-specific regulations and guidelines designed to complement targeted application of specific AI systems and tools to different sectors of the economy and areas of administration.

- Ethics and privacy are a key focus of Chinese AI regulation, with a notable emphasis on regulating commercial access to user data while allowing government access for purposes including surveillance and public health monitoring.

- AI safety risks have been less of a focus than in the West, but recent developments indicate that China is taking them seriously in terms of mitigation measures and regulation.

- AI strategy and regulation is also being used by Beijing as a foreign policy tool. Its approach to international AI cooperation is proving especially fruitful in its relations with countries in the Global South, including through cooperation initiatives presented via the UN. China's position as a key technology partner to countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East, combined with its leading position in AI development, means it is well placed to project influence through technological standard-setting.

- As Chinese AI is exported, so its regulation and governance become more accepted as international norms; this contributes to China's aim of presenting a genuine alternative to US-led models of global AI governance, including its own AI Safety Risk Governance Framework and a range of other initiatives.

- Geopolitically, China's leaders see AI leadership as key to countering US-led attempts to constrain China's technological development. This means that China is unlikely to fold its AI strategy and regulation into one led by the US; instead, Beijing aims to be a global leader in AI, ambitions which are supported internationally by the spread of Chinese AI governance and standards across the Global South.

Introduction

In the rapidly evolving landscape of global technological advancement, China aims to position itself at the forefront of the 'Fourth Industrial Revolution' through technological leadership and perceives it as crucial for achieving both economic, domestic political, and geopolitical objectives.

Advancing Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as a cornerstone of China's ambitious and far reaching 'Digital China' strategy in particular. To achieve this, China has made significant investments into pursuing not only leadership in AI capabilities, but in becoming a norm setter in the technology's governance as well. As China pursues its ambitious AI agenda, the implications for global technological competition, economic development, and geopolitical dynamics are significant.

China's AI ambitions are reshaping its economy and global technological capabilities, expanding its global geopolitical influence and in particular with the Global South. Western attention to China's AI ambitions has predominantly focused on cutting edge technology capabilities and associated supply chain issues, military competition, and surveillance concerns. While these are important, the potential of AI to transform China's economy completely, which in turn will undeniably have a significant effect on the global economy, cannot be dismissed. As a result, understanding the 'why' and the 'how' of China's aims is critical in order to better anticipate and prepare for how not only China is likely to continue to seek to advance its AI leadership, but how these transformative effects will come to fruition. This paper delves into the multifaceted aspects of China's AI strategy and governance, exploring its domestic and international dimensions, governance approaches, and potential global impact.

China aims to integrate AI systematically across its economy and society in order to address domestic challenges, including administration, demographic change, security, and state service provision. Moreover, it seeks to gain a competitive advantage in AI to counter US attempts to restrict its technological development and intensifying cooperation with and influence in the Global South. Thus far, China's approach to AI regulation has predominantly focused on the themes of ethics and privacy, centred on aligning AI development with socialist values and national interests. These efforts have been realised in the development of domestic control regimes of specific AI technologies, including algorithms, deep synthesis, and generative AI. More recently, addressing potential catastrophic risks from frontier AI, known as AI safety risks, has also garnered increased attention as a critical necessity, as evident from the increased interest from the AI expert community, high-level political acknowledgments, and policy publications.

'Digital China':Technological Leadership and a 'Fourth Industrial Revolution'

Leadership in AI and other emerging technologies is a central pillar of China's grand strategy, both in terms of domestic economic development and social and governance provision, and its geopolitical competition with the United States.

Such leadership is seen by the Chinese government as crucial for achieving the domestic goals of upgrading China's economy and addressing challenges of administration, demographic change, security, and state service provision, and the linked international goals of countering US attempts to restrict China's technological development and intensifying cooperation with and influence in the Global South.

