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# EXPERTS TAKE

## “Why we should cooperate with China on AI regulation”

### An Interview with Tom Abram

Tom Abram is a Research Fellow at the Foundation for Strategic Research (FRS). His work focuses on the foreign and security policy of China and Taiwan, strategic stability and deterrence in Northeast Asia, and the intersection of emerging technologies and national security. Abram is also a PhD candidate at the Centre for International Studies (CERI) at Sciences Po/CNRS under the supervision of Dr Stéphanie Balme, where he examines China’s role in the emerging global governance of artificial intelligence. He holds an MSc in China in Comparative Perspective from the London School of Economics (LSE) and an MPhil in International Relations from Sciences Po-Paris.



## Foreword

Maud Descamps

Artificial intelligence has rapidly emerged as one of the defining geopolitical, economic, and technological issues of the twenty-first century. Beyond transforming economies and societies, AI is increasingly shaping global power relations, industrial competitiveness, information control, and national security. As governments race to develop and regulate these technologies, the question of who defines the rules, standards, and norms governing AI has become a matter of growing strategic importance. In this context, China has positioned itself not only as a leading AI power, but also as an increasingly influential actor in global debates surrounding AI regulation, ethics, and technical standards.

China's approach to AI governance must be understood within the broader context of its strategic planning framework and long-term technological ambitions. Artificial intelligence was identified as a key priority in the 14th Five-Year Plan (2021–2025), which emphasized technological self-reliance, digital infrastructure, and leadership in emerging technologies as central pillars of China's modernization strategy. More recently, AI governance and technological security have featured prominently in high-level Party discussions surrounding preparations for the next development cycle and broader debates on "high-quality development." During recent Politburo meetings and Central Committee discussions, Chinese leaders have repeatedly stressed the importance of developing "safe, reliable, and controllable" artificial intelligence while ensuring the "healthy and orderly development" of the sector. These discussions reflect Beijing's dual ambition: accelerating

innovation and strategic competitiveness while maintaining political stability, social cohesion, and Party control over rapidly evolving technologies.

At the same time, China is seeking to shape international AI governance through initiatives such as the Global AI Governance Initiative, increased engagement in international standardization bodies, and the global expansion of Chinese digital infrastructure and AI technologies. These developments carry significant implications not only for China's domestic governance model, but also for Europe and the broader international community as they navigate questions of technological dependence, digital sovereignty, security, and regulatory coordination.

In this interview, Tom Abram discusses the evolution of China's domestic AI regulatory framework, the political and strategic logic underpinning Beijing's governance approach, and China's growing role in global AI governance initiatives. The conversation also explores the opportunities and limitations of EU-China cooperation on AI governance, highlighting both areas of potential convergence, such as technical safety and content labelling, and deeper normative divergences regarding state authority, individual rights, and technological sovereignty.

Conducted by Loke Sandvall, Katja Pomortseva, and Felicia Kämpe, this interview is divided into three parts from domestic to an international perspective. The exchange offers important insight into how China views AI not merely as a technological tool, but as a central component of economic modernization, political governance, and international influence.

## China's domestic AI regulation

**Loke Sandvall:** The legal landscape of China's domestic AI regulation can be difficult to navigate. For non-experts, what are the key laws or policies one should understand to grasp China's national approach to AI regulation?

**Tom Abram:** I think what is interesting to see is that there is a growing concern in China, whether it is among experts or authorities, about safe, controllable, and trustworthy AI, and risk associated with AI, and the need for governance then, which is interesting, which is notable. And for instance, I think as early as 2018, Xi Jinping, in a speech quite well known on AI, said that China must ensure safe, reliable, and controllable AI. And I think it really gained momentum ever since within the Chinese authorities and so on. So, to understand maybe governance in AI, I think the first question is, who regulates? I see three main actors. One is regulation, per se. The other is more about ethics. And the last is more about standardization. The major agency in charge of regulation is the Cyberspace Administration of China, which have issued the major regulations so far on AI. The other is the Ministry of Science and Technology, especially on ethics, requiring organizations to set up ethics review committees. Then there's the Standardization Administration of China, leading the work on national standards.

**Sandvall:** What are some key laws or policies?

**Abram:** The Chinese governance of AI has been quite developed. Contrary to the EU, the Chinese have tried to put forward specific regulations to tackle specific problems. There are basically five, six major regulations. The first one in 2021 was

addressing the question of algorithms, especially recommendation algorithms. Then in 2022, a second on generated content, in the context of deep-fakes, requiring labels to be put on deep-fakes. Then 2023, another regulation focusing on algorithms, content, and data, in the context of the rise of chatbots, ensuring that the data is true and accurate, and introducing licensing regimes for AI models.

