

A visitor toasts with an ancient poet at the World Internet Conference Wuzhen Summit on Nov. 21, 2024, in Wuzhen, China. (Wang Gang/ China News Service/ VCG via Getty Images)

# **Culture as a Tool for Trustworthy AI**

# Averill Campion

# Introduction

he current logic of trustworthy AI is that the combination of top-down AI principles and centralized regulatory efforts will control AI actors' behavior. This logic entails that AI actors should incorporate AI principles throughout the AI lifecycle and respond to regulations. As a result, the theory is that society will widely adopt AI because it accepts a degree of vulnerability based on positive expectations<sup>1</sup> about the intention and behavior of AI actors, the AI applications they use, and government's ability to protect them from harm. This important formula is still limited because it does not capture the full picture of how trust is institutionalized. The trustworthy AI formula can benefit from also leveraging cultural-cognitive and normative elements, in addition to the regulative elements that tend to be more top-down and coercive in nature. Cultural-cognitive mechanisms are a crucial but often-overlooked tool for how values are translated into prescriptions about the appropriate way to do something, which tends to be dependent on local context. It is now a national security priority for the U.S. and its allies to build "technology for freedom or watch as others build for control."<sup>2</sup> Therefore, the aim of this policy report is twofold: First, it intends to illuminate how cultural-cognitive elements can play a role in supporting AI development with democratic values; second, it intends to convey why policy makers should ensure the structural provisions are in place for bottom-up initiatives such as partnerships across research labs, civil society, grassroots organizations, and the multitude collaborative efforts that provide the face-to-face interaction necessary for creating shared conceptions and meaning about AI governance. By helping policymakers better understand how culture is a tool for trustworthy AI development, this report both responds to calls for ensuring that the global majority possesses agency in determining their Al governance future while also illuminating the paths that counter techno-authoritarian values.

Decisions about prescriptive, evaluative, and obligatory aspects of behavior often combine or interact with cultural elements to the form practices. standards, roles, conventions, and codes<sup>3</sup> needed to institutionalize AI governance. Cultural-cognitive mechanisms are the mental models or "operating mechanisms of the mind" that shape the share beliefs, categories, heuristics, and logics of actions.<sup>4</sup> This is a relational process that often requires spontaneous human interaction to occur. Just like the seemingly invisible algorithms that people use to make decisions daily,<sup>5</sup> establishing a combination of regulatory, normative, and cognitive-cultural mechanisms for AI development will create the often unseen but stable infrastructure upon which society builds its shared meaning and positive expectations<sup>6</sup> about AI.

# The Institutional Toolbox: Trustworthy AI

Trust building is a long-term process based on characteristics like competency, benevolence, and integrity. It is hard to disassociate the human from trustworthy AI, even if widespread AI adoption refers to the ability to trust the technology (or application) itself. Therefore, it is imperative that the foundations upon which these tools and applications are being developed support human flourishing and set up the means for humans to interact around collaborative AI development. An effective way to shape value systems in organizations is through cultural-cognitive and normative mechanisms.

Establishing the right sort of trust pattern needs more illumination. Trust patterns can be established over time from repeated interactions, but just because those trust patterns have been established doesn't mean they are infused with the appropriate guidelines of what is important enough to prevent violations of that trust. Trust based purely on another party's competency might be good enough to create a long-term commitment, but is it enough to assess whether the competent, trusted party will not attempt to cause future harm? With regard to national security and the promotion of technology based on democratic values, the U.S. and its allies must be vigilant and look beyond the regulations enacted to support global principles like "AI for the public good" and further analyze the underlying norms and culture that guide the interpretation of these principles. Moreover, the U.S. must be proactive in setting up collaborative efforts and partnerships that will create cultures conducive to democratic value interpretations. An important indicator about whether technoauthoritarianism is a model to be exported can be examined by the way actors specify how things should be accomplished in partnerships and other types of interorganizational collaboration for technology.

# AI for the Public Good and Responsible AI

While principles are unquestionable meanings, principles are interpreted through different combinations of values. Therefore, it makes sense that global-seeming principles such as "AI for the public good" contain different meanings throughout the world. At the global level, themes like "AI for the public good/public interest," "responsible AI," and "AI safety" are being prioritized. For example, responsible Al is being implemented through networks like the Partnership on AI, whose mission is to bring together diverse voices so developments in AI advance positive outcomes for people and society, while AI for the public interest was a major theme at the 2025 AI Action Summit in Paris. By unraveling the normative background of trust building, it can be better deciphered how shared concepts influence the social reality.

A global effort to set up a shared meaning about Al governance must also be considered alongside the fact that nations have a degree of self-interest in

institutionalizing their own norms into these principles. China is also embracing the principle that AI should be for the public good. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the People's Republic of China announced in September 2024 an "AI Capacity-Building Action Plan for Good and for All"<sup>7</sup> that calls for the establishment of an international cooperation platform to promote AI capacity-building, programs in developing countries to enhance education and exchanges, and global, interoperable AI risk assessment frameworks and standards.

