

SOFT POWER IN GREAT POWER POLITICS: COMPETING AI GOVERNANCE FRAMEWORKS OF US AND CHINA

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Abstract

Artificial intelligence (AI) has emerged as a transformative force in the twenty-first century, reshaping various sociopolitical and governance aspects. The great power struggles to harness the potential of AI are based on the underlying political values that inform their approaches to its development and governance, which have become increasingly significant. Scrutinizing the postulates of Joseph Nye's soft power theory, the central argument lies in AI incorporation and regulation as instruments for operationalizing political values and expanding global influence. Premised on this theoretical framework, the research explores the political values promulgated by the US and China, manifested in their AI governance models, and the subsequent impact on soft power projection. The strategies for AI regulation reflect their political systems, as well as the strategic power and alliance systems, which echo geopolitical ambitions. To address these considerations, this research uses a comparative analysis method: examining American democracy and the transparent use of AI to govern, while exploring the Western perspective on China's AI governance. It concludes that AI governance remains central to global competition, as these tech superpowers are at the forefront, redefining the norms of global politics and shaping the international structure in the contemporary world.

Keywords: AI governance, US-China, Soft Power, Geopolitics

Introduction

In the modern world characterized by a fast-paced technology-driven industrial revolution, Artificial Intelligence (AI) stands at the forefront of great power political discourses, prompting a critical appraisal of states' mechanisms to integrate their political values into AI governance frameworks, particularly by the US and China. AI advancements are phenomenal in the 21st century and have revolutionized all facets of human life, be it economic or governmental systems. Harnessing the potential of AI necessitates its regulation. Resultant tech norms would determine the domestic social order and global balance of power in the contemporary era. This research utilizes and develops an understanding of the AI-driven techno-politics nexus through the soft power conceptual framework by Joseph Nye Jr.

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While evaluating the principles of AI governance in terms of Nye's soft power concept, the core emphasis is given to the political values of the US and China, pivoting around important factors in shaping the global narrative surrounding AI governance. The US model reflects democratic values based on openness, individualism, and privacy, while China represents its own version of the governance model based on social solidarity, security, and collective governance. Such diversified AI frameworks reveal the fundamental political belief systems of these global powers through the influence of their soft power strategies. AI, as a soft power tool, extends the influence of these political values by shaping international perceptions and fostering technological alliances.¹ This analysis utilizes Nye's theoretical assumptions to explore AI governance to reinforce the global standing of these states and alter the dynamics of Sino-American competition. Integrating AI into soft power dynamics, reflecting the political values of respective governance models, has become central to the broader discourse aimed at projecting global impact.

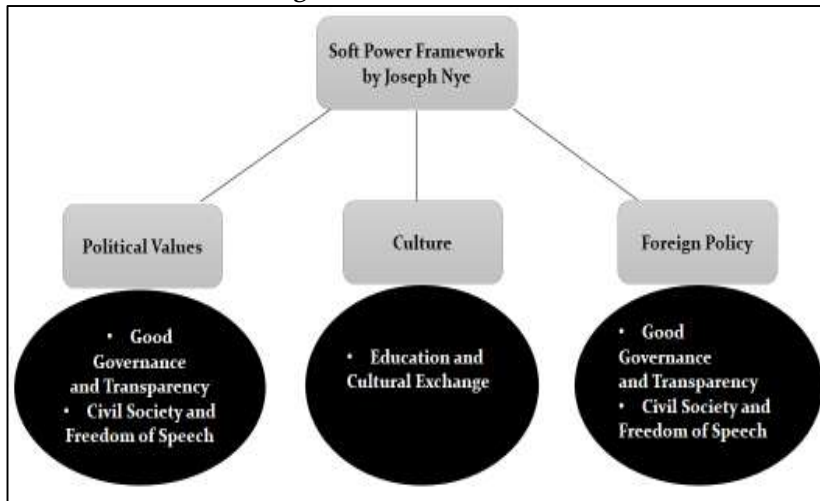
The US and China use AI applications to project power in recipient states. This research compares the technological capabilities of these competing tech giants, accentuating their investments in research and development (R&D), patent filings, governance approach and structures, and overarching ethical stands, while underscoring the significance of this competition for international technological leadership and security dynamics revolving around AI developments. The geopolitical power struggle lies in controlling the norms and standards within the domain of AI. The Western-centric global standards for the development and regulation of AI were set by the International Organization for Standardization in 2022 to consolidate its leadership in technology and regulation.² Nevertheless, China has also managed to set up its AI-inclusive standards, such as "China Standards 2035", which indicates its geopolitical ambitions.³ China's role in developing international standards for AI is evidenced by its active participation in formulating AI principles at the G20 and other related international standards formulation bodies.⁴ This influence seeks to spread its values of regulations globally through its policies. AI as an instrument of power can help states to consolidate and project their soft power. With the integration of this cutting-edge technology, states can shape public opinions through social media and news platforms. For instance, firms from America, such as Open AI with the GPT-4, have boosted content generation and simultaneous translation, strengthening the cultural dominance of the US. Likewise, China has projected its soft power through giant infrastructural projects, e.g., AI integration in the Digital Silk Road.

In line with this, the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) existing efforts to influence global public opinion through AI-controlled state media and related applications such as WeChat show how China seeks more control and influence, particularly in the Global South.⁵ Having control of AI technologies results in dependencies that can be effectively harnessed. This research aims to explore the AI-driven governance and regulating efforts of these great powers, reflecting the political value that would influence technological superiority and reshape the global political order.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This research utilizes the soft power theory, proposed by American political scientist Joseph Nye. The theory postulates that states can exercise power over others through attraction and persuasion rather than through coercion or force.⁶

Figure -1: The Soft Power



Source: Developed by the authors based on Joseph Nye’s Soft Power Framework

Essentially his work emphasizes three primary sources of soft power: political values, culture, and foreign policy, whereby he considers political values to be the attractiveness of the political system of the state and its adherence to democratic principles.⁷ This research expands Nye’s framework to incorporate artificial intelligence (AI) as a contemporary instrument of soft power by observing the modern technological features entrenched in the geopolitical competition between the US and China. AI governance models are being examined as a new dimension within this framework to examine the strategies of these tech giants for portraying their political values at the global level in the guise of AI governance; these models bolster soft power and attract other states and societies into their orbit, hence changing the balance of power trajectories.

Assessing AI governance models as indicative of the political values of the US and China, the research uses comparative analysis and a qualitative approach. It scrutinizes official white papers, political assertions, and policy documents on artificial intelligence. Secondary data includes academic and research articles and international reports for comprehending AI-driven power politics. The research employs qualitative data analysis to investigate the policy approaches to AI regulation by both states and employs comparative case study analysis, through which differences in regime type and their influence on international perception have been explored. Through a combination of theoretical perspectives and qualitative evidence, the research aims to offer a thorough understanding of the role of AI and soft power in global standings within the Sino-American competition. The following model (by the authors) shows the relationship between AI regulation and its soft power potentials and projections in different aspects of the socio-political life of the nations, for instance, values, culture, and foreign policy.

Digital Dominance: Examining the Rivalry of Tech Superpowers

AI's spectacular rise has prompted a change in traditional political and security thinking across the world, especially in competitive environments. AI developments significantly add to the states' power potential, especially with the advent of Autonomous Weapon Systems, unauthorized surveillance and intelligence, drone warfare, algorithm-based predictive diplomacy, and early warning systems. Owing to these developments, the global political landscape is undergoing a profound transformation, with China and the US engaged in a race for digital supremacy for geopolitical purposes.⁸

For a comparative analysis, it is imperative to assess the technological potential of these tech giants. As far as technological advancements are concerned, the US, being a superpower, is heavily investing in the R&D and patent sectors⁹ and leading the tech ecosystem as a significant innovator of AI, largely driven by private-sector companies like Google and Microsoft.¹⁰ Similarly, China has also diverted massive funds to R&D and tech-related ventures and filed more patents than any other country recently, which reflects its tech-leadership ambitions in line with its global ambitions.¹¹ Initiatives like the "New Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan" with a vision of developing AI leadership in the world by 2030, and 'Made in China 2025'¹², are the widespread application of modern technologies such as 5th-generation cellular networks and AI¹³ to facilitate China's soft power projection through technology sharing in developing states.¹⁴ AI, biotech, and renewable energy are a few industries that spearhead the innovation in the Silicon Valley of China – Shenzhen.

