Governing the web

The impact of digitalisation and AI technologies is unprecedented, but global governance needs to keep pace if we are to avoid worrying trends in their usage

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The rate of digitalisation and the rapid development of artificial intelligence technology have had significant impacts worldwide. Despite being relatively nascent, digital platforms on the internet are now integral to society's operation, enabling a wide array of functions ranging from communications to financial transactions. This makes the digital domain an attractive target for governments to treat as an arena of geopolitical competition. Through the internet, disinformation campaigns are waged, cyberattacks on digital infrastructure conducted and sensitive data stolen.

Similar developments are also reflected in the field of AI, where seemingly innocuous AI systems have been adopted for military purposes. AI-driven optimisation and recommendation systems, used by business to improve processes and maximise efficiency, are now being incorporated into military platforms such as Lockheed Martin's Aegis Combat System.

These developments signal a worrying trend. Although there are international legal frameworks that regulate state conduct in traditional domains such as the high seas or outer space, there is no equivalent for the digital domain or AI technologies. Given the lack of binding norms for acceptable and unacceptable state behaviour and the difficulties of regulating, the digital domain and AI technologies – if left unchecked – run the risk of creating strategic instability and constant sources of insecurity for states and societies.

IMPROVING EXISTING EFFORTS
Existing efforts to develop digital governance policies should clarify and delineate between global AI governance and global digital governance. In the context of international security, global AI governance is about ensuring that the application of AI in military contexts is bound by ethical guidelines and that AI decision-making remains accountable and functions as intended. Global digital governance is about ensuring cyber stability through the promulgation of norms and outlining what 'responsible state conduct' might look like in cyberspace.

Global governance initiatives can be further improved by streamlining global efforts and preventing their fragmentation by reducing the number of parallel initiatives and duplicate work. Additionally, although certain states have taken the initiative to kickstart global governance regulatory frameworks for both AI and digital governance, such as the G7-initiated Global Partnership on AI or the Chinese-led World Internet Conference, such efforts must also reflect what their names suggest: that their membership is inclusive in nature and reflects global efforts rather than wider geopolitical tensions.

Private-sector expertise can also contribute greatly to the development of policies aimed at improving global governance. Regulation often lags behind innovation, with policymakers struggling to keep pace with the rate of technological development. However, this presents an opportunity for governments to tap into the wealth of technical expertise in the private sector

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and narrow the 'gatekeeper-innovator' gap. Indeed, the private-sector ecosystem already boasts industry-led governance efforts – such as the Cybersecurity Tech Accord, an industry coalition that includes Microsoft and Nokia. While some governments may baulk at involving non-state actors in an area that typically falls under the exclusive mandate of states, private tech companies and their expertise will likely be indispensable in implementing any global agreement.

ROLE OF THE G20
The G20 plays a crucial role in shaping and enhancing global governance structures. At the New Delhi Summit, G20 leaders should do the following:

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- Convene a scientific committee to formally define and differentiate global AI governance from global digital governance. The committee can help provide the necessary subject matter expertise to policymakers and facilitate common understandings on technical terms. This can lay the foundation for subsequent discussions on norm formation, standards setting and codes of conduct.
- Review existing multi-stakeholder initiatives, identify areas of convergence and streamline existing efforts. This would reduce the likelihood of duplicate efforts and ensure that initiatives neither overlap nor compete for policymakers' attention.
- Consider mechanisms to incorporate technical expertise from the private sector, based upon previous experiences. As demonstrated in the fields of nuclear non-proliferation, space cooperation or climate change, incorporating technical expertise from the private sector could involve information-sharing efforts or personnel secondments to support policymaking efforts. 🅖