Artificial Intelligence in China’s Domestic Governance and Foreign Policy

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1. Introduction

In March 2026, China's National People's Congress approved the 15th Five-Year Plan (2026-2030), a document that mentions artificial intelligence over 50 times. For comparison, the previous five-year plan referenced the term just six times (Flanders-China Chamber of Commerce, 2026). This increase is not just rhetorical: it signals a broader shift, as AI has ceased to be one priority among many in Beijing's planning architecture and has become, as analysts at Stanford's DigiChina (2026) project put it, “the organizing logic for a broad industrial transformation.” The transformation in question is not only economic, however; it is political, and it is both inward and outward-facing.

One of the most important questions in international politics today is how great powers are integrating artificial intelligence into governance and statecraft. In China's case, the answer reveals a coherent, if contested, project: using AI as a dual-purpose instrument on one hand to domestically reinforce social control and enhance governance efficiency, and on the other to externally project influence, export norms, and compete for technological leadership in a world increasingly defined by the politics of data and computation (Lee, 2018).

Understanding how China uses AI goes beyond technology policy analysis. It is a window into how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) conceives power, legitimacy, and sovereignty in the 21st century, and into how Beijing intends to shape the broader international order as AI becomes the defining arena of geopolitical competition. This article examines both dimensions in turn: first tracing how AI is deployed domestically across surveillance, governance efficiency, and information control, then analyzing its role in China's foreign policy through infrastructure export, military competition, and the global contest over AI governance norms, before turning to the tensions that have arisen between these two agendas.

2. The Strategic Architecture of China's AI Ambition

China's AI trajectory did not begin with the 15th Five-Year Plan. Its roots lie in the 2017 New Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan (AIDP), a State Council directive that set out an explicit national ambition: for China to become the world leader in AI by 2030, with AI contributing one trillion yuan to the economy and serving as a foundational pillar of national security and military modernization (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2017). The AIDP was not a conventional industrial policy document. As Kania (2017) has argued, it reflected a deliberate blurring of the line between civilian and military AI development. Chinese planners often use the term "military-civil fusion" (军民融合) to describe this phenomenon, as it creates a framework in which commercial AI research and defense applications are treated as parts of a single, integrated national project.

The key institutional actors in this project are a combination of state agencies and tech champions operating under close party oversight. The Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) and the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) serve as the primary regulatory and coordinating bodies, while companies such as Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent, and Huawei function not as independent market actors, but as what one analyst described as "policy instruments": entities whose research agendas, data assets, and international expansion serve national strategic objectives (Lee, 2018). This is a fundamentally different model from the market-led AI development seen in the United States, and it shapes both the pace and the character of China's AI deployment.

The 15th Five-Year Plan marks a qualitative shift in this architecture. As Stanford's DigiChina Forum (2026) observed, the plan is "much more explicit about breaking bottlenecks, securing strategic initiative, and reorganizing state support around resilient control of critical technologies and rapid deployment at scale." It was drafted in the wake of sweeping US semiconductor export controls imposed between 2022 and 2025, controls that cut off Chinese firms from the most advanced chips and forced a decisive pivot toward domestic substitution. The plan introduces a standalone AI+ action plan, sets a target for digital industry value-added to reach 12.5 percent of GDP, and, crucially, frames AI not just as an economic driver, but as inseparable from national security and geopolitical positioning (Caster, 2026).

What makes the new Five-Year Plan especially significant for foreign policy analysis is its explicit ambition to shape the global governance environment for AI. The plan calls for China to “play a bigger role in setting global standards for AI governance, the digital economy, and outer space activities,” including the establishment of a global organization for AI cooperation and the creation of AI collaboration platforms under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and within the Global South (Caster, 2026). In short, the plan does not treat AI as a domestic policy matter: it treats it as the organizing principle of China's next phase of international engagement.

3. Domestic Policy

3.1. Social Surveillance and the Security State

The most visible and most documented dimension of China's domestic AI deployment is surveillance (Mozur, 2018). China has constructed what is arguably the world's most extensive AI-powered monitoring infrastructure, integrating facial recognition, biometric data, and predictive analytics into a real-time monitoring system for its 1.4 billion citizens. The flagship programs known as Skynet (天网) and Sharp Eyes (雪亮工程) link millions of cameras across urban and rural areas into centralized command platforms capable of identifying individuals, tracking their movements, and flagging anomalous behavior (Qian, et al, 2022).