On the other hand, competition has intensified in the sectors of 5G, 6G, quantum computing, and tech companies to control domestic diplomacy, culture, and narratives. Velocity and adaptability have become part of state behaviors, as the technological platforms are being used as instruments of digital diplomacy to realize strategic goals. As far as diplomatic prestige and influence are concerned, if Silicon Valley is the symbol of US innovation edge and entrepreneurship skills, the BRI-related AI initiatives are examples of China's growing influence that signifies cutting-edge technology as a key factor in world politics and determining the future world order.

Setting Global AI Standards through Contending Visions of the US and China

The competition between the US and China over setting international AI standards is yet another dimension of the larger strategic competition between two tech-norm entrepreneurs. Both self-interested states intend to have their governing framework with divergent political, economic, and technological goals. AI governance models encapsulate conceptual structures, regulations, and policies that characterize AI systems' creation, application, and management in both the US and China. The global race to establish norms and standards for AI is a defining feature of the US-China competition, shaping not only technological supremacy but also the values that underpin global AI governance. Both claim that their governance models are robust and intend to alleviate geopolitical apprehensions, foster international collaboration, ensure privacy, be ethically sensitive, and offer legal frameworks. In a similar vein, privacy laws like the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and ethical standards for AI development are being implemented to reduce biases and guarantee responsible AI deployment.¹⁵ International frameworks and agreements, like the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) AI governance principles¹⁶, provide foundations for international dialogues and collaboration on security issues related to AI, which otherwise have been challenged by geopolitical rivalries. Since the US-China competition demands effective global governance initiatives, it could impede the development of approved guidelines and standards for AI technology. Furthermore, the extensive application of AI threatens data security and privacy; the large-scale data collection and processing in AI systems necessitate protecting sensitive data and data protection procedures from misuse or unauthorized access. Such regulations and agreements seek to protect people's right to privacy by placing provisions on corporations and digital enterprises that regulate personal data.

US AI Governance Model as an Epitome of Liberal Principles

The US advocates for AI governance rooted in democratic principles, emphasizing individual liberty, privacy, transparency, and the rule of law. Adhering to ethical codes of AI governance in the US helps instill and socialize ethical practices consistent with democratic principles revolving around individual liberty. A remarkable illustration of this strategy is the blueprint for an AI Bill of Rights that the US has adopted to promote the good use of AI systems while protecting civil liberties.¹⁷ This framework seeks to encourage accountability of decisions that the AI system makes, primarily in areas like preference, treatment, and justice, amongst other fields.

The National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) laid the foundation of AI governance, focusing on fairness, risk management, and the avoidance of bias in algorithms.¹⁸ Furthermore, the American approach to AI governance stands out for its emphasis on innovation, moral considerations, and decentralized regulation, establishing a framework designed to navigate the complexities of rapidly advancing technologies. This approach is complemented by guidelines from the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) that prioritize consumer protection and accountability for companies deploying AI technologies.¹⁹

Significant investments in AI research from agencies such as the National Science Foundation (NSF) and Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) not only bolster America's technological leadership but also address national security challenges tied to AI advancements. Additionally, the regulatory approach allows for innovative AI solutions to be tested in controlled environments, fostering creativity while managing associated risks. Overall, these elements underscore a comprehensive and strategic American framework that balances the need for rapid technological advancement with a commitment to ethical governance, positioning the US as a leader in shaping the future of artificial intelligence.

It actively participates in multi-stakeholder initiatives like the G7's Global Partnership on AI that seek to advance the development of sustainable, private, human rights-protecting technology within the framework of the rules-based liberal order. The US NIST and the Department of Commerce created the American Artificial Intelligence Safety Institute Consortium (AISIC)²⁰ to improve AI safety-oriented initiatives. In this regard, it assumes the role of a leader in AI diplomacy through the integration of AI with democratic values, promotes its soft power, and strengthens alliances with like-minded countries, such as the EU, Japan, and India. These partners share democracy, transparency and accountability, human rights, and fundamental freedoms in common.

For example, the US, with the EU partners, has established the US-EU Trade and Technology Council, which, among the issues, focuses on AI regulation aligned with the values of democratic countries.²¹ This cooperation helps the US strengthen the 'coalition of convenience' among states with similar stances regarding the use of AI.