It is unclear how intentional China's efforts may be to infuse its own normative and regulatory values abroad. There are some suggestions that China is promoting surveillance technology and cyberspace governance norms through Chinese "training sessions and seminars with over thirty countries on cyberspace and information policy," and invitations to journalists and media to learn about "socialist journalism with Chinese characteristics."<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, AI safety is a concern shared by Chinese policymakers, as evidenced through increases of this topic in research papers, public statements, and government documents.<sup>9</sup>

In the Western context, democratic values must be safeguarded to ensure the internet upholds

its commitment to decentralized networks and freedom in contrast to authoritarian regimes, as seen through initiatives like the international partnership surrounding the Declaration for the Future of the Internet.<sup>10</sup> Distinguishing visions is important because the Western interpretation of AI for the public good, especially in the U.S., can often mean protecting human rights and freedoms, as opposed to other national contexts where it could mean putting the collective above the individual, especially when individuality threatens stability of the collective in times of uncertainty. In democracies, AI (assisted) decisions about the common good are *not* indisputable, even in the name of the public interest. Boundaries about when the collective good does or does not override the individual good must be drawn just as the Founding Fathers institutionalized for Americans.

#### Regulatory Elements as a Tool for Trustworthy AI

The point of a regulatory tool as an institutional mechanism is to set rules, monitor, and sanction when conformity is violated.<sup>11</sup> The U.S. has not taken a federal-level approach to regulating AI, and the fragmentation across state-level laws is making it difficult for platforms to navigate.<sup>12</sup> Thirty-four out of 50 states have proposed some form of AI legislation.<sup>13</sup>



A teacher trains students on how to use DeepSeek and other AI tools at a night school in Hangzhou, China, on March 12, 2025. (Jiang Zitong / Zhejiang Daily Press Group / VCG via Getty Images)

While regulation is not the focus of this report, it is important to note even authoritarian regimes implement cyber and data privacy protections. There are even mirrored intentions between China's Personal Information Protection Law and the EU's GDPR regulation of protecting personal information.<sup>14</sup> However, authoritarian privacy is the idea that autocracies are proponents of privacy law, repressing citizens but protecting their privacy as a form of legitimizing and maintaining the surveillance state.<sup>15</sup> China, for example, is proactive in information privacy law and enforcement to portray itself as a "benevolent guardian" against "intruders."<sup>16</sup>

China has also built an "extensive governance regime for cyberspace and information and communications technology (ICT)" with policy "spanning cybersecurity, the digital economy, and online media content - all under one mantel" that provide rules for data protection, crucial infrastructure, encryption, internet content and so forth.<sup>17</sup> Policymakers must pay attention to how new rules for AI governance are shaped because Chinese think tanks and scholars are also pursuing the Chinese Communist Party's version of solutions abroad for things like global cloud governance and the idea of data sovereignty and data localization.<sup>18</sup> One important characteristic of techno-authoritarianism from the Chinese model is that Chinese companies, even when abroad, are compelled by law to install "backdoors in equipment or software."19

It is beyond the scope of this report to examine in detail the extant differences and similarities between varieties of AI regulation since research exists on the intricate distinctions.<sup>20</sup> Instead, this provides an overview to encourage continued discussion on the topic of regulation for subjects like data privacy. Overall, regulation as a tool for institutionalizing trust should not be completely taken off the table, especially as a coordination mechanism to unify state efforts. The U.S. doesn't have to copy the EU's GDPR law but could instead ask what we have learned since the passing of GDPR, what could be improved upon, and what could be done differently to set a baseline of data protection for citizens, for example. Topics like data privacy remain relevant, considering that DeepSeek emerged as an innovative foundational model despite regulatory considerations in China.

# Normative Elements as a Tool for Trustworthy AI

Norms are the second mechanisms in the institutional toolbox and are defined as the "standards, roles, conventions, practices, customs and the codes of conduct that guide behavior."<sup>21</sup> Norms often contribute to behavior shaping much faster than regulation. Mark Zuckerberg's recent statement<sup>22</sup> about internal changes being made at Meta with regard to content moderation exemplifies the speed at which the implementation of practices and processes internal to an organization can change the prescriptions around how a value like free speech is interfaced to billions of users worldwide. Moreover, Meta illustrates that company self-monitoring and the structural change of international policies and processes from both a technical and non-technical standpoint occur quickly when pressure is in place. This example represents how nonstate actors possess the ability to both rapidly respond to changes and adapt the way their algorithms interact with humans, showing speed, flexibility, and agility.

# Cultural-Cognitive Elements as a Tool for Trustworthy Al

Culture-cognitive elements sit at the bottom of collaborations across sectors, partnerships, networks, and organizations in general. These tools may be softer than normative and regulatory elements,<sup>23</sup> but cultivating this ethos and spirit provides a much deeper and more fundamental dimension related to beliefs and meaning. Collaborators must attempt to bridge a shared meaning across multiple logics, with each logic containing belief systems, different aims, and strategies for obtaining those aims.<sup>24</sup> Mark Andreessen, the co-author of Mosaic and co-founder of Netscape, stated<sup>25</sup> that this sort of intangible spirit is always there and keeps bouncing back. A Financial Times article describes how at Davos 2025. EU leaders were said to be alarmed and in an existential crisis, with other references to the "increase in animal spirits" in corporate sentiment.26

In terms of policy, the idea is to set up the structure or enable structural elements to be in place to allow a culture and ethos based on democratic values to flourish. We see this happening on the venture capital scene with Ex/Ante, a fund backed by Eric Schmidt that focuses on agentic tech based on "technology that works to support human agency through things like individual control over things like your privacy."<sup>27</sup> The most effective way is structuring culture to emerge through collaborative organizational forms and initiatives that create a diverse pool of ideas and information and that can provide insight into local contextual needs and concerns.

# **Beyond Rock, Paper, Scissors**

A rock-paper-scissors game among national security, economic competition, and the innovation-risk tension over AI development is prevalent. From the lens of great AI power competition, the United States' and China's tech leadership is evident both domestically and internationally. Both countries are at the forefront of capability in providing a suite of AI packages to governments including offers in telecom infrastructure<sup>28</sup> like 5G mobile networks, fiber optic cables, and satellites, fintech, and smart cities; data infrastructure like data centers, and cloud computing services; open- and closed-source foundational models; and AI applications and tools. U.S efforts to curtail China's increasing capabilities are underway with export controls on AI chips and restrictions on outbound investments that can widen the gap between these two competitors, alongside new efforts to carefully manage security threats to intellectual property.<sup>29</sup>

# Economic Competition Doesn't Counter Innovation or Agency

The opportunity to pursue innovative solutions using AI that create benefits for society is not limited by economic competition or the fact that two states tend to control the "AI triad of inputs:" compute, data, and algorithms.<sup>30</sup> First, as shown by the release of DeepSeek R1, AI companies in different countries may be able to release innovative frontier AI models despite previous notions about financial buy-in and compute. Creating such a model at a lower cost opens the playing field for other competitors to enter, which was once considered a low probability due to structural restraints. Next, the AI application layer of the foundational model supply chain<sup>31</sup> is how application developers most directly interface with



Zhang Yachun (R), 19, has long battled anxiety over school and has struggled to form deep friendships. Her BooBoo - a "smart pet" that uses artificial intelligence to interact with humans - assists with making social settings easier. (Adek Berry / AFP via Getty Images)

users and thus how they most directly affect humans. Empowering AI developers in local communities to possess the training and proper data collection and infrastructure needed to create applications that understand their contextual needs is a field bursting with innovation potential.

At first glance, this economic competition could be seen as entrenching the global majority in a dependency on the U.S. and China for their AI development, but that paints a limited picture. For "AI middle powers" such as the EU, the increasing "availability and appeal of open-source AI" may be an opportunity for countries to actively position themselves in the "AI ecosystem" rather than attempting to engage in model competition.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the notion of fine-tuning a foundational model begets the question of how much can be changed about the model. The very technical guestion remains about whether application developers in various countries who are using a foundational model. based on techno-authoritarian values, are therefore entrenched in those values, even with fine-tuning.

For countries throughout the Global South, there are still numerous opportunities to set the terms and conditions of AI development and exercise agency over how AI is incorporated into their societies. In Kenya, for example, when key actors from the tech sector were excluded from the country's regulator attempts for AI, these stakeholders were able to unite and deter the initial regulatory effort.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, in the Gulf States, for example, a recent report from Carnegie<sup>34</sup> explains that although Saudi Arabia and the UAE are indeed intentionally employing digital authoritarianism in their societies, the Chinese firms providing the technological infrastructure are nonetheless aligning with local laws and regulations. These governments are not passively accepting an exported Chinese "domestic internet model" but are instead actively dictating their "specific demands."

Keeping this in mind, it must be also be considered that when it comes to ensuring that AI development is based on democratic values, sometimes commercial interests may trump value choices, since countries in the Middle East and North Africa, diverse in their political contexts, are lucrative markets – the report also highlights that U.S. tech firms like Amazon Web Services (AWS) and Google Cloud "operate three cloud regions, while Microsoft leads with four Azure cloud regions."<sup>35</sup> This may present a sort of moral dilemma, not unfamiliar to international business. U.S. companies can nonetheless mitigate this to make sure their tech is "used responsibly" and make "really thoughtful decisions about who you will and won't sell to" as well as "design decisions in the product itself."<sup>36</sup> In sum, the idea of exporting or imposing a development or technological model on others is still not clearly understood due to the complex dynamics at play. However, this doesn't mean that other forms of more subtle Chinese influence aren't taking place.

# National Security Can Align With Commercial Interest

For national security purposes, working toward AI development based on democratic values must involve several important considerations: the guarantee that local communities and their contexts across the global majority have agency over their role in AI governance and development; that the variety of these contexts means opportunity-risk spectrum is diverse and that so are a community's algorithmic needs; and that countries should not be viewed as passive consumers of technology or mere places of extraction.<sup>37</sup> The Forum on Information and Democracy recently held a seminar in Senegal with local partners across civil society to develop regional and national advocacy strategies for information integrity and together proposed calls for things like the strengthening of AI education for citizens and journalists, the involvement of subregional organizations in initiatives, and engaging civil society in the implementation and monitoring of national AI strategies.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, by considering how trustworthy AI is culturally influenced, it becomes easier to understand the tricky diffusion of soft-power tactics that are not always evident through a purely economic competition lens.

Trustworthy AI adoption cannot always be separated from the economic incentives and political choices made by governments from their decisions to buy and/or deploy different AI systems and required infrastructures. China's Digital Silk Road project illustrates how data from countries in the Global South can be harnessed for strategy and surveillance through things like Chinese-built smart city projects or infiltration of personal data and "backdoor vulnerabilities" through Chinese-built IT networks.<sup>39</sup> Governments across the world are often looking for the best deal in terms of cost effectiveness and pricing, so "buy decisions" for technology may boil down to the need to incorporate basic infrastructure into a country at a reasonable price.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, U.S. tech companies will both compete for price offerings and make value choices and enable innovation and adjust to local contextual considerations.

## Innovation and Risk Are Symbiotic

Al innovators in the Global South are embracing the challenges imposed by generative AI as a form of empowerment to solve language and dialectic problems in large language models so that applications can be relevant for their unique cultural contexts.<sup>41</sup> Where the West may fear threats of automation, the radiologist shortage in Africa means Africans technologists may embrace automation, like Ghana's MinoHealth AI Labs solution for infectious disease and chest condition diagnostics.<sup>42</sup> Another Al system in the form of a mobile app is helping farmers identify banana disease43 in countries like Benin, Colombia, and India.<sup>44</sup> The South African Project Africa GRADIENT initiative, in collaboration with Ersilia Open-Source Initiative, is building models that help researchers understand differences in therapeutic treatments and are based on data modeled from African datasets using genetic variants to enable more tailored dosages for fighting malaria and tuberculosis.<sup>45</sup> Countries in the Global South are set to contribute to and benefit from the innovation potential of AI adoption through a combination of research, partnerships, and grassroots initiatives, and their interpretations of risk and contextual needs will differ significantly from those of the Global North.

In terms of the innovation-risk tension, AI has the potential to revolutionize health care, improve agriculture in climate-sensitive regions, and expand educational access – the Global South could reap these benefits to increase the prosperity and resiliency for future generations.<sup>46</sup> Leadership in the Global South tends to be "intent on maximizing the AI opportunity."<sup>47</sup>

Under the right conditions, technological leapfrogging the Global South is possible, as evidenced through

the faster rates of adoption in low- and middleincome countries of mobile-based e-commerce and e-banking<sup>48,49</sup> than high-income countries in the areas. For example, in terms of social media platform usage: about 64.9% of the Brazilian population uses WhatsApp, compared to the 27.2% of the population in the U.S; In India, around 40.2% of the population uses YouTube,<sup>50</sup> compared to around 71.1% of the U.S. population. These U.S.-based social media companies are blocked in China, but around 57.8%<sup>51</sup> of the Chinese population uses WeChat, an all-encompassing instant messaging, social media, and mobile payment app developed by Tencent. Around 43.2% of China's population uses microblogging platform Sina Weibo.<sup>52</sup>

Collaboration among scientists is also serving as a vehicle to find areas of international cooperation on AI safety. In 2024, the organization of the top foundational AI scientists<sup>53</sup> from both China and the West was convened to create a dialogue on AI safety. The summit reached consensus on three key propositions and especially highlighted about the need for setting red lines for AI safety. This exemplifies that while the innovation potential for AI to do good is plentiful, there are emerging risks beyond the catastrophic potential of the chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear capabilities beginning to pose



An instructor assists visually impaired students in using AI-powered smart glasses, which are designed for face recognition, object recognition, and navigation assistance, during a training program in Hyderabad, India, on Nov. 22, 2024. (Noah Seelam / AFP via Getty Images)