Nowhere has this architecture been more comprehensively deployed than in Xinjiang. Feldstein (2021), in his landmark study The Rise of Digital Repression, documents how Chinese authorities have “brought together mass surveillance, censorship, DNA collection, and artificial intelligence to enforce their directives” in the region, constructing what he describes as a system of repression of unprecedented technological sophistication. Byler (2022), in Terror Capitalism, goes further, framing Xinjiang as a “laboratory”; a space where surveillance technologies are tested, refined, and normalized before being scaled elsewhere. The collection of DNA from the region's entire Uyghur population, combined with AI-powered analysis of mobile devices, financial transactions, social networks, and movement patterns, represents a qualitative leap in what state control can achieve when machine learning is applied to mass data collection.

Human Rights Watch researcher Maya Wang (2019) has extensively documented how this infrastructure extends beyond Xinjiang into predictive policing applications across China: systems that use historical data and behavioral modelling to flag individuals for pre-emptive intervention before any crime or protest has occurred. The logic of predictive control sits at the heart of what critics call China's “techno-authoritarianism”: a model in which the state uses computational power to anticipate and suppress dissent, rather than simply respond to it.

3.2. Governance Efficiency and the “Smart State”

China's domestic AI agenda is not limited to surveillance. Beijing has invested heavily in AI applications that enhance governance efficiency, and serve a secondary function of reinforcing CCP legitimacy, by demonstrating the party's capacity to deliver modern, data-driven public services (The State Council of the People's republic of China, 2024). Smart city initiatives now operate in dozens of Chinese municipalities, integrating AI into traffic management, environmental monitoring, healthcare triage, and public service delivery. AI-assisted judicial decision-making tools have been introduced across the court system, ostensibly to improve consistency and reduce corruption in sentencing. Urban management platforms aggregate real-time data from sensors, cameras, and citizen-facing apps to enable faster administrative response to infrastructure failures, public health incidents, and social unrest (Ryan et al, 2025).

The 15th Five-Year Plan targets AI penetration across 90 percent of the economy by 2030, and mandates integration of AI into government services, healthcare, education, and manufacturing (OpenTools, 2025). This ambition serves a dual political purpose. On one level, it is about genuine modernization, reducing administrative friction, improving resource allocation, and managing the complexities of governing an economy at China's scale. On another level, it is a performance of competence: a demonstration to both domestic and international audiences that the CCP's model of state-directed development can outperform Western market-based alternatives in deploying transformative technology at scale.

3.3. Information Control and Narrative Management

A third and increasingly consequential dimension of domestic AI deployment concerns the information environment. The Great Firewall, China's system of internet censorship, has evolved from a primarily manual moderation system into an AI-

powered real-time content filtering architecture capable of processing billions of daily interactions across platforms like WeChat, Weibo, and Douyin. Natural language processing models identify and suppress sensitive keywords, images, and video content with a speed and scale that would be impossible for human moderators alone (McLaughlin, 2026).

The 15th Five-Year Plan's cybersecurity section, as analyzed by Caster (2026) and published in The Diplomat, “doubles down on the securitization of information,” calling for improvements to regulations on internet content management and a crackdown on online illegal activities, language that, in the Chinese regulatory context, encompasses political dissent, foreign news, and unapproved historical narratives. The amended Cybersecurity Law, which entered into force in January 2026, encourages the use of AI specifically to improve what authorities term “cybersecurity”; a concept that, in an authoritarian context, could provide a legal basis for restrictive information controls in the name of political security (*ibid*).

AI is also increasingly deployed on the generative side of information control, not just to filter unwanted content, but to produce approved narratives at scale. State media organizations use AI tools to generate news articles, social media content, and video material that amplifies CCP messaging (Tang & Castillo, 2026; Bandurski, 2026). The Cyberspace Administration of China has issued guidelines on generative AI that require models operating in China to adhere to “socialist core values” and produce content aligned with official narratives on sensitive topics including Taiwan, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, and Tiananmen (Bajarin, 2025). The information environment, in other words, is being shaped from both ends: AI removes what the party does not want said, and produces more of what it does.

4. Foreign Policy

4.1. The Digital Silk Road and the Export of AI Infrastructure

The most operationally significant vehicle for China's international AI engagement is the Digital Silk Road (DSR), a sub-initiative of the Belt and Road Initiative launched in 2015. Between 2017 and 2023, Chinese state and private companies invested, loaned, or contracted over US$22 billion in digital infrastructure under the DSR framework, spanning telecommunications, AI-enabled surveillance, and cloud computing across 106 countries (Kurlantzick & West, 2020). The DSR has encouraged

Chinese technology companies to expand their commercial interests in emerging markets while simultaneously advancing Beijing's strategic goals of norm-setting, market capture, and geopolitical alignment (Gordon & Nouwens, 2023).