China's AI Governance Model Reflecting Societal Control

The Chinese approach to AI governance echoes balancing regulating technology while pursuing national interest, revealing that the state's focus is on controlling technology for societal solidarity and ensuring social order in line with its governance model. China's AI strategy is characterized by state-authorized surveillance with no regard for individual privacy, in the name of national security.²² This section identifies China's emerging AI governance and regulatory landscape as a crucial factor in its capacity to influence norms and standards of AI on the international level. The Chinese government's emphasis on developing its talent domestically guarantees the flow of qualified engineering, scientific, and technical personnel suitable for the AI governance that helps China to remain competitive. Chinese officials have therefore been debating whether China should not only raise its stakes in the existing global governance debate but also champion the creation of new state-led systems of rules.²³

This aspiration is well reflected in a 2017 document from the State Council of the People's Republic of China, as "China will actively participate in the global governance of AI, strengthen the study of major international common problems such as robot alienation and safety supervision, deepen international cooperation on AI laws and regulations, international rules, and so on, and jointly cope with global challenges."²⁴ It is worth noting that this state council is the top administrative authority and national cabinet of the republic.

Chinese ethical and regulatory perspectives on AI are aimed at grounding a holistic and general governance model that reinforces state authority, national security, and social order. In 2021, the Chinese government promulgated the Ethical Norms for the New Generation of AI,²⁵ which targets the concepts of transparency and supervision in AI systems, especially those that are used in sensitive use cases like surveillance and algorithmic decision-making. Also, the Internet Information Service Algorithmic Recommendation Management Provisions (2022) obligate companies in the technology sector to explain how algorithms function and grant users the ability to manage recommendations. These regulations are in place to control interference with public opinion; however, they synchronize with national security compulsions.

It's Data Security Law (DSL) and the Personal Information and Protection Law (PIPL) came into force effectively in 2021. These laws demand that data produced within the Chinese territory should be controlled by central authorities, control flows of data across borders, and protect individual and other forms of sensitive data from foreign companies.

Accompanying these actions, the Chinese Cybersecurity Law provides strict provisions and controls over data processing and usage, especially regarding data regarding critical infrastructures, which companies must pass a government examination; such measures bolster the nation's security agenda. Moreover, AI is a critical enabler for the CCP's Military Civil Fusion strategy, which merges military and civilian technologies. AI technologies, including facial recognition, the use of self-automated systems, and quantum computers, are key areas in business and the military. Such utilization of AI surveillance systems is an illustration of China's social governance approach, such as the social credit system and predictive policing elements of state control.

The two Chinese papers presented by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China- 'Strengthening Ethical Governance of Artificial Intelligence 'and 'Regulating Military Application of Artificial Intelligence 'present a more specific sectorial framework of 'AI governance and 'autonomous weapons'.²⁶ These documents outline China's general approach to tackling AI governance and development, and relate general principles of governance to specific areas of policy focus. Through its governance model that promotes state control and economic development, China fosters AI and digital infrastructure cooperation with states from the global south, Africa in particular.

The success of the AI surveillance-based model in China has not restricted its effects to the region alone. China offers these technologies through its Digital Silk Road (DSR) project to the states with illiberal and autocratic tendencies in Africa and Southeast Asia. Zimbabwe and Ethiopia, for instance, have deployed Chinese AI surveillance technologies to improve domestic control.²⁷ These exports not only raise China's power but also lend even greater political authority to its state-controlled model using AI. By supporting like-minded governments (illiberal with police state aspirations in the name of political order and social solidarity), China secures more influence and acts as an attraction mediated by AI as a means for control rather than liberty.²⁸

A Critical Appraisal of Both Models

The disparities in regulatory frameworks on AI between the US and China raise relevant concerns about their various economic and geopolitical dimensions. Both visions of AI regulation differ significantly in approach and outcomes.

The US engages in multilateralism to promote global norms for the ethical use of AI. The major goal of the US is creating innovations and fostering economic development, supporting such ideas as competition and freedom; whereas, the Chinese model seeks a balance between creation, free enterprise, and state regulation to promote the national agenda in technological development. These conflicting priorities have brought forth economic rivalry, especially on trade issues and the protection of intellectual properties and markets, thus making their economic relations more strained. The US promotes a liberal and flexible approach, allowing emerging markets to adapt regulatory policies to bring up innovation. China, on the other hand, despite being an authoritarian state from a Western standpoint, strives to set up extensive regulations and legal provisions for cutting-edge technologies. Thus, this competition influences the international regulation of AI and other states depending on their regulatory preferences and strategic interests aligned with either the US or China.

