

# Unlikely Allies: Reaching Beyond Traditional Halls of Power for AI Global Governance

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## Issue

Due to the potential for Artificial Intelligence (AI) to fundamentally change international affairs, Canada's strategy to advance AI governance that supports a human rights-focused, rule-based international order must engage both traditional allies, as well as non-traditional allies such as member states of the African Union and even traditional rivals - namely China.

## Background

AI refers to a machine-based technology that can make autonomous predictions or decisions for a predetermined set of human-defined objectives (OECD 2019). AI technologies have grown and reached global markets, which have permeated national borders through the expanded global network exacerbated by growing widespread internet accessibility. Because of this permeability, it is crucial that Canada engage with the movement to govern AI on a global level to protect human rights both domestically and abroad.

The absence of strong AI global governance threatens the rules-based international order and can result in devastating effects on humanity. Without the global governance of AI, human rights become implicated due to AI's ability to exacerbate economic inequalities, marginalize vulnerable populations, and compromise individual privacy (Thomas, 2019). Moreover, with China arguably leading the AI technological race against the West, China and the West have acted relatively slow on developing a responsible AI framework that mitigates

political, social, economic and planetary instability (Garcia 2021). However, to effectively operationalize responsible AI, there is a critical need for Canada to engage with members of the Global South to further international cooperation and set guidelines and standards to ensure that AI is mutually beneficial and constructive. Further, standards that uphold transparency, accountability, respect for privacy, human control, and mitigation against bias are needed (Fjeld et al 2020). Pursuing a multi-track approach to AI governance that includes traditional allies, non-traditional allies, and potential rivals is consistent with not only the department's mandate to help strengthen the rules-based international order but also advances the aims of the UN's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation (United Nations). Whilst this paper acknowledges the necessity of engaging with the Global South as a whole, we see a fundamental opportunity to begin in Africa. In particular, engagement with the African Union (AU) presents the opportunity to build capacity in AU member-states while informing "responsible AI" that is inclusive of African perspectives. This brief supports a case for Canadian policy-makers to focus their attention on two pathways with high potential for achieving these objectives through AI global governance: resource mobilization and capacity building, and multilateral, multi-stakeholder standard-setting. Once proven successful, this can be replicated as a pilot program in other regions e.g. South America.

Moreover, by focusing on these pathways for global engagement, Canada could leverage its middle-power status to position itself as the bridge between the East-West or North-South AI ecosystems. Though Canada is

not considered a *primary* global leader in AI, its position as a middle power and engagement with AI governance at the national level can be leveraged to help promote AI governance at a global level. Canada has already demonstrated its ability to orchestrate collaboration by engaging with a wide range of public and private sector actors to increase investment and business initiatives within the AI sector. In 2017, the government of Canada appointed the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research (CIFAR) to establish and lead the Pan-Canadian Artificial Intelligence strategy, which injected \$125 million into fostering and honing Canada's AI talent and research institutes. (Accenture & CIFAR 2020). Furthermore, Canada has attracted renowned AI pioneers and has garnered growing attention from Big Tech companies to invest in Canadian AI start-ups (Brindle et al. 2021). In combination, Canada's position in global politics and its current engagement with Artificial Intelligence governance at the national level indicates a capacity to have a sustained impact on this space by developing responsible AI policies while making positive and impactful social contributions within Canada.

### Working with Traditional Allies on AI Governance

Canada's traditional allies, namely the United States (US) and the European Union (EU), present the most attainable diplomatic partnership opportunities for Canada to engage with. The European Union (EU) is the world's current leader in protecting the data and privacy rights, within the digital realm, of its citizens after it implemented the *General Data Protection Regulations* (GDPR) in 2018. It also created plans for AI technologies that aim to enhance cooperation on AI across the region on the technology's development and governance (European Commission, 2021). Similarly, the US, under the new Biden Administration, is also taking steps to move towards AI governance. For example, it has launched an Artificial Intelligence Research Resource Task Force which aims to provide recommendations to advance innovation in AI (The White House, 2021).

In the current political climate, core global governance institutions such as the United Nations (UN) are often criticized for being inadequate to address global challenges collectively and only accommodate the interests and values of westernized, powerful and privileged states (Caserta 2021; Krasnodebska 2014). This sentiment highlights the limitations of a Western-centric approach to global

governance and the consequences of failing to engage with diverse actors.

Though engaging with traditional allies is a way to leverage existing alliances for sway on the AI global governance stage, Canada should approach leveraging these relationships with caution. The exclusion of the Global South in pursuit of the governance of AI will inherently silence the voices of the world's most under-served groups, and directly violates the UN's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation. Excluding voices from the Global South risks the preservation of colonialist standards, norms and ideologies which subordinate the diverse experiences of the Global South, ultimately jeopardizing the revitalization of the rules-based international order by hindering constructive engagement with diverse partners.