This year's Third Plenum – a meeting of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) Central Committee held roughly every five years to introduce key policy initiatives – confirmed the desire to implement key reforms in science and technology by 2029.[1,2] AI plays a central role in this as part of the 'new quality productive forces' China seeks to leverage as it shifts from catching up with existing technologies to a position of innovation and leadership.[3]

AI is seen as a key driver of the fourth industrial revolution via its integration into manufacturing, as articulated by China's State Council, Ministry of Industry and Information Technology, and Ministry of Science and Technology; accomplishing such a revolution would put China at the forefront of technological and economic development while countering perceived US leverage of its own current leadership in AI as a means of restricting China's growth.[4,5] This is reflected more broadly in government-linked academic approaches, such as publications by the Centre for Contemporary International Studies, a Ministry of State Security think tank, emphasising technological leadership as key to the rise of great powers.[6] In short, with AI China wishes to accomplish a transformation on the order of what the United Kingdom achieved with steam power, Germany and the United States with electricity, and the United States again with computers.

This ambitious aim should be taken seriously in the rest of the world. China's approach to AI governance since at least 2017, when the State Council issued the New Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan, reflects this ambition.[7] The Plan was the State Council's first presentation of a solely AI-focused strategy, which laid out aims to be world-leading in some AI applications by 2025 and to codify legal ethical standards for AI by 2025, and to 'become the world's innovation centre for AI' by 2030 while further developing laws and standards in line with the evolution of AI technology.[8]

Crucially, while China is concerned with competing with the United States in developing the most advanced AI models, including in traditional areas of geopolitical strategic importance such as military applications, this is far from its only focus. What China's approach reflects, alongside the suite of laws, regulations, and advisory documents intended to govern it, is a clear intent to integrate AI systematically across the economy and society. This is referred to in policy documents as 'informatisation' and is key to the goal of building 'Digital China'.

China's Domestic AI Strategy

China's domestic strategy is focused on three broad areas: transforming the economy through increased efficiency and upgrading traditional industry; improving the efficiency and capacity of social governance, ranging from administration to surveillance to social morality; and improving the coverage and quality of provision of key social services including healthcare, elder care, and jurisprudence.[9]

The Central Committee for Internet Security and Informatisation's '14th Five Year Plan National Informatisation Plan', itself fitting into the broader 'Digital China' strategy, delineates seven areas for experimentation with the application of AI in social governance: healthcare provision and administration; city administration; care for the elderly; environmental governance; education; risk identification and protection, including early warning and mitigation; and most ambitiously, platforms for big data-driven simulation to aid social governance.[10] These areas are notable for encompassing service provision and administration as well as research into the social and individual effects of the introduction of AI in each case.

Concretely, this strategy has begun to be realised through encouraging private sector development and innovation, creating frameworks for standards and a clear regulatory landscape, and direct experimentation and learning from the experience of implementing AI technologies in government services and by private companies. Private sector development has been fostered through the designation of national champions including Baidu for autonomous vehicles, Alibaba for smart cities, and

Tencent for medical imaging – private companies agree to work towards state strategic goals in return for access to finance and preferential bidding for contracts.[11] Meanwhile, the China Standards 2035 plan includes a 'blueprint for the Chinese government and leading tech companies to set global standards for emerging technologies, such as 5G, Internet of Things, and AI'.[12]

China has experimented with AI in a range of government services, including systems to promote consistency of legal judgements and improve their transparency; while these have met with mixed success, they indicate a willingness to actively experiment with the impacts of AI on real-world activities.[13] AI tools are now commonplace in Chinese workplaces for boosting productivity and reducing costs.[14]

Finally, an important application of AI in China is surveillance and its close relation to the development of systems such as smart cities and social credit via the ability to track and harvest data from citizens' digital footprints.[15] Most infamously, this has been apparent in Xinjiang, where the state and Chinese companies have used the crackdown on the Uyghurs to develop a range of surveillance techniques, including AI identification of ethnicity and emotional state via facial recognition.[16][17] Meanwhile, reports suggest that Xinjiang has also seen the introduction of some of the 'new productive forces' through which the government seeks to revolutionise the economy, including 5G integration of machinery in cotton factories, which facilitates AI-driven oversight of production and thereby cutting costs and increasing output.[18]

China's Approach to AI Governance

AI governance has developed from its first clear stage of planning beginning in 2017, to the formation of non-mandatory national standards and the finalisation of key data protection laws such as the 2021 Personal Information Protection Law and Data Security Law (allowing the development of targeted AI laws based on a solid legal foundation for general data governance), to the direct legal supervision of specific AI technologies from 2022 onwards (so far targeting algorithms, deep synthesis, and generative AI).[19] It is unsurprising that China's AI governance has developed in this way, with AI-specific regulations not appearing until after the finalisation of data governance laws, given that the Chinese government sees data itself as a 'production factor' – a national economic asset which can be leveraged to gain economic value.[20]

There are clear indications from the State Council that a general AI law will be formulated, and there is increasing development of local experimental administration of AI and provincial-level regulations.[21] This follows a broadly common approach of the Chinese government involving general medium- to long-term planning which is refined iteratively over time. The relatively slow development of AI regulation at first led to only eight large language models (LLMs) being publicly released in August 2023, but since then, and amid a more mature regulatory and governance framework, that number has risen to 117, including some of global competitiveness, particularly in Chinese language.[22]

The Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) has followed a 'vertical' approach to AI governance with regulations focused on specific technologies such as algorithms and deep synthesis. While this has resulted in the imposition of more regulations overall and thus potential bottlenecks for AI development, in the long run it could allow for greater iteration and rapid response to new AI-related technologies.[23] Such an approach appears tailored to the specific tasks required for China's aims in social service provision, industrial upgrades, and surveillance; it is not obvious that the risk of censorship which preoccupies many Western commentators when it comes to political and creative content is as relevant to areas such as healthcare delivery and rural education provision.[24]

Ethics, Privacy, and Safety in Chinese AI Regulation

Ethics, privacy, and safety have becoming increasingly important themes in China's approach to AI governance. Ethics in particular has long been a core focus of Chinese AI regulation, and should be understood in relation to concerns with security and privacy. In 2019 the Ministry of Science and Technology-established New Generation Artificial Intelligence Governance Expert Committee issued principles for AI governance: common human wellbeing, human rights, privacy, fairness, transparency, responsibility, collaboration, agility in response to emerging risks.[25]

The 2023 draft Measures for the Management of Generative Artificial Intelligence Services include provisions that generated content reflects Socialist Core Values and that measures are taken to prevent the generation of 'false information' and discrimination. Article six of the Measures requires that all generative AI services submit a security assessment to the Cyberspace Administration of China before providing services to the public.[26] These Measures put legal responsibility on companies providing access to generative AI services via APIs and 'programmable interfaces' for all generated content.[27]

A 2023 Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) scholars' draft AI law emphasises more stringent oversight of foundation models, including annual social responsibility reports by an independent body, alongside existing regulatory focus on core socialist values, privacy, anti-discrimination provisions, transparency, data security, and human control of AI systems. A key innovation is the draft law's proposal for a national AI office to coordinate and supervise AI technology administration and prevent chaos arising from fragmented regulation across multiple government bodies.[28]

Concerns with data privacy reflect China's existing data protection and privacy laws; for example, AI applications are covered by the 2021 Personal Information Protection Law, which requires companies to give prior notice and obtain consent for personal data collection.[29] However, while China's approach to data privacy for consumers has been developed in the context of frequent private sector data leaks and other scandals, alongside public trust in the government, it also facilitates government access to personal data for purposes of 'significant public interest'.[30] This is by design – China's approach to privacy and consumer protection has been fairly robust when it comes to private companies, but the government desires to make use of citizens' data for a range of purposes from social governance to improving public health and welfare provision using big data.[31]

Conversely, China's AI strategy and governance has not focused much on AI safety risks, which are generally defined as the potential threat for powerful cutting edge frontier AI systems such as large general-purpose models to pose large-scale, catastrophic risks to humanity. Thus far, AI safety discussions have mostly been centred in the West, as evident in the 2023 letter from AI experts and public figures warning about AI safety risks, and in the Bletchley Declaration from the UK AI Summit, which promises to mitigate risks arising from frontier AI technology, of which China was a signatory.[32][33]

However, in recent years AI safety has garnered increasingly significant attention in China. Leading Chinese policy advisors and scientists, as well as state-affiliated industry associations such as the China Academy of Information and Communication Technology, have articulated their concerns regarding catastrophic safety risks associated with frontier AI.[34] Meanwhile, the volume of Chinese technical AI safety papers being published has skyrocketed, and several Chinese labs have begun releasing benchmarks and evaluation materials around AI safety as well.[35]