More so, the US and China's approaches collide significantly in determining the norms for privacy, security, and ethics, leading to a conflict of national interests. While both states are still trying to orient their policies in the domain of governing AI, the characteristics of their regulatory approaches are going to shape not only their development but also impact the geopolitical landscape as states operate in innovative and existential dilemmas. In his book, 'The Coming Wave', Mustafa Suleyman emphasizes the global perspective of AI governance and argues that solving the challenges of deep micro-scale automation requires a global approach with incessant advancements of AI.²⁹ This necessitates forming institutions encompassing computing power, algorithms, and data, requiring new models of governance, particularly for the AI ecosystem.

AI can also shape power dynamics and enhance the deterrent capabilities of the state by assisting with early warning systems, intelligence gathering, surveillance, and identifying potential risks. Technologies like facial recognition and predictive analytics can be implemented to prevent security breaches and strengthen deterrent strategies for states. However, as AI strengthens, it comes with certain risks that require governing these algorithms responsibly and transparently for humans and AI to function appropriately. For this reason, as AI leads the world into the fourth industrial revolution, there is a great opportunity and risk that requires prudent guidance on possible ethical and sociological complexities that might arise from the technology.³⁰ While the two states push for supremacy on the technology front, this leads to a new factor in competition: the soft power element. The US seeks to challenge China's AI narrative and advance America's AI governance agenda rooted in democracy and privacy protection.

Regarding AI, the US might require integrating such a methodological approach as conducting cultural exchange, fostered by cooperation in global AI development, and establishing transparent AI governance.

Global AI governance, however, remains a relatively novel and developing concept, and its norms and institutional frameworks are yet to be adopted. It implies that there is a substantial opportunity for China to reshape to assert its place. In this regard, China has been making preliminary strategies to establish its position in global AI norms and rule-making. It is therefore not surprising that many Chinese scholars are actively involved with the policy evaluation of AI impacts on international order and security. Many view China as a tech giant with global responsibilities during the days of AI globalization, it is involved in the process of dealing with governance challenges ahead. For instance, Chinese research institutions, such as the Institute for Artificial Intelligence International, are employing this vision.³ It is pertinent to speculate that proposed agreements and governance have their strengths and limits.

These models usually comprise agreements for AI's moral, societal, and political consequences, each of which has notable advantages and drawbacks. AI governance in the US is focused on ethical principles and standards for the use of AI, including the principles of fairness, accountability, and responsibility. There are proposed agreements that assist in the establishment of AI practices and common platforms for various industries for the convenience of users, as well as enhancing trust among stakeholders. Effective measures in the governance area can maintain user confidence by maintaining accountability for decisions and AI outcomes to overcome problems related to abuse of privacy and misuse of data. Moreover, through governance frameworks of AI on efficiencies, it is possible to guard against different dangers that may arise from AI, such as infringement on data privacy and cybersecurity threats, to conduct preventive measures to avert negative outcomes. Working with the public sector promotes development and creates new ideas on how to make certain projects ethical and interesting for all parties, making knowledge and resources available to all.

On the other hand, the Chinese AI governance model is centralized, allowing efficient decision-making and implementation, hence promoting the development of AI technology and a development framework. The Chinese government can put regulations in place rapidly, which means that AI technologies must support the state's objectives, such as security and the economy. Chinese policies such as the "New Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan" advance China as the leading AI country, which sets standards consistent with its governance ideology, and when AI is connected to state targets, it boosts control and effectiveness in social management and public

administration. In the US, there is a lack of flexibility in governance models where the implementation of AI occurs rapidly, leaving the regulatory models behind in terms of responding to emerging technologies as well as challenges. The politics of the US and the garnered cultural differences might pose a major problem in setting objective standards. Current and proposed agreements do not have stringent measures that can guarantee organizations' compliance, as there are cases where organizations are found to have violated the agreements, but little can be done against them, leaving fewer organizations motivated to adhere to the agreements. Ethical principles can be interpreted subjectively, which makes their universal application problematic. In China, such a centralized approach to AI governance may contribute to ethical problems associated with state control and surveillance while decreasing public confidence in AI solutions. The governance model is the least transparent, which may compromise accountability, as most of the decisions about the deployment of AI-based systems are sometimes made in the shadows with no public involvement. Furthermore, with the top-down approach, there is little or no opportunity to engage stakeholders and address the range of concerns that may exist. The Chinese AI governance model will be challenged by the democratic states with an emphasis on human rights. AI-enabled governance will only reinforce authoritarian policies, leading to human rights abuses and social repression, damaging China's reputation globally.