The infrastructure dimension of the DSR is anchored by a small number of dominant Chinese firms. Huawei alone is involved in 25 datacenter and e-governance projects across Africa, and AI surveillance systems developed by Chinese companies are deployed in at least 13 African countries (Patil & Gupta, 2025). Major vendors, including ZTE, Alibaba Cloud, Hikvision, and CloudWalk, supply products ranging from facial recognition cameras and 5G base stations to integrated city operations centers across Southeast Asia, Central Asia, the Middle East, and beyond (Reddy, 2024; Gordon & Nouwens, 2023).

The DSR's political logic is compounding. Once embedded in a country's critical digital infrastructure, Chinese hardware and software can create long-term technological dependencies, sustained through maintenance contracts, operator training, and data-sharing arrangements. Accordingly, it could give Beijing ongoing leverage in bilateral relationships (Kurlantzick & West, 2020). A particularly illustrative case is that of Zimbabwe, where Chinese company CloudWalk signed a strategic partnership for domestic implementation of surveillance recognition software in exchange for receiving the biometric data of millions of Zimbabwean citizens. The transaction captures a pattern: AI infrastructure as a political bargaining chip, in which developing country governments trade data sovereignty for access to technology they cannot afford to build domestically (Williams, 2024).

It is worth noting, as Feldstein (2023) cautions in his research, that the relationship between Chinese technology export and deliberate authoritarian diffusion is more complex than the simple grand-strategy narrative suggests. In his fieldwork, government officials in recipient countries cited the low cost of Chinese technology as the primary driver of procurement decisions, not ideological alignment with Beijing's governance model. This does not, however, diminish the systemic effect: whatever the motivation for individual procurement decisions, the cumulative result is that Chinese AI surveillance infrastructure is becoming the default option for governments that lack the resources to source alternatives, with predictable consequences for civil liberties and political pluralism.

4.2. Military AI and Strategic Competition

China's foreign policy AI ambitions are not limited to infrastructure export. The military-civil fusion doctrine that underlies the AIDP ensures that advances made by commercial AI firms are available to, and often developed in explicit collaboration with, the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Kania's (2017) analysis of Chinese military AI doctrine identifies autonomous systems, intelligence processing, and cyber operations as the primary domains in which Beijing is seeking AI-enabled military advantages. AI is understood within PLA strategic thinking not simply as a tool for tactical improvement, but as a potentially transformative factor in the nature of warfare itself; one that could allow China to offset US advantages in platform-based military power through superior data processing, decision speed, and autonomous capability (McFaul, et al. 2025; Kania, 2020).

The US-China chip war is the most direct expression of how central AI has become to the bilateral strategic competition. Washington's semiconductor export controls, imposed in waves between 2022 and 2025, were explicitly designed to prevent Chinese firms from accessing the advanced chips required to train frontier AI models; in effect, an attempt to create a technological ceiling on Chinese AI development. Beijing's response has been to massively accelerate domestic chip development, with the 15th Five-Year Plan mandating a minimum annual increase of 7 percent in R&D spending, and designating advanced semiconductors as a top-priority sector (Flanders-China Chamber of Commerce, 2026; Caster, 2026). By early 2026, Chinese GPU firms, including Biren, Moore Threads, and Enflame, had all listed on domestic capital markets, signaling the state's commitment to building a domestic semiconductor ecosystem capable of sustaining AI development even under continued export restrictions.

4.3. Global AI Governance

Another important dimension of China's international AI engagement is its campaign to shape the global governance architecture for AI; to ensure that the norms, standards, and institutions that govern AI development and deployment internationally reflect Chinese interests and preferences, rather than those of the liberal democratic bloc led by the United States (Lukasz, 2025).

China has pursued this agenda through multiple channels. In various UN forums, Chinese delegations have consistently advocated for AI governance frameworks that emphasize state sovereignty over individual rights, reject extraterritorial regulation, and treat content moderation and national security as legitimate grounds for restricting AI applications (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People's Republic of China, 2024; Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations, 2025).

Tobin's (2018) analysis of Xi Jinping's vision for global governance transformation identifies this norm-setting campaign as a core component of Beijing's strategy to build a “community of common destiny in cyberspace,” a concept that, stripped of its diplomatic packaging, means a world in which authoritarian approaches to internet and AI governance are treated as legitimate alternatives to liberal democratic frameworks.

The 15th Five-Year Plan makes these ambitions explicit: it calls for the establishment of a global organization for AI cooperation - a proposal that, if realized, would create a China-anchored institutional counterweight to Western-led AI governance bodies, and of the promotion of Chinese AI governance frameworks specifically among the Global South countries (Flanders-China Chamber of Commerce, 2026). This is consistent with what Feldstein (2023) identifies as “parallel modeling”: demonstrating the benefits of censorship and surveillance tools and thereby making their use more attractive to other countries. The pattern echoes China's successful campaigns in 5G and high-speed rail: establish the domestic standard first, build scale around it, then export it as the de facto international norm.

