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Commentary Article No. 5

China's Vision for Global AI Governance: Opportunities and Challenges for ASEAN

November 2025

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Introduction

When Premier Li Qiang addressed the World Artificial Intelligence Conference in Shanghai in July 2025, his call to establish a World Artificial Intelligence Cooperation Organization (WAICO) marked a pivotal step in China's ambition to shape the global conversation on artificial intelligence (AI). As reported in China Daily (August 15–21, 2025), the proposal signaled a shift from technological advancement to international norm-setting. It positioned China as a leading advocate for a multilateral approach to AI governance built on inclusivity, transparency, and shared benefit, especially for countries in the Global South that have historically been excluded from global rule-making.

China's vision forms part of a larger framework developed over several years: the Global Development Initiative (GDI), Global Security Initiative (GSI), Global Civilization Initiative (GCI), Global AI Governance Initiative (GAIGI, 2023), and Global Governance Initiative (GGI, 2025). Together, these five frameworks provide a philosophical and institutional foundation for Beijing's aspiration to craft a more balanced and ethical international order.

For ASEAN, this expanding agenda presents a mixture of opportunity and challenge. It offers new channels for digital partnership, but also calls for strategic caution in ensuring that participation supports the region's long-term autonomy and diversity.

China's Expanding Governance Framework

China's push for WAICO reflects its ambition to transition from being a technology producer to a rule-maker in global digital governance. The organization would coordinate standards, safety mechanisms, and ethical principles, positioning China as a provider of global public goods in the digital era.

Each of the five global initiatives provides a piece of this wider governance puzzle: 1. Global Development Initiative (GDI), launched in 2021, links digital innovation to inclusive and sustainable development. The GDI has been notably well received among Southeast Asian nations because it resonates with their developmental priorities and state-centric governance ethos (Ha, 2023). 2. Global Security Initiative (GSI), announced in 2022, promotes cooperation in cybersecurity and responsible data governance. 3. Global Civilization Initiative (GCI), introduced in 2023, emphasizes intercultural dialogue and moral responsibility in technology. 4. Global AI Governance Initiative (GAIGI), unveiled in October 2023, laid out China's principles for AI ethics, sovereignty, and fairness, providing the foundation for WAICO. 5. Global Governance Initiative (GGI), introduced in 2025, expands these ideas into a global reform plan for international institutions, integrating AI, biotechnology, and environmental sustainability.

Together, these initiatives outline China's vision of consultation, co-construction, and shared benefits, positioning Beijing as a counterweight to Western-led governance systems often perceived as exclusionary or corporate-driven.

Opportunities: Broadening and Humanizing Global AI Governance

1. Inclusivity and Global Representation

At the heart of China's AI vision lies a commitment to inclusivity. WAICO is designed to amplify the voices of the Global South, including ASEAN members, in international standard-setting. For ASEAN, participation could mean a greater role in shaping ethical norms, transparency mechanisms, and the use of AI for sustainable development. This aligns with the Global Development Initiative (GDI), which advocates for equitable access to digital tools. By engaging with WAICO, ASEAN can ensure that its diverse perspectives—ranging from advanced digital economies such as Singapore to developing ones such as Cambodia or Laos—are reflected in global AI policy.

2. Civilizational Ethics and Moral Pluralism

China's AI governance philosophy draws inspiration from the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) and GAIGI, both of which emphasize moral pluralism and collective responsibility. These frameworks integrate values of harmony, balance, and compassion drawn from Confucian and Buddhist traditions.

For ASEAN, this provides a familiar moral foundation. Many Southeast Asian societies share cultural and philosophical affinities with China's communitarian ethics, valuing societal balance and moral order over unrestrained individualism. This shared moral vocabulary allows ASEAN to engage with China on ethical grounds while maintaining its own identity and priorities.

3. Open-Source Collaboration and South-South Cooperation

China's thriving ecosystem of open-source AI platforms, including models such as DeepSeek, offers a model of technological sharing that could benefit ASEAN. Through WAICO, China proposes to expand access to open algorithms, datasets, and safety standards that could empower developing economies to build their own digital capacity.

This approach complements the Global Security Initiative (GSI), which encourages collective responses to cyber threats and data inequities. For ASEAN, deeper engagement could help bridge the digital divide, allowing less-developed members to access the technical expertise and tools needed to build resilient and ethical AI systems.

ASEAN's Response: Balancing Diversity, Cooperation, and Autonomy

The diversity of ASEAN economies means that the region must respond at multiple levels. Some member states, such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand, are already advancing

national AI strategies and ethics frameworks. Others, like Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia, remain focused on foundational digital infrastructure and human capital.

In the short term, ASEAN can focus on three priorities:

1. Strengthen regional coordination through instruments such as the ASEAN Digital Masterplan 2025 and the ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics, ensuring coherence across member states.
2. Engage selectively with WAICO and related Chinese initiatives, maintaining open dialogue with both China and Western institutions to prevent overreliance on any single framework.
3. Invest in capacity-building through cooperation under China's GDI and GAIGI, focusing on skills development, digital ethics, and data management.

In the medium term, ASEAN's strategy should aim to position the region as a bridge-builder between different AI governance models. This requires the creation of interoperable regulatory frameworks that protect digital sovereignty while supporting innovation and cross-border collaboration.

By pursuing a pragmatic and balanced approach, ASEAN can transform its diversity into an advantage. The region can serve as both a beneficiary and a co-designer of global AI governance, contributing perspectives that emphasize equity, cultural sensitivity, and shared human welfare.

Challenges: Politics, Perception, and Practicality

1. The Trust Deficit

China's initiatives face persistent skepticism from Western powers, which view them as instruments of geopolitical influence. For ASEAN, this trust gap represents a major policy dilemma. The region must maintain strategic neutrality while promoting transparency and accountability in its partnerships.

Beijing can help address these concerns by engaging with existing multilateral institutions such as UNESCO, the International Telecommunication Union, and the United Nations AI Advisory Body, signaling that WAICO is inclusive and cooperative rather than exclusive or state-driven.

China's diplomatic AI ethics strategy can be strengthened by promoting global consensus around moral pluralism and inclusivity. Building on the Global AI Governance Initiative (GAIGI, 2023) and the proposed World Artificial Intelligence Cooperation Organization (WAICO), China can champion ethical cooperation across eight key dimensions: safety, transparency, fairness, privacy, accountability, truthfulness, human autonomy, and dignity

to align with public concerns while advancing its Global Civilization Initiative (GCI). This approach allows China to lead in shaping a culturally inclusive ethical framework that integrates civilizational values with global norms for sustainable and responsible AI governance (Cao & Meng, 2025).

2. Overlapping Frameworks and Regulatory Complexity

The current AI governance landscape already includes the OECD AI Principles, the EU AI Act, and UNESCO's ethical recommendations. The addition of WAICO risks creating overlapping standards unless coordination mechanisms are clarified.

For ASEAN, this complexity underscores the need for policy alignment and adaptability. Regional consensus on issues such as privacy, data portability, and ethical AI will be essential to ensuring that ASEAN members can engage constructively without being caught between competing governance blocs.

3. Balancing Regulation with Innovation

China's proposed 13-point AI safety plan reflects a strong regulatory orientation. While this may help mitigate ethical and security risks, excessive regulation could slow innovation in developing economies. Conversely, insufficient oversight could allow harmful or biased technologies to proliferate.

ASEAN will need to develop context-sensitive regulations that protect public interest without hindering experimentation. Partnerships with both China and Western institutions can help build regulatory literacy and share best practices for balancing safety and innovation.

Conclusion: ASEAN's Path in a Shifting Global Order

China's vision for AI governance, anchored in the GDI, GSI, GCI, GAIGI (2023), and GGI (2025), is more than a technological agenda; it is a bid to reshape the moral and institutional foundations of global cooperation. For ASEAN, it represents both an opportunity and a test.

In the short term, ASEAN can use China's initiatives to close its digital gaps, enhance capacity, and participate more actively in shaping the ethical rules of AI. In the medium term, the region's challenge will be to consolidate its own standards and emerge as a regional convener capable of fostering dialogue between competing global models.

Ultimately, ASEAN's response should not be one of passive adaptation but of creative engagement. By developing its own frameworks that reflect local values and diverse levels of development, ASEAN can help ensure that the future of AI governance is defined by cooperation, inclusion, and human dignity rather than rivalry.

References

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