Nevertheless, these contrasting cases demonstrate that AI is critical in determining partnerships within the international structure. This competition is intensifying by exploiting the existing fault lines between these tech powers and carving the direction in which not only the domestic use of AI but also the impact of this technology shapes global norms and narratives regarding the future of governance. Competition between the US and China on global norms setting regarding crucial global policies is contrasting, as the US aims to preserve an order based on liberal democracy, and China as a revisionist, has the intention of reshaping the order that suits its policies and influence in the global south – with whom the latter enjoys a natural affinity because of the West's colonial past. The US tends to align with European states that emphasize stringent AI regulations prioritizing privacy and human rights, as exemplified by the European Union's AI Act. Since the US is dominating the soft power matrix, it can strengthen its economy and military might by using AI-driven policies to strengthen its foreign policy goals. It resorts to soft power to proclaim its cultural, political, and institutional values and ethics to shape public opinion. The US could wield influence over other states that help achieve its national interests.

AI's research influence on micro-power processes includes seeking control of global norms and building relationships with other states and organizations, such as the United Nations and the World Trade Organization. The course of AI regulation in China and its implications for trends in international politics is unstable, as the state's power is dependent on the dynamic of innovation development, leading to the rise of the geopolitical crisis in which cutting-edge technologies are used, like brinkmanship and other predicament circumstances.

Conclusion

AI's revolutionary characteristics have penetrated and impacted the soft power strategies of the great powers and the dynamics of global politics. The US-China competition is shaping global affairs in multiple domains—politics, ideology, military, and cyber. Both self-interested states aim to establish their governing frameworks with divergent political, economic, and technological goals. Therefore, AI regulation for global governance is a new chapter in the existing manual. Both seek to dominate global multilateral frameworks relative to their respective national interests, global institutions, standards, and policies regarding conventional affiliations and global institutions in the long run. In the culmination of pursuing national objectives, leading states have supported and disseminated their ideas, promoted their values, and secured the cooperation of other states. The US model sets liberal democracy and efficiency in transparency and accountability, while China presents a dystopian vision of AI state-society relations, lending its power to areas that value stability and order over freedom and openness. While the US plans to counter the Chinese narrative and propose an AI governance agenda encompassing ethical values and privacy, albeit self-serving, which are inherent to American principles, the Chinese government is proactively proposing regulatory frameworks that prioritize social order and stability at the expense of individual liberty and privacy. This implies that AI governance provides a pathway for the US and China to project their soft power by disseminating their political ideologies to the international community. Ethical AI and the commitment to democracy by the US bolster its soft power with democratic governments, while views on cyber sovereignty and state power resonate with those of China, appealing to authoritarian counterparts. The nature of the approach to AI regulation also reflects the domestic political priorities of these diverse states and their AI exportation, positioning AI as an essential element of soft power and the struggle for global dominance. As the US maintains a strong influence among like-minded democracies, China's appeal to states seeking economic growth without political constraints is expanding its soft power across diverse regions to the detriment of liberal values.

The shared historical experience of colonialism at the hands of today's West (Euro/American) in Africa, Asia, and, to some extent, Latin America, and the Chinese model's economic miracle, which has delivered better results than the liberal democratic model, are the intervening variables. These regions, which form the Global South, do not have consolidated democracies and have a natural affinity toward China. Nevertheless, the two models of AI governance have a positive impact on ethical use, standardization, public perception, and innovation despite facing implementation issues, compliance challenges, and controversy over ethical issues and power relations between states. To overcome these challenges, persistent dialogue and collaboration between the US and China will be critical for establishing universally acceptable governance frameworks amidst the rapid development and application of AI technologies.

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