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EDITED BY
Carlos Leone,
Open University, Portugal

REVIEWED BY
Simant Shankar Bharti,
VIZJA University, Poland
Chamila Liyanage,
Centre for the Study of Emerging Security
Threats (CSEST), Australia

*CORRESPONDENCE
Dora Papadopoulou
✉ dpapadopoulou@elgs.eu

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Geopolitics: AI and China; enabling ideology?

Dora Papadopoulou*

European Public Law Organisation (EPLO), European Law and Governance School, Athens, Greece

Introduction: The use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has changed our understanding of political and social reality. Only recently has AI been brought up in the context of Governance, primarily in relation to the development of National Strategies.

Methods: A conceptual and interpretive analysis of China's strategic AI documents (MIC25 and AIDP 2017) is conducted, situating them within the country's political and ideological framework to explore AI's role as an ideological instrument reshaping global power dynamics.

Results: AI has a transformative character, which is a global challenge. While approaching it as performativity or using a human-centric approach has altered the dynamics, China is undoubtedly setting the benchmark for AI. Analysis of China's key strategic documents shows that AI is embedded within a Governance model focused on centralized control, ideological alignment and social stability, using technological innovation to reinforce political legitimacy and contest liberal governance norms.

Discussion: This paper discusses the return of ideology in the context of geopolitics, highlighting China's use of AI as a key example of how it may shift the balance of power. Instead of using AI as an instrument, China mostly applies it as a means of enforcing a power model. China mainly relies on AI as a method to advance a model of power, rather than merely utilizing it as an instrument. As the world moves beyond the US-led liberal international order, the AI battle can be understood fundamentally as a battle of ideologies.

KEYWORDS

geopolitics, ideology, AI, China, MIC25, AI development plan (AIDP 2017)

Introduction

The use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is becoming a topic of increasing discussion in the scientific community worldwide. It goes without saying that the relationship between argumentation and political and Governance theories could not be left unchanged. In this regard, AI is associated with the function of National Strategies that have been formed in nearly all countries (Dutton, 2018), as well as its influence on citizen participation and the decision-making process. Furthermore, the claims that AI is being overvalued are not negligible (Fang et al., 2025; Goldman Sachs, 2024; Widder and Hicks, 2024). Adding the challenge of determining AI to this contributes to understanding the complexity and dynamics of the topic at hand. This is reflected by the global attempts to reach a consensual framework, which are also demonstrated by the adoption of National Strategies that incorporate normative and ethical elements.

These National Strategies have been put into action in the name of AI's influence, which has allowed the political dimension to play an active part and to raise a nation's standing in the world (Papadopoulou, 2023, 2024). These strategies aim to win over citizens' trust by establishing a framework for AI Governance that addresses potential concerns about its application. In that framework, good Governance now prioritizes AI integration, and private initiatives are no longer the only ones that play the most decisive role. Although the present research does not seek to provide an analytical theoretical approach on the concept of geopolitics, it integrates the impact of technological innovation, particularly AI, in redefining global power relations using its theoretical framework and settings. The

primary focus of this perspective is ideology as an analytical lens and AI is employed to promote alternative power models that oppose the liberal international order as well as an instrument of control and Governance. A brief introductory clarification of the term ideology, as it is intended in this context, is necessary to illuminate how it is applied, which is crucial to the current study.

The term “ideology” describes a systematic set of values, ideas and principles that influence how individuals and groups view, organize and react to outside factors. It is a framework that operates to exercise and justify power, authority and legitimacy rather than just being a theoretical concept (Freeden, 2003: p. 3). In particular, while authoritarian ideology stresses centralized control, state-led development and collective order, liberal ideology supports the rule of law, individual rights and market-driven policies (Weiss and Wallace, 2021). Recognizing this difference is crucial to understanding that AI is not merely a neutral tool but rather a mechanism that can be integrated into and used to promote particular ideological frameworks. Accordingly, this research considers ideology as an active element that influences political and institutional decisions and, in the end, reshapes the global power structure when addressing China’s strategic use of AI (Triolo et al., 2020). In the Chinese political system, ideology is an active tool for state control and geopolitical visibility rather than a passive set of beliefs. Ideology is used by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to maintain social harmony, preserve political legitimacy and direct the course of the country (Shambaugh, 2008). Xi Jinping New Era Socialism with Chinese Characteristics Thought, now constitutionally enshrined, is the ideological basis of China’s strategic plans and model of Governance (Xinhua, 2017; Gov.cn, 2017b).

Thus, the argumentation about AI Governance and how it will be perceived in regard to its potential uses have created a blurry representation of how decision-making centers will handle AI and which country will set the standard. Although the United States (US) and China are the primary players, the European Union (EU) has also taken appropriate action. The EU’s most recent effort—in 2024 (European Commission, 2024; EPRS, 2023)—to develop a regulatory framework aimed to address its boundaries and applications.

In order to map the aforementioned context of AI Governance, the current study uses China as a distinctive case study. The digital transformation, particularly through AI, offers—as China acknowledged early on—economic and military (Stango, 2024) developments, which are crucial drivers of influence on the global scene. At this level, the paper aims to discuss the key pillars—“Made in China”: MIC25 /中国制造2025 and “AI Development Plan: Development Plan of the New Generation of Artificial Intelligence 2017”/AIDP 2017. These strategies present AI development as a means of exporting a state-centric Governance paradigm and strengthening state power, in addition to being a tool for economic advancement (Zeng, 2022). In this way, China’s approach is part of an ideological effort that aims to show that, in contrast to liberal democratic models, centralized Governance is more effective and better. Since the CCP seeks to influence global AI and digital Governance standