



HOW CHINA PLANS TO RULE THE WORLD IN ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

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Photo: China has shifted its attention to AI as the new battlefield in the Great Power Competition. Source: ABC News (Australia)

In 2017, while speaking to some students about the dangers of any country monopolizing developments in artificial intelligence (AI), Russia's President Vladimir Putin declared that ["whoever becomes the leader in this sphere will rule the world."](#) This seems to be true in our current geopolitical context, as the United States and China have shifted their attention to AI as the new battlefield in the Great Power Competition. This is evident from the increased level of AI initiatives, policies, and activities the two countries have engaged in recently. While the actions of the US on AI (along with the European Union's –

notably the [EU AI Act](#), the world's first comprehensive law on AI) have been the staple of everyday media coverage, China's AI approaches have not been sufficiently highlighted, except in dense academic analyses that are often not readily accessible by the layperson or in biased coverage that does not do justice to the factual content of China's strategies. Therefore, sticking only to what's contained in China's documents on AI and providing some context where needed, this article will in a simple layout detail China's approach to influencing AI governance and development on a global level. It will provide insights into how China intends to leverage AI in its bid for global influence. Hopefully, this can help inform the broader public discourse on global AI governance and serve as a guide for researchers and policymakers working on international developments in AI.

The following is a summary of the ways China plans to rule the world in AI. These were derived from a review of [China's top AI policy documents](#) and a [relevant analysis](#), focusing on explicit expressions of China's strategy for influencing AI governance globally and its approaches to dominate AI developments at an international level.

1. **Recognition of AI as a strategic technology for competing at a global level:** China sees and frames AI as a *strategic technology* for elevating its status among the most innovatively competitive nations of the world, in addition to AI having national security implications. The People's Republic of China (PRC) in the New Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan (NGAIDP) of 2017 observed the increasing complexity that China faces in national security and international competition in a rapidly emerging world and determined that *"[China] must, looking at the world, take the development of AI to the national strategic level with systemic layout, take the initiative in planning, firmly seize the strategic initiative in the new stage of international competition in AI development."* to create *new competitive advantage, opening up the development of new space, and effectively protecting national security.*" China seems to

have recognized the transformational impacts of AI systems across societies and economies and is seeking to position itself strategically. The PRC seeks to become a ‘global science and technology power,’ by having a centrally planned approach to AI aimed at creating competitive advantages in new spaces while also using AI for protecting its national security interests.

2. Awareness of strengths and weaknesses: In its bid to leverage AI for global competitiveness, China looks to consolidate its areas of strength. The NGAIDP noted: *“As a result of many years of continuous accumulation, China has achieved important progress in the field of AI, with the number of international scientific and technology papers published and the number of inventions patented ranked second in the world, while achieving important breakthroughs in certain domains of core crucial technologies.”* The PRC went on to list other areas of China’s technological leadership and accomplishments, such as voice recognition, visual recognition, industrial and service robots, intelligent monitoring, and biometric identification. However, China seems clear-eyed about its abilities; it acknowledges the areas in which it must improve. The PRC observed that despite China’s achievements in the areas listed, there is still a gap between China’s ‘overall level of development of AI’ in comparison to other developed countries, specifically concerned about achieving major original results in areas such as basic theory, core algorithms, key equipment, high-end chips, and more. China looks to address these and other areas through urgently improving basic infrastructure, policies, regulations, and standards systems.

3. Monitor global trends in AI development and seize opportunities: In achieving its AI plans, China is not risking being haphazard in its approach, throwing its resources at everything and everywhere. Instead, the PRC looks to be opportunistic and utilizing-maximizing. According to the NGAIDP, China will *“accurately grasp the global development trends of AI, find the correct openings for breakthroughs and directions for the main thrust.”* The PRC plans to monitor global AI developments

through studies that evaluate general trends and R&D efforts that proactively explore key frontier domains in AI development. By capitalizing on opportunities revealed in crucial areas by trendwatching, China hopes to lead the world by setting the trend itself.

4. Obtain a first-mover advantage: A recurring word in China’s AI policy documents is ‘first-mover advantage.’ This is indicative of the PRC’s intent to drive novel discovery and application of AI systems. To realize this, the Ministry of Education released the Artificial Intelligence Action Plan for Institutions of Higher Education (Action Plan) in 2018. The Action Plan stated the following as one of its purposes: *“that China can gain a first-mover advantage in the development of artificial intelligence.”* The implication of this is that China preconceives that certain benefits of AI will only accrue to first-movers and it works towards realizing these.

5. Deliberate resource allocation: Money, they say, makes the world go round. AI is no exception and China understands this. The NGAIDP notes that China will *“fully use existing finances, bases and other such stored resources, comprehensively plan the allocation of international and domestic innovation resources.”* The PRC intends to allow inputs from its financial administration experts to inform its use of policy incentives, aiming at achieving the most optimal allocations of its resources for pursuing innovation on a global scale. Therefore, to realize its vision of being a global science and technology power, China is prioritizing a conscientious allocation of its financial and other resources in its domestic and international policies.

6. Achieve theoretical and technological breakthroughs in AI: During budget cuts in many countries, funding for basic science is usually an area that is negatively impacted because the returns are often not immediately apparent or readily applicable. However, China has identified this area as a critical area that will inform its capacity to develop world-leading AI systems and drive its economic ascent to global power. The NGAIDP states that *“By 2025, China will achieve major breakthroughs in basic theories for AI, such that some technologies and*

applications achieve a world-leading level and AI becomes the main driving force for China's industrial upgrading and economic transformation." The Action Plan also expresses China's ambition to move the field of new-generation AI forward, stating that it will "make a number of original achievements of international significance" and "demonstrate a world-class level in some theoretical research, innovative technology, and application." By achieving groundbreaking progress in new-generation AI theory and technology systems, China hopes to contribute to AI applications in fields like intelligent manufacturing, intelligent medicine, and national defense construction, all of which it expects will greatly expand and strengthen its economy. And the results are already starting to come in. As of 2020, [China leads the world in the number of AI publications](#), and as of 2022, [China has filed the highest number of AI patents](#). These results are also aided by China's [expanding domestic market and AI-promoting privacy-weak regulations](#).

7. Entering global markets and fostering globalization: China hopes that the cumulative effects of its theoretical and technological breakthroughs in AI will be increased influence in global markets. The NGAIDP predicted that China will achieve 'world-leading levels' in AI theories, technologies, and applications by 2030, making it the 'world's primary AI innovation center.' The PRC hopes that producing tangible results from the application of AI in intelligent economy and society arrangements will build a solid foundation to catapult it to a position of economic power among innovative nations in global markets. In addition to this, China is determined to actively support its domestic AI enterprises and brands to attain a global leading status and facilitate international cooperation with top foreign AI enterprises and research institutes. The "Internet+" Artificial Intelligence Three-Year Action and Implementation Plan (Internet+ Plan) detailed China's plan to "encourage cooperation with relevant countries to strengthen the R&D and application of AI technology, integrate domestic and foreign innovation resources, and enhance the innovation capabilities and international competitiveness of the AI industry. We will support relevant industry associations, industry alliances, and business service organizations

as they build service platforms and provide international cooperation and overseas innovation services for innovative companies in the AI field." Finally, China hopes to expand its influence on AI developments internationally by partnering with fellow member countries within [BRICS](#) as well as through its '[One Belt, One Road](#)' initiative – a foreign policy strategy to increase its global footprints through financing infrastructural, trade, and investment projects around the world – while also obtaining foreign AI investments in research and development.

8. Investment in talent pipeline and education: Talent is a critical element and resource for AI developments and China recognizes this in its plan for global influence in AI. This is especially important given [China's increasing brain drain](#) of scientific and technological talents, many of whom are leaving the country because of undemocratic political and social conditions. The NGAIDP details how China seeks to address what it considers a strategic weakness in its AI plans. By prioritizing the 'construction of a high-end talent team' the PRC seeks to build a talent base both by improving its AI education system and by hunting for the 'world's top talent and young talent.' It looks to achieve this through establishing personnel training centers, research collaborations with the world's top AI research institutions, getting technical advice from international top AI talents, support for academic exchange overseas and technical exchanges, and using talent plans such as the "Thousand Talents" plan. The Action Plan notes that "By 2030, colleges and universities will become the main force behind building the world's main AI innovation centers and will lead the development of a new generation AI talent pool to provide China with the scientific and technological support and guaranteed talent to put it at the forefront of innovation-oriented countries." In light of this, institutions of higher education are encouraged to adapt their curricula to be responsive to cutting-edge developments in global science and technology, create additional AI-related majors that address industrial demand nationally and regionally, cross-integrate professional education for AI with other disciplines, and create world-class teaching materials.

9. Influence global standards and governance: China is no longer content to take directions and follow the rules on AI made by its Western counterparts. Instead, it now longs to be actively involved in participating and even leading the formulation of international standards on AI. The PRC noted in the NGAIDP that it will take a more active part in the global governance of AI. China looks to focus on studying major problems common to the international community, such as robot alienation and safety supervision, and improve its collaboration with other countries to develop AI laws, regulations, and international rules to “*jointly cope with global challenges.*” The PRC hopes to support its homegrown AI enterprises to participate or lead in the development of technical standards internationally, even as they promote their AI products and services overseas. The Action Plan also documents the role of China’s education plan in influencing international standards and regulations. By encouraging and supporting Chinese scholars to occupy influential positions in international academic organizations and actively take part in drafting international AI regulations, the PRC believes it can influence many international AI spaces with Chinese initiatives and standards. Finally, the Internet+ Plan expressed China’s plan to support its relevant departments, research institutions, standardization organizations, industry organizations, and enterprises to be actively involved in setting international AI standards, working with the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) among others, to put in place mechanisms for standards exchange and cooperation. The PRC did not mince words about its intent for doing all these: “*We will promote the export of Chinese AI standards to the wider world and continuously enhance our international clout.*” Obviously, China is fully out to rewrite the rules.

Understanding China’s game plan can help other actors in AI developments and governance generally prepare and respond adequately. It is imperative that the world keeps an eye on China seeing that it is very motivated to lead in the new era of Artificial Intelligence and whatever China does can affect us all.

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