Traditional allyship should be maintained and leveraged, but with the ultimate goal of creating broader participation and inclusion across the globe. Continued engagement with Canada's traditional allies will legitimize the pursuit of AI global governance, and give Canada a more safeguarded pathway to engaging the AI elephant in the room: China.

### Engaging with China

While traditionally aligned with the EU and the US in its policy decisions, states that claim to be "honest brokers" such as Canada should use their role as a middle-power to bring competing views to the discussion table and facilitate a single AI governance mandate that all parties accept. To revitalize global confidence in the rules-based international order, especially in AI, Canada must both support and prioritize the West engaging with China on the development of AI governance.

Currently, the People's Republic of China has demonstrated itself as a full-spectrum peer in AI, advanced computing, surveillance and manufacturing, which dominate global markets and institutions that govern the design, development, and use of AI (Allison and Y 2020; Allison 2019). In 2017, China published the *Artificial Intelligence Development Plan*, which stands as the most ambitious national AI strategy to ensure China's economic, military and diplomatic interests. Currently, their predatory economic behaviour controls multiple domains while revising global norms in their steadfast race to be global technological leaders by 2030 (Lewis 2019).

Despite reports of the US leading AI, the US is threatened by China's advancements (Allison 2019), with the Biden

Administration declaring the AI competition with China a “national emergency” (Samp et al. 2021). China’s influence over the global AI industry without clearly established regard for legal and ethical considerations poses implications to human rights, national sovereignty, and security. Canada must be wary of AI-enabled weapons systems and the exportation of surveillance technologies, particularly to authoritarian regimes.

Admittedly, given the current geopolitical tensions, there is seemingly little policy room for constructive engagement with China on AI. That being said, any AI global governance regime that does not include China is ultimately detrimental to the rules-based international order and is not in Canada’s long-term interests. Since China has demonstrated itself to be an emerging technological giant both domestically and globally using state-led policies, Canada cannot ignore China’s rapid AI and technological ascent (Schoff & Ito 2019). Furthermore, Canada cannot restrict its engagement only to include other liberal democratic countries to establish the global governance of A.I. Canada must diplomatically engage with China by leveraging its position as a promoter of rules, stability and openness alongside the EU or the US since Canada does not have the capacity to operate alone. While it is important to remain cognizant of the risks of engaging with China, the benefits of doing so outweigh the risks.

Canada’s most sustained impact for engaging China may present itself in the use of its collegial, public, and private AI ecosystems. The educational sector can be used to inform precedence on responsible AI which can be shared with its like-minded allies in pursuit of developing strategic engagements with China to foster and encourage developing accountability mechanisms that follow through with commitments to human rights, democracy, and inclusion. Currently, Canada already utilizes education diplomacy to engage China in the emerging technology space. For example, the University of Waterloo, one of Canada’s leading schools for engineering, already has numerous partnerships with leading Chinese institutions to advance research in areas of connected and autonomous vehicle technology (Media Relations 2018). The expansion of existing emerging technologies ecosystems that exist in the academic sector can be used to further engage China in a more politically neutral space leading up to multilateral political engagement, and could positively contribute to this later engagement.

### **Engagement with Non-Traditional Allies: Opportunities Amidst the African Union**

In addition to engaging China, an opportunity also presents itself in other areas of the Global South. The African continent has strategic potential for engagement on AI governance and development. Africa is home to the youngest, fastest-growing population on the planet; the median age in Africa is around 20 years old, compared to the EU’s average age of 44 years old (Ausubel 2020). With Africa’s young and robust talent pool, several countries are beginning to boast technological hubs including Kenya, Nigeria, Rwanda and South Africa, each of these racing to host the next Silicon Valley for AI and Digital Currency.

These countries, with a wealth of innovation and low regulation, are critical strategic partners for Canada. Based on previous engagements with the African tech industry, an impactful investment for the AU and Canada is through Africa’s education sector. Canada can leverage previously developed educational partnership frameworks, such as the Perimeter Institute’s Global Outreach strategy (Perimeter Institute 2010) or the African Leaders of Tomorrow Program (Canadian Bureau for International Education 2020). There is massive potential for Canada to feed into the need for capacity building and skills that are highly useful for a variety of AI stakeholders on the continent, such as the African Union Scientific Technical and Research Commission (AU-STRC).

Already-existing stakeholders such as the AU-STRC present a crucial opportunity in advancing GAC’s mandate, while also aligning with the UN Roadmap for Digital Cooperation. Contributing to the capacity of these stakeholders while simultaneously including them in AI global governance negotiations will solidify the presence of voices representing the interests of the world’s most under-served groups, echoing the sentiments of Canada’s Anti-Racism Strategy and ensuring a more equitable process in governing AI. To ensure these voices of the Global South are heard, Canada can encourage the creation of a Digital Sovereignty Board, which can serve as a forum for these voices to actively participate in developing AI global governance and allow for issues surrounding the digital sovereignty of nations, and in particular, smaller nations, to be mitigated. A Digital Sovereignty Board that includes a wide breadth of voices will provide an equitable process for establishing global digital sovereignty norms.