An April 2024 meeting of the Politburo, the highest political body within the CCP, acknowledged the importance of addressing the risks associated with frontier AI technology.[36] Meanwhile, a recent statement in the 2024 Third Plenum Decision document called for establishing oversight and regulatory systems dedicated to AI safety.[37] While AI safety risks had not been explicitly defined in the Third Plenum Decision, contextual analysis indicates that the risks being referred to are likely "large-scale threats to public safety".[38] This is reinforced by later communication via official CCP media channels, which expressly referred to safety risks being posed by frontier AI technology.[39]

Questions on China's approach to AI safety are addressed to some extent in its more recent 'Artificial Intelligence Safety Risk Governance Framework', published by the National Information Security Standardization Technical Committee, which seeks to provide more comprehensive AI safety guidance by mapping AI risks and outlining safety measures through which to manage said risks.[40] However, despite referring to 'AI safety' in the title, the Framework is more a general risk assessment and mitigation guidance. The Framework more broadly identifies different types of AI-enabled risks, organised under 'inherent safety risks' and 'safety risks in AI applications', and provides technical countermeasures and governance measures to address them. It does not explicitly refer to catastrophic-level risks or frontier AI technology as mentioned in the Third Plenum, although the risk matrix does mention AI safety risks typically associated with these, such as 'risks of AI becoming uncontrollable in the future' - which signals China's continued attention to and focus on addressing these types of potential harms.

China's actual governance strategy for addressing AI safety risks largely remains to be seen, raising the question of whether it may take a similar approach to its Western counterparts such as standing up a Chinese version of a national AI Safety Institute, much like what has been launched in the US and the UK.

AI Governance and China's International Strategy

China's aim to become a major AI power by 2030 includes playing a crucial role in developing global AI governance; this reflects its ambition as a rising power, and concerns with the US-led international order as a strategic risk to China's prosperity through both deliberate constraints (US-led efforts to counter China's growing power and influence) and perceived inherent fallibilities of the US system (as evinced by the 2008 financial crisis).[41]

China's efforts to set technical standards could well lead to increased influence in global institutions; China's position among the leading AI powers grants it the capacity to set the agenda.[42] This is especially true in the Global South, where China has become an established provider not only of development projects but also of digital infrastructure. This should not be underestimated as a vector for the growth of China's global influence, particularly as adoption of technical standards for digital technologies can prove challenging and costly to reverse; as such, it 'locks in' influence via reliance on China as a technology partner.[43][44] The potential effects of this are already evident in US dominance of established digital technologies in much of the world, and consequent reliance on them by governments and businesses in countries such as the UK.[45]

Such influence is important to China in part as means by which to counter US-led international AI initiatives from which it is excluded; from China's perspective, the US leverages its position as an AI leader to enforce its continued hegemony.[46] A 2023 communique on the Global AI Governance Initiative published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs explicitly opposes 'drawing ideological lines or forming exclusive groups to obstruct other countries from developing AI', including through 'creating barriers and disrupting the global AI supply chain through technological monopolies and unilateral coercive measures', pointing to US efforts to restrict China's access to the high-end chips required for developing the most advanced AI models, and the risk of potential US restrictions on the availability of open-source development frameworks, such as Meta's Llama series on which many Chinese models rely.[47][48]

China's position in the Global South, and its efforts to promote global AI governance via the UN, are likely to counter US efforts to exclude China from global AI governance and influence more generally, even if those prove successful in keeping China behind in cutting-edge development (which is less likely to be decisive if China proves more capable of general implementation of AI systems to improve economic, security, and service efficiency domestically and internationally). China's Global AI Governance Initiative seeks to cooperate on AI development and governance with developing countries and specifically to establish 'an international institution to govern AI, and to coordinate efforts to address major issues concerning international AI development, security, and governance'.[49] That is, China's approach to international AI governance is explicitly multilateral, makes use of a key existing multilateral institution, and directly addresses developing countries – countries which, like China, have concerns about a global technological divide, and, unlike China, do not necessarily seek world-leading AI capabilities but do seek to take advantage of AI and related technologies to develop their economies.