And I think the two last ones are interesting, both in 2025. One requires most generated content to be labeled, including visible labels and metadata. And another draft addresses AI companions and chatbots, pushing providers to strengthen the protection of minors and restrict harmful content.

So, the general idea is that this is very dynamic since 2021, tackling different specific topics. Some experts have been pushing for a national AI law, and in 2023 the government announced that it would propose a draft for a national AI law.

**Sandvall:** What factors have shaped the choice of starting with vertical regulation, and what advantages does this model offer?

**Abram:** I think there are different things. First, there is a legal culture. They often regulate by targeting very specific problems, and then later try to integrate it into a broader framework.

I think it's also related to the objectives of China in regulating AI, which is not necessarily to protect the citizens, per se, but first and foremost to maintain social stability and cohesion, prevent social incidents, and maintain CCP control over information. This drives them to tackle very specific problems perceived as threats, such as

deepfakes or chatbots. So I think that's why it tends to have vertical specific regulations. But it doesn't mean they will stay like this.

On the advantages, it's hard to say. But the interesting thing with the Chinese model is that they are quite effective in targeting real problems, like deepfakes, and regulating them upfront. The EU tackles broader risks instead. From the Chinese perspective, this helps maintain stability, control information, and follow the dynamic evolution of AI and its applications. So many different problems emerge quickly, and this way is perceived as a useful tool to address that dynamic ecosystem.

**Sandvall:** Is manpower or population size a factor?

**Abram:** I don't think they perceive it like this. The implementation of regulations is actually complex. Enforcement is handled at different levels, but centrally coordinated by the Cyberspace Administration. I don't think demographics play a big role, but the size of the AI ecosystem adds difficulty. The registry system

for algorithms and AI models is also a way to control and understand what is being developed and to keep a hand on this dynamic ecosystem.

**Sandvall:** How do policies balance innovation and risk? Is development prioritized?

**Abram:** I think they officially say that they don't want to oppose regulation and development. They are trying to find a balance, but AI is clearly seen as a key area for development and competition, especially with the U.S. Development is a top priority, but they try not to put too much pressure on innovation. Programs like AI Plus focus on applications and deployment.

At the same time, concerns about social impact and labor are significant. These issues are regularly discussed, including with international partners. The impact on labor and social stability is a major concern, linked to the CCP's focus on cohesion. China's economic model is transforming, and AI will play a big role. They want this transition to be as smooth as possible, creating opportunities while reducing negative impacts.

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## China's ambitions to shape global AI governance

**Katja Pomortseva:** In recent years, China has become more active in global AI governance debates. In 2025, it proposed a Global AI Governance Plan emphasizing international cooperation on using “AI for good,” and the provision of open-source technologies to developing countries. What do these diplomatic efforts reveal about China’s vision for reshaping global AI governance norms?

**Abram:** During the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in 2023, they announced the Global AI Governance Initiative, which is very much related to the big initiatives they have put forward before—the Global Development Initiative first and foremost, and you can find links with the Global Security Initiative and Global Civilization Initiative. That is the context; it is one of the big shiny initiatives they have put out, even though they have not provided that much detail so far. But as with the GDI and GSI, it provides a broad framework through which to understand what they will do afterwards and through which they can frame all of their initiatives on global AI governance, which are manifold because they have tried to shape and to be active in the global AI governance discussion through different strategies. So, you have that initiative, which is a framework basically.

They also try to put China at the core of the global debate on AI governance by supporting the World AI Conference in Shanghai. China really wants to make this a major global event for AI governance, and the 2024 edition was really a step up in ambition, as you can see in the Chinese and international attendance and the coverage. For the first time, they brought the premier, Li

Qiang, for the opening speech, and they proposed the Shanghai Declaration, issued a year after the Bletchley Declaration. They really try to shape the governance discussion from China, for instance, by organizing high-level meetings to discuss AI governance - and it is also a way for China to put forward its AI standards and shape standardization of AI.

The BRICS have been very active on AI, pushed by China. They talked about the ethics of AI, and in the leaders’ meeting in 2025 they put forward a statement on global governance of AI, talking about AI for the SDGs and responsible AI. China is using BRICS to push forward the idea that it supports the Global South and champions its inclusion, notably at the UN level, but not only. For instance, in 2024 China and Zambia co-launched the Group of Friends on AI capacity-building at the UN, one of many informal coalitions fostering dialogue on these topics.