A radiologist at Shaoxing Central Hospital in Shaoxing, China, performs diagnoses with the help of an AI image analysis system on Feb. 25, 2025. (Costfoto / NurPhoto via Getty Images)

concerns found in the training data. For example, a new and emerging security and safety threat is the integration of AI into value chains in which supplychain attack vectors enable the training data or model to be poisoned "effectively brainwashing the AI" to "prompt the AI to deliver favorable responses" that can be manipulated resulting in the release of sensitive information, altering settings on industrial control systems, or delivery false data for example.<sup>54</sup> Such a risk represents an unsophisticated style attack. Thefore, basic risks can pose serious safety concerns that, if left unaddressed could perpetuate distrust of the adoption of AI tools. This realistic threat involves addressing supply chain risk management than a more sophisticated kind of cyberattack.<sup>55</sup>

# The Role of Culture in Technology

Silicon Valley might be both admired and criticized, but its cultural influence is dominant across the globe. The result is the spread of symbolism and norms: ranging from the casual "hoodie" dress style to flat organizational structure and agile work processes, and the countless other norms that are adopted in slightly modified forms across global technology organizations. In Paris, the stretch of tech start-ups and tech companies close to the Saint-Lazare train station is locally referred to as the "Silicon Allée," while Bengaluru is called the "Silicon Valley of India," and Shenzhen, home to Huawei, is the "Silicon Valley of China." The evolution of Silicon Valley since its birth in the 1970s is not just a story of the physical location of companies and technology but of the bottom-up networking, human interaction, and cultural mixes that formed because of human connection and idea sharing. Cyber-culture scholar Fred Turner<sup>56</sup> says this phenomenon first occurred in World War II laboratories:

"...scientists, engineers, and administrators in wartime laboratories worked not so much as members of a single culture, but rather as members of different professional subcultures bound together by a common purpose and a set of linguistic tools, they had invented to achieve it."

The Cosmos Institute is an example translating a vision about Al's purpose (to ensure Al enables human agency and flourishing through the values of autonomy, rationality, and decentralization) from the bottom up in a research lab. By focusing on professional identity formation, the Cosmos Institute wants to develop more "philosopher-technologists" and ensure their training and values systems are based on human-centered AI. In autumn 2024, Oxford University announced the establishment of the Human-Centered AI Lab (HAI Lab), a research initiative supported by the Cosmos Institute that creates a space to bring together AI practitioners and philosophers to "embed concepts such as reason, decentralization, and human autonomy into the AI technologies that are shaping our world,"57 so that a new culture of philosophertechnologists is born that can build "systems that truly contribute to human well-being."

Socialization and interaction enable shared understanding and value formation.<sup>58</sup> By institutionalizing the desired culture for trustworthy Al, one that is human-centered, it is easier to form shared goals, values, and norms because there is a better mutual understanding among stakeholders about ensuring technology is developed with the public interest in mind. Through collaborative arrangements like research labs at universities, there is the opportunity to shape the way technology is developed by instilling a type of ethos within developers that is both human-centered and democratically oriented.

Turner further explains in his book, in reference to the concept of the personal computer, that it was not the "technological developments ... in and of themselves [that] spawn the ethos of 'personalness' to which small computers have since become attached" but it was rather through a combination of community ideas that were exchanged in the Bay Area out of a vision to move beyond nuclear destruction toward technologies that can "facilitate a growth in the wisdom of race experience ... [like] a hypothetical desktop machine designed for individual use."59 In order to implement this view of "technology with democratic values," the U.S. must focus on how it can zero in on local initiatives and must enable support that helps agency thrive, so that communities across the world obtain a sense of ownership of the governance and technology of AI.

When thinking about the institutional needs for trustworthy AI, the more symbolic and cultural elements shouldn't be neglected because they provide the "deeper foundations of institutional forms" or the "infrastructure on which not only beliefs, but norms and rules rest."<sup>60</sup> The main lesson of this section is to not be afraid of a more temperance-oriented path to AI governance because in the nascent stage of technology, there are always other mechanisms that can emerge more organically to control and prescribe ways of behaving appropriate to the context.

As the examples above show, the means can be crafted through vision about the end and asking what we want from technology. Without answering those clear questions, it is difficult to set boundaries around the desirable and undesirable. However, the main risk of a normative- and cultural-cognitive-led approach to control is that regulatory efforts are also important, and that for countries looking to take control fast, it is attractive to adopt regulations similar to those that already exist. For example the so-called Brussels Effect explains how the EU has been able to shape policy in areas like data privacy, consumer health and safety and antitrust as multinational companies use EU standards, conforming the the EU's first mover regulatory stance. For example, some experts convey how South Korea and Brazil's recent enactements of AI law mirror their inspiration from the EU AI Act.

The cultural approach is subtle but strong and combines public diplomacy, soft power, and bottom-up engagement to help build a community-influenced AI. Helping communities in the global majority achieve ownership in the AI development ecosystem could help counter the ability for techno-authoritarian models to be appealing. However, communities need the structural mechanisms in place to develop the ethos about what they want.

## Soft Power: Image Matters

Domestically, China is building a regulatory and normative institutional structure for AI governance. China is not exactly going against the grain, either, when it comes to AI governance. Yet, there are also some overlooked background concerns that require more attention. The way China is developing and promoting the combination of its regulatory, normative, and cultural mechanisms must not be ignored. The Belt and Road Initiative and Digital Silk Road can be extrapolated to theorize about China's underlying intention of AI governance, but it is still too soon to make too many conclusions. By promoting AI governance that ensures human safety and collective benefit, China legitimizes its role as protector of the people.

China's political stance for the purpose of AI is state-led and about incentivizing compliance and controlling information through censorship with technology. That is, technology is used to maintain stability because of fear of instability among citizens.<sup>61</sup> The root of its intentions is to protect the Communist Party's narratives and its influence over people. At the same time, there have been recent instances<sup>62</sup> where the government is willing to quickly change policy or

scrap a program that infringes too much on citizens' freedom because public opinion does matter to the party. During the end of China's zero-COVID policy,63 which sought "social stability" over individual freedom, there were some indications that public sentiment called for more freedom. This may be due in part to evolving concerns about things like the online health code system that used an app to directly track an individual's travel, contact history, and biometric data and possibility harvested personal information.<sup>64</sup> This illustrates a shift in response to calls for individual freedom protection, as the Chinese government later incorporated privacy concerns into comprehensive data protection law in 2021 with the Personal Information Protection Law.65 While Chinese citizens might have been initially willing to safrcifce some freedom during an emergency like COVID, it may not be the case in non-emergency situations, What seems more certain is that China is ensuring its domestic institutional image of AI governance remains pristine.

In organizational theory, mimetic isomorphism<sup>66</sup> is the concept of how an organization may mimic or imitate another by adopting a similar structure or processes due to the perceived benefits or legitimacy that the latter possesses. It is possible for autocratic-leaning regimes to structurally incorporate universal principles on AI: accountability, privacy, transparency, fairness, well-being, and inclusive, sustainable growth. However, the mutual alignment of shared interests on the use of AI for the public good on topics such as agriculture, health care, and climate should not be mistaken for an alignment of values.

On the other hand, by aligning with international principles, China's Communist Party can also appease public opinion and exert a sense of care and concern that may bolster trustworthiness of Al adoption internally, for instance. Norms, rules, guidelines, and standard setting are just as important as tangible material components and infrastructure



People walk past the booth of China Mobile at the 2025 Mobile World Congress in Barcelona, Spain, on March 3, 2025. (Zhao Dingzhe / Xinhua via Getty Images)

are for institutionalizing long-term trust for AI. Therefore, power competition, national security, innovation, and risk involve both these tangible and intangible dimensions.

China's maintenance of a robust domestic image helps guide the appeal of the Chinese interpretation of international principles on trustworthy AI and could thus strengthen its soft-power influence internationally. Public diplomacy efforts are often soft in nature, with influence operations abroad intended to "seduce and captivate foreign audiences by crafting a positive representation of China" and then to "infiltrate and coerce."<sup>67</sup>

Public diplomacy is always an indirect strategy. For example, China and Alibaba's Netpreneur Training Program in Africa partners with African entrepreneurs to offer opportunities for entrepreneurs to explore how to harness "digital technology to grow their business and the local economy" through masterclasses and skill-building, for instance.<sup>68</sup> The Jack Ma Foundation and Alibaba Philanthropy also have an "Africa Business Heroes Prize Competition" to honor and elevate African entrepreneurs across sectors. Soft-power plays from China on the international scene have been well underway to promote trustworthiness through benevolent behavior and actions.

From the outside, the alignment of China with trustworthy AI principles and its robust internal effort to ensure stability through institutional tools like regulation across the spectrum of topics from ICT to data privacy to generative AI could look to some as exemplary. Especially with the recent progress of open-source AI models like DeepSeek, it must be kept in mind the appeal of China's ability to provide protection and innovation simultaneously. The U.S. has domestic work to do on its image when it comes to strengthening its own institutional toolbox and must be a leader abroad to promote collaborative Al development. China is filling institutional and diplomatic voids left by a lack of U.S. engagement. The U.S. must continue to work with its allies to develop a counter approach and remain involved as a tech leader and an enabler.

# Recommendations

The path to trustworthy AI must combine normative, regulatory, and cultural approaches for AI adoption, with a particular emphasis on the role culturalcognitive elements play in enhancing democratic values. By leading the way in structuring and supporting collaborative activity on AI governance worldwide, the U.S. can build support for cultures that enable human flourishing and human agency. The U.S. must be proactive with its response because other systems are emerging. AI adoption at the societal level is not without challenges and requires the care and consideration of contextual needs in order to form positive expectations about the innovative capability AI systems can have to improve human life while causing minimal harm.