The concept of “algorithmic sovereignty,” the idea that states have the right to govern AI systems within their borders free from external interference, has become a cornerstone of China's diplomatic messaging on AI. It is a framing that simultaneously defends China's domestic information controls, validates similar approaches by partner governments, and delegitimizes Western criticism of AI-enabled repression as a form of geopolitical interference, rather than as a principled rights concern (Taylor, 2025).

5. Domestic vs. Foreign AI Agenda

Despite its apparent coherence, China's AI strategy also faces internal tensions. These tensions are not peripheral: they cut to the heart of whether China's dual-purpose AI strategy can succeed simultaneously on both fronts.

The most visible tension is reputational. The same surveillance apparatus that Beijing deploys domestically generates significant political costs in its efforts to build international AI partnerships with countries beyond the authoritarian bloc. The Xinjiang documentation, compiled by Human Rights Watch, investigative journalists, and academic researchers, has made Chinese AI firms synonymous, in Western policy discourse, with repression-enabling technology (Feldstein, 2021; Maya, 2019). Hikvision and Dahua, two of China's largest surveillance equipment manufacturers, have been added to the US Commerce Department's Entity List, restricting their access to American technology and limiting their ability to serve markets where US component suppliers remain critical (UHRP, 2023). The reputational damage extends beyond specific firms, and has energized democratic governments to develop regulatory and procurement frameworks designed to exclude Chinese AI infrastructure from sensitive sectors.

The second tension is technological. Western semiconductor export controls have created real constraints on China's ability to develop frontier AI models, the large-scale systems that require massive computational resources to train. This is not just an economic inconvenience: it affects the quality of AI products that Chinese firms can offer in international markets, and limits the ambition of domestic AI applications that depend on the most capable models (DigiChina, 2026). The 15th Five-Year Plan's emphasis on technological self-reliance is in part an acknowledgement that the chip war has imposed a structural handicap on Chinese AI development that cannot be quickly overcome, even with state-directed investment at scale (OpenTools, 2026).

A third tension, perhaps the most theoretically interesting, concerns the credibility of China's international AI governance messaging. Beijing presents itself as a responsible stakeholder in global AI governance, advocating for frameworks that are inclusive of developing countries and respectful of national sovereignty (Permanent Mission of the People's Republic of China to the United Nations, 2025). But this framing sits uneasily with a domestic reality in which AI serves explicitly as an

instrument of repression against ethnic and political minorities (Feldstein, 2021; Byler, 2022).

Beijing manages this contradiction through a combination of rhetorical strategies and selective engagement. It cultivates partnerships with governments that share an interest in sovereignty-protective AI governance frameworks and have their own reasons to resist Western human rights criticism. In addition, it exploits the absence of a compelling alternative. In a world where the United States withdrew from the Paris AI summit declaration in February 2025, Beijing's framing of itself as a development partner for the Global South carries more weight than it would in an environment of coherent Western leadership (Au, 2025).

6. Conclusion

China’s use of AI in domestic and foreign policy goes beyond technology. As this article has shown, the same logic animates both its domestic and foreign AI agendas: AI is not a neutral tool, but a political instrument wielded to consolidate control at home and project influence abroad. More broadly, it reflects how the CCP conceptualizes the relationship between the state, the citizen, and the international order in an era defined by computational power. Domestically, AI has become the infrastructure of a new form of political control; one that is not merely repressive in the traditional sense, but anticipatory, preemptive, and deeply integrated into the fabric of everyday life. Internationally, AI has become the leading edge of China's ambition to reshape the global order; to embed Chinese technology, norms, and dependencies into the infrastructure of other states in ways that make the world more hospitable to Chinese interests and the Chinese model.

The 15th Five-Year Plan represents the clearest articulation yet of this dual ambition and of the scale of resources Beijing is prepared to commit to it. AI is mentioned more than 50 times not because Chinese planners are technologically excited, but because they understand that leadership in AI is inseparable from leadership in the 21st century's defining contests: over economic productivity, military power, information control, and the norms that govern them all.

It remains unclear whether the international community will develop governance frameworks capable of engaging with this reality. Treating China's AI agenda as simply

a technology policy challenge, to be addressed through export controls, procurement restrictions, or technical standards competition, risks missing its fundamentally political character. The more consequential question is whether liberal democracies can articulate a coherent and attractive alternative vision for AI governance; one that is not just restrictive, but genuinely inclusive of the Global South, and that offers governments an AI development pathway that does not require trading civil liberties for connectivity. Until that alternative is credible and accessible, Beijing's offer will remain compelling to enough of the world to matter.

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