Another major development on the continent is the ongoing private sector-driven transcontinental collaboration on AI matters within Africa. Africa is seeing a rise in innovative trans-continental approaches, such as Deep Learning Indaba (Zulu for gathering), which is fostering a community of AI researchers in Africa. Canada should take notice of existing multilateral engagements between Big Tech companies - IBM Research, Google, Microsoft, Amazon - and the African diaspora community to repatriate knowledge back to the African continent. The aforementioned present evidence that points to the technological potential of the African continent.

However, despite the vast potential for AI collaboration and capacity building in Africa, the majority of Canada's bi- and multilateral engagements on AI governance thus far have been with "like-minded liberal democracies." Historically, African voices have been excluded or silenced in technological governance fora, a practice that directly hinders Canada's alignment with GAC's mandate. The exclusion of the Global South, especially those countries most negatively impacted by colonialism, automatically implies the *imposition* of standards rather than democratic collaboration on those standards. The effect of this inherently hinders GAC's mandate of revitalizing the rules-based international order by further alienating the African continent in the international governance setting. In the case of global AI governance, Canada must ensure that inclusion is paramount to the process to avoid replicating past inequities and forms of systemic and institutional oppression. Lastly, it is worth noting that our recommendations for Africa, whilst upholding the principles of inclusion and equity, also complement the current International Development Research Centre's "Artificial Intelligence for Development Africa" (AI4D Africa) program, which aims to build digital and technical literacy within Africa, in order to strengthen her voice in multilateral fora.

## Recommendations

1. **Canada should engage with China on AI Governance.** The rise of China will be Canada's most important foreign policy challenge of the 21st century. Therefore, Canada must increase its investment in foreign service to foster a better relationship with China for the mutual benefit of both countries while balancing consensus and strategic autonomy. Canada can continue to coordinate policy objectives with its allies through multilateral bodies, such as the G7, or individual States such as the US and the EU, which will present to China a united front on the development of AI governance. However, Canada must also prepare itself for the long-term should its allies, the US or the EU be unprepared to advocate on its behalf for which Canada has been traditionally accustomed to. Canada should seek to exercise its diplomacy by developing more sophisticated foreign policies, tools and increasing diplomatic presence overseas to contribute to the discussion of AI governance as an honest broker.
2. **Canada should engage with the African Union, using education diplomacy as a tool for capacity building.** Canada should partner with leading tertiary institutions of the Global South to create AI hubs and institutes. Canada has the potential to reap the most benefit in creating formidable allies by prioritizing academic institutions in the AU - specifically under the branding of an AI African Leaders Program via a public-private partnership with multinational, Big Tech organizations. The suggested objective would be to establish satellite hubs to key universities in the AU that link with Canada's robust AI ecosystems in Edmonton, Toronto, and Montreal; this would broaden Canada's AI talent pool and promote cultural exchange and diversity, so as to invoke Canada's shared values and support the foundations for a rules-based order across the AI ecosystem.
3. **Canada should facilitate a multi-stakeholder task force that intertwines the relationship between AI and Human Rights.** The task force should be composed of a variety of stakeholders, including but not limited to representatives from nations, NGOs, the technology industry,

and academia to maintain a broad range of perspectives and address concerns from all areas of AI governance. The goal of the task force, moreover, should be to set suitable multilateral standards and encourage commitments to human rights, democracy, and inclusion for responsible AI governance. The task force would serve two purposes: 1) create a peer review and verification system within private sectors to operationalize responsible AI; and 2) foster collaboration that is embedded in a rights-based approach. This task force would be prefaced upon a securitization agenda that will secure both Canada's relevance in North America through the multifaceted engagement and support it will gain from human rights pressure groups. Currently, Canada's involvement in the Freedom Online Coalition already demonstrates the Canadian Government's commitment to the protection of human rights online. Through similar collaboration - but with the inclusion of other stakeholders such as tech industry workers and NGOs - the Canadian Government will have the opportunity to even further advance these efforts to protect human rights going forward.

4. **Canada should support the establishment of a Digital Sovereignty Board for Africa** to address the obstacles surrounding national control of Big Data and the vacuum's inequitable AI global governance. The Board should seek diversity and equal representation of both regional organizations and non-state actors to deviate from previous structures based on country size and military prowess. Ultimately, a Digital Sovereignty Board would enable a decolonization agenda, provide underserved groups with more agency over their digital affairs, and address historical structural inequities of the international governance institutions.

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