China's efforts so far have proven fruitful. The 2024 World Artificial Intelligence Conference in Shanghai saw both the announcement of the Shanghai Declaration on Global AI Governance and the formation of AIM Global (Global Alliance on AI for Industry and Manufacturing), a UN Industrial Development Organisation (UNIDO) global centre of excellence for AI supported by China's Ministry of Industry and Information Technology and the Shanghai Municipal Government. According to UNIDO Director General Gerd Müller, it will allow UNIDO to "increase our support to promote best practices and technology transfer to the Global South, so that those countries can benefit from the great potential of AI for development and contribute to bridging the global digital divide".[50]

Most recently, at the 2024 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation, China's efforts to lead international approaches to AI have seen a joint agreement with African nations to strengthen international cooperation via international frameworks including China's Global AI Governance Initiative and Global Data Security Initiative, and the China-Africa Initiative on Jointly Building a Community with a Shared Future in Cyberspace, with a view to 'jointly advance rules-making for digital governance'.[51] This coincided with China's National Cybersecurity Standardisation Technical Committee's publication of the Artificial Intelligence Safety Risk

Governance Framework, a technical document important for AI safety compliance and, being published in both Chinese and English, apparently intended as a globally-applicable standard.[52]

Meanwhile, China's early steps into engaging with AI safety concerns, which thus far have been dominated by Western discourse, may also signal another AI governance space where China is seeking to become more involved. Moreover, China's AI Safety Risk Governance Framework, which was also published dually in Chinese and English, suggests China's interest in shaping AI safety approaches on a global scale. This holds both potential opportunities and challenges for global AI safety regulation. If China is similarly concerned about the potential catastrophic-level risks posed by frontier AI technology as its Western counterparts are, this may open up a potential opportunity for multilateral alignment in developing an international control regime over cutting edge AI models – a boon both for mitigating AI safety risks and for more cooperative engagement. Conversely, if China believes that a governance approach different from what Western countries have been pursuing is necessary for securing AI safety, this could become an area of regulatory contention as China pursues a leadership role in governing the technology.

Conclusion

The rest of the world cannot afford to ignore China's ambitions to harness AI to revolutionise its economy and bring about a fourth industrial revolution. In the Global South, governments increasingly look to China as a potential or actual partner in economic development via the application of emerging technologies, based at least in part on China's domestic successes. But in the West, at least outside the relatively small community of China specialists, attention to Chinese AI is dominated by competition for high-end technology and associated supply chain issues, military advantage, and surveillance.

All of the above are important concerns, but their significance pales in comparison to the possibility of China successfully rolling out its AI plans across the economy and society. China, as a rising power and developing economy, has a significant advantage in harnessing the potential of AI and actively experimenting with its implementation; it can observe the gaps and opportunities presented by the current global order, and experiment with administration techniques and service provision unencumbered by long-entrenched institutional structures built for an earlier era of technology.

Whether these attempts prove successful remains to be seen, but if China's leaders are correct, and AI can usher in a step-change in productive capacity and efficiency, their approach to regulation, with its specific focuses and associated flexibility; their willingness to experiment with application across society while also responding to the social implications; and their long-term thinking could put China in a far better place to exploit the AI revolution than its Western competitors. If Western countries are to keep pace, it is not enough to focus on high-end competitiveness alone. Leadership in such terms is all well and good, but is unlikely to prove a decisive advantage against a competitor who has reoriented their entire economy and governance system to accommodate AI tailored to each sector.

Internationally, China's approach to AI governance and cooperation is proving attractive to countries in the Global South, which like China stand to gain from implementation of AI to accelerate development. When coupled with China's growing network of international partnerships emphasising technological development, its established position as a provider of digital infrastructure, and its ability to set technical standards, this is generating significant geopolitical influence with which it is difficult for other countries to compete. US-led approaches to global AI governance that actively seek to exclude China could thus prove to have limited appeal beyond close US allies.

This could be particularly detrimental when it comes to areas where cooperation is necessary, such as AI safety and frontier risks. As a leading AI power, China will not be content with adapting to US-led standards, especially when it sees those as inherently coercive. A path needs to be found which allows cooperation with China in such critical areas, while also maintaining competitiveness and addressing concerns with defensive capability, national security, and the dangers of AI-powered surveillance.

About Adarga

Adarga is a leader in AI-driven information intelligence for defence, national security, and commercial organisations.

Our team includes geopolitical and geoeconomic experts who are dedicated to delivering in-depth analysis that is enriched by our AI software and proprietary data models.

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