At the Shanghai High-Level Meeting on Global AI Governance, they put forward the idea of establishing an international-level agency on AI governance in Shanghai, especially targeting Global South countries, but more broadly as well. One objective is to shape the global AI governance debate by pushing notions like “AI for good,” which they have promoted for a long time, a people-centered approach to AI governance, and ideas like building a community of shared future for mankind in the AI field.

Standardization is another aspect we tend to forget, but the Chinese are very active in global AI standardization, pushing their standards and norms actively, and the US does as well. This is one of the last global platforms they both invest

heavily in. So, it is multi-pronged; they are very active and take different approaches within the Global AI Governance Initiative framework.

As for objectives, they try to shape global norms and regulations aligned with their interests, so they do not threaten regime security or the core interests of the CCP and China. For instance, avoiding being targeted by human rights-based restrictions. They present themselves as a responsible power in AI, a champion of multilateralism and multilateral governance of AI, and South-South cooperation. Another objective is to support their status as a big power, a tech power- they talk a lot about that and want to present themselves as a power shaping the global discussion. So, I see these four big objectives; we could discuss them further as I am still working on this, but as far as I can see, these are the big objectives for the CCP on the global stage.

**Pomortseva:** Through initiatives like the Digital Silk Road, China offers technical assistance and data security systems to developing countries. What implications might this have for Western efforts to promote shared standards for ethical AI?

**Abram:** As with other digital technologies, there is a clear question—one we now understand quite well—of exporting services and tools abroad through the Belt and Road Initiative, but not only to countries of the Global South, also to Europe,

and the question of what they carry in terms of values, usage, and economic influence. As far as AI is concerned, we can see strategies by LLM providers, probably supported by the government but also driven by economic objectives, trying to propose cheap solutions to the Global South, especially in Africa.

As far as I remember, some smaller startups like “the four tigers” have tried to redirect their market out of China and sell practical solutions to African countries, so there is a big projection of these companies and these tools abroad. As you said, the Digital Silk Road is still one of the big policies of Xi Jinping’s CCP, and it goes through this, and as I said, the Global AI Governance Initiative was proposed during the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, which also means something.

Then there are questions of standards; they try to shape standards, and to shape standards you also need other countries and other societies to use your tools, then you can shape standards and norms. As for ethics, Chinese actors also think a lot about ethics, and they say they want to cooperate with us; of course, we do not necessarily have the same approach, but I think there are things we also agree on regarding ethics. So there are questions of promoting specific ethical perspectives through the export of AI solutions abroad, but we also need to engage China on ethics and to increase dialogue on

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ethical questions beyond what is happening. UNESCO and others work on this to some extent, but we need to make it larger.

**Pomortseva:** As China emerges as a pivotal supplier of AI infrastructure and foundational models, while the EU remains structurally dependent on extraterritorial technologies, to what extent does this asymmetry constrain Europe's strategic autonomy in negotiating AI governance norms with Beijing?

**Abram:** Our dependence on extraterritorial technologies, whether hardware, software, or components necessary to make the hardware function, is obviously a big concern, and I think the EU has in recent months been quite

aware of that. We are dependent on the U.S. and on China in several aspects, and that is a constraint on our autonomy and a constraint on how we approach governance. The question of governing AI has been on the table, and governance of cyberspace in general has been a topic of discussion and negotiation with the U.S., and the U.S. has not always been happy with our regulations. We can see that sometimes our dependency on the U.S. in some aspects has an impact on what we can do in our regulation, and a couple of months ago the EU Commission proposed to postpone the application of some aspects of the EU AI Act because of competitiveness concerns, but also because questions of dependencies chime in.

## EU-China cooperation on AI

**Felicia Kämpe:** Some scholars have called for a high-level EU-China dialogue on AI governance. From your perspective, should cooperation be deepened in this area? If so, what benefits and drawbacks would this entail?

**Tom Abram:** Being French, I'm looking at this question from the French perspective regarding what to cooperate with China on, especially in a context of major trade dependencies. As Macron said, balancing economic relations with China is a question of "life or death"<sup>1</sup> for European industries. My point is, that AI is one of the domains where we should cooperate with China—for the sake of EU-China relations but also for the sake of AI governance, i.e. taking control of AI in our societies.

Climate change has been another classical topic

of cooperation, and I think AI should be as well, for several reasons. Notably, the EU and China both are recognized leaders in AI regulations in different ways, and China has expressed willingness to cooperate with Europe on some aspects of AI regulation along with taking an interest in our EU AI Act.

At the same time, Europe shouldn't be naive to the potential risks that AI interdependencies may pose, e.g. in regard to autonomy and data security. Risk is inherent in all AI models. Apart from social consequences, misuse is especially concerning, such as the spread of misinformation or AI-enabled crimes like cyber-attacks. There are many risks related to AI, and these should be dealt with globally, which is why I think we should cooperate with China on AI regulation.

<sup>1</sup> This is a quotation attributed to French President Emmanuel Macron, as reported by Tom Nicholson in *Politico*, "Europe must rethink China strategy, Macron says — and China needs to help," December 7, 2025, <https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-china-emmanuel-macron-foreign-investment-trade/>.

**Kämpe:** Despite differing normative priorities, such as the EU's emphasis on individual rights and China's focus on state sovereignty, both sides share concerns about technical safety and reliability. In which areas do you see the greatest potential for practical EU-China cooperation?

**Abram:** I think there are several domains where we could engage with China in dialogue. The EU could draw inspiration from China in some areas, e.g. their regulations on deep-fakes and content labeling. China's algorithm registry is another interesting tool of governance which could be useful in national governments in Europe too, although we don't need to apply it the same way.

**Kämpe:** What are the major obstacles hindering cooperation?

**Abram:** There are several obstacles, primarily rooted in our differing approaches to AI governance and perceived discrepancies in values.

Firstly, the Chinese approach has been framed in the EU as a cautionary example of non-regulation, with AI-based surveillance favored over freedom and other rights. The Union's AI Act specifically condemns facial recognition and social scoring, which have become common practices in China. For this reason, Europe, in the past few years, has been keener to cooperate with like-minded countries like Japan and Canada.

Secondly, economic and strategic competition

are obvious obstacles. There is the idea of rivalry, implying that the EU needs to compete against China and the U.S. to be considered successful in innovation.

A third difficulty is that some countries within the EU, like France and Germany, don't necessarily want to regulate AI as it would mean losing competitive edge. Macron, for example, has insisted that the EU is overregulating and underinvesting, by consequence missing out on AI as an economic opportunity.

I think this brings about a broader difference which I frame as the "rule of law" versus the "rule by law". The EU's primary concern is to protect society and individual rights from intrusion, but the Chinese are doing differently. They don't want to protect society from the state, instead they want to empower the state to protect society, and more specifically protect China's social and political order from risks related to AI misuse by non-state actors.

**Kämpe:** Finally, is there anything else you would like to add?

**Abram:** We haven't touched upon the question of military AI governance. China is intertwining AI in its military in many ways—as are the U.S. and the EU. It is a complicated and sensitive question, but we need to push for more dialogue and regulation, especially regarding AI in the nuclear domain.

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## Afterword

### Maud Descamps

The interview highlights the complexity and dynamism of China's approach to AI governance. Rather than pursuing a single comprehensive framework from the outset, Beijing has adopted a highly adaptive and sector-specific regulatory model, seeking to address emerging risks while simultaneously supporting rapid technological development. This reflects broader features of China's governance model, where regulation is closely linked to questions of social stability, political control, and strategic competition.

At the international level, China's growing activism in AI governance demonstrates that the contest surrounding AI is not limited to technological capabilities alone, but increasingly concerns the power to shape global norms, standards, and institutional frameworks. Through initiatives such as the Global AI Governance Initiative, the Digital Silk Road, and active participation in international standardization bodies, China is positioning itself as a central actor in defining the future governance architecture of AI.

For the European Union and its members and allies, the discussion underscores both opportunities and challenges. While important differences remain regarding human rights, surveillance, and the role of the state, there are also areas where practical cooperation may prove both necessary and beneficial—particularly in fields such as AI safety, content authenticity, technical standards, and the governance of emerging risks. At the same time, growing technological dependencies and strategic competition complicate the EU's pursuit of digital sovereignty and autonomous governance capacity.

Ultimately, the interview suggests that AI governance will increasingly become a key arena of geopolitical negotiation. Navigating this landscape will require not only technological competitiveness, but also sustained dialogue, institutional innovation, and international cooperation capable of addressing the profound societal and security implications of AI development, including in sensitive domains such as military and nuclear applications.