# Strategic Recommendations

# 1. Supercharge public-private partnerships and interorganizational collaboration efforts

Eight tech companies (Amazon, Anthropic, Google, IBM, Meta, Microsoft, Nvidia, and OpenAI) have partnered with the U.S. Department of State and committed over \$100 million in investment to use AI as a means for good in the Global South. The partnership combines expertise, resources, and networks to ensure the safe and trustworthy adoption of AI by focusing on compute (e.g., increased access to AI models and compute credits, tools), capacity (e.g., human/ technical) and context (expanding local datasets).69 However, considering both the cost of technology and size of the countries spanning the category of "Global South," the investment must be significantly larger. The money is aimed toward AI training, data centers, and hardware and computer resources that are provided through discounts and credits to help people increase access and development<sup>70</sup>.

Given the precedent that China is also providing financial, material, and educational support for countries across the Global South, it is imperative the U.S. takes the lead on this effort. For example, the Chinese Communist Party has announced it will "actively promote the application of AI in education, carry out training of AI professionals, increase the sharing of expertise and best practices, promote Al literacy among the public ... [and] strengthen the digital and Al rights of women and children<sup>71</sup>" in the Global South.

It is strategically important for the private sector to continue to partner with the State Department to create more financial support to fund these empowerment initiatives to help local communities achieve their ambitions and AI opportunities. Publicprivate partnership can even be encouraged between companies located in allied countries like Samsung in South Korea, for example.

## 2. Increase support for grassroots initiatives

Grassroots initiatives can encourage AI adoption through topics like data collection and engagement efforts or even convening around what kind of applications would be relevant to attaining AI for the public good in the community. AI literacy and public awareness are also best institutionalized through grassroots vehicles and are another important aspect of building trust, although AI literacy and education must be supported with other capacity building like training, relevant university programs, and access to basic AI infrastructure.

Grassroots initiatives like Masakhane use community building, resource creation, research, and collaboration to facilitate local participation to develop African datasets for NLP tools. The University of California-Berkeley and the National Science Foundation's Teaching Privacy Project use a bottom-up approach to data privacy education by outreach for K-12 students and undergrads to help create education tools and exercises that teach the effects of informationsharing and what happens to personal information on the internet. Trust is built through increasing an understanding about how things work so that people can grow a sense of personal autonomy and control over the situation.

Moreover, when it comes to assisting with basic infrastructural needs that create the foundation for AI development, things like the digital divide and solving Internet access problems are improving from technological advancements in areas like satellite communication. In Latin America, Satcom startups like Orbith,<sup>72</sup> an Argentinian satellite internet provider, are providing internet connections. Imagine how the U.S. government and partners can work to support local startups around the world that are solving their own AI infrastructure problems for their contexts. this not only would help deter Chinese solutions to those problems but also would strengthen the AI ecosystem to be more adept to the multitude of nuances when it comes to AI technology needs.

#### 3. Technology as an exercise for freedom

Zoe Weinberg, the head of Ex/Ante venture capital fund, explained how technology can empower individual freedom in places where censorship and surveillance are oppressive. The development of VPN technologies, secure communications and transactions, and the circumvention space can help in conflict zones and oppressive regimes like the example of decentralized storage that has "been used in certain cases by protestors in Hong Kong to upload copies of their publications and media before it can be censored by Beijing."<sup>73</sup>

The U.S. import-export bank could be a vehicle for providing loans to businesses interested in agentic tech as a means to creating a system in which AI supports, rather than erodes, democratic values. By more broadly exploring how agentic tech can flourish, concerns for safety and security can still be addressed. More consideration should be given to how the U.S. can become involved in shaping technology as a means for human agency. This is not groundbreaking; the federal government has traditionally created agencies like DARPA to develop innovative technology, and venture capital has been used for several decades as a way to accelerate groundbreaking technology for national security purposes.<sup>74</sup>

#### **Policy Recommendations**

# 1. Support must be given to regional and local approaches to AI governance to capture contextual needs.

Starting inclusive discussions about AI governance on a local and regional basis will help surface specific contextual expectations and needs at the forefront. Trustworthy AI adoption depends on the incorporation of cultural nuance into AI applications and model training, for example.

Regions like Latin America are already proponents of Western-based social media platforms like WhatsApp, Meta, and YouTube,<sup>75</sup> and the EU is one of the largest investors in Latin America.<sup>76</sup> However, countries like Brazil are experiencing the use of AI technology to limit information access and control social movements through surveillance systems.<sup>77</sup> Latin America possesses its own unique challenges, like fragile electoral processes and degradation of democratic spaces in the digital sphere,<sup>78</sup> so key stakeholders for Al governance must be analyzed, so that voices that promote open systems are included. Furthermore, as Latin America is a U.S. neglected in recent times, with China filling those public diplomacy voids,<sup>79</sup> it is in the United States' best interest to re-engage with the region.

Next, while some countries like Saudi Arabia and UAE may be more techno-authoritarian in their approach to AI governance, U.S. companies already have a presence in the region and could use initiatives already in place like the EU's Global Gateway strategy for trusted networks to bolster influence.<sup>80</sup> By concentrating on each specific region, it will be easier to understand what trustworthy AI means for that context and tailor approaches accordingly.

#### 2. Use evidence to analyze progress of AI governance in terms of regulatory and normative trends at the domestic and international level to better understand the Chinese approach.

To more clearly understand and paint a picture about the AI governance landscape and the Chinese Communist Party's intentions, both domestically and abroad, evidence and expertise must be strengthened in order to gather more precise information about trends in regulation and normative adoption of technoauthoritarian practices and procedures, for example.

Utilizing AI experts who both possess both language skills in Chinese and have contextual knowledge about China will help to enhance the assessments to gain more precise understandings about motivations and the realizations of those motivations. As some countries may be inherently more techno-authoritarian in their local policies and regulations, it is important to differentiate what is true soft-power influence and public diplomacy and what is simply value alignment and/or a combination of these facets. It would be beneficial for future analytical purposes to further integrate cultural expertise with geopolitical and Al governance expertise.

## 3. The U.S. Artificial Intelligence Safety Institute (AISI) at the U.S. Department of Commerce's National Institute of Standards and Technology must continue to exist.

President Donald Trump's revocation of former President Joe Biden's AI Executive Order places the funding and existence of the AISI in limbo, with no structural or financial means to continue. The previous Trump administration supported funding for AI research initiatives and understood the value in collaborative research especially on red-line areas of catastrophic risks. As the EU and partner countries continue to use AI safety institutes to reveal the latest research and findings, the U.S. must remain a part of this network of insight. Human safety is a basic area for international cooperation, even if only on very specific topics.

In May 2024, an agreement between national AI safety institutes for an "international network of AI safety institutes" was formed and can provide effective information-sharing to improve coordination on AI safety internationally.<sup>81</sup> Just because of the focus on safety, the U.S. AI Safety Institute should not be considered as a blockage to innovation, especially when several U.S. AI-based startups openly agreed to memorandums of understanding. Some argue there is no tradeoff between safety and U.S. primacy since it is affordable and unlikely to slow innovation.<sup>82</sup>

One important vehicle for this trust-building approach is strengthening support for collaboration between the U.S. AI Safety Institute and AI labs that enable knowledge transfer and communication about the latest research discoveries. Anthropic and OpenAI signed MOUs with the U.S. AI Safety Institute for research, testing and evaluation to fuel "breakthrough technological innovation."<sup>83</sup> Anthropic, for example, promotes this voluntary collaboration between government and AI labs due to the need to understand how models can affect national security concerns, since it is often government expertise that best understands the security implications of a technology.<sup>84</sup>

#### 4. Increase the number of opportunities for student and research exchanges in AI through programs like the Fulbright.

This U.S. has always been a beacon for international talent, with around 19% of STEM the workforce being foreign-born. The Fulbright Program provides funding for scholar and student exchanges and enables foreign nationals to visit the U.S. through exchange programs.

At the moment, the Fulbright Program sends around 800 American scholars and professionals per year to 130 countries and provides around 8,000 grants annually with 1,600 to U.S. students. These numbers could be increased because exchanges, teaching and grant opportunities are excellent ways to build cultural understandings and value alignment across the globe. The U.S. Department of State, with the help of Congress, could create a program just for Al exchanges and grants, for example, but this must be considered in the annual appropriation bills.

Learning and information exchange is an effective way to help instill a compelling "vision for AI that resonates with the needs" of the Global South "while upholding values that ensure a fair and inclusive AI future."<sup>85</sup> This state-led effort can complement private sector programs like Microsoft's Accelerate Foundation Models Research that brings together an interdisciplinary research communities based on human centered AI development.<sup>86</sup>

# 5. Create an AI Alliance with like-minded countries based on democratic values.

Since authoritarian regimes can also promote similar trustworthy principles for AI, such as it being humancentered or used to promote public good, the U.S. and its allies must work together to create their vision for AI based on democratic values. This involves asking what it means to be human, how to define the relationship between technology and humans, and what AI for public interest entails in non-authoritarian regimes and worldviews. Those fundamental philosophical questions help guide answers to means-ends distinctions. Classic liberal ideas like human freedom, human dignity and purpose, and decentralization<sup>87</sup> may better capture the intention of how AI is developed and applied in non-authoritarian systems.

Inter EU-U.S. economic competition aside, several concessions may be required for transatlantic relations to be ameliorated. For instance, the EU might have to acknowledge that proposing comprehensive AI regulation may not be the best move for the U.S. and its innovation ambition,<sup>88</sup> while the U.S. should recognize that on topics such as data privacy, perhaps agreement can be conveyed about the underlying themes about protecting personal data and ensuring AI causes minimal harm to humans is important for building trustworthy AI. By working together, partners engaged in the AI alliance for democracy might learn something from one another about how to strengthen their weaknesses; after all, the world faces a very real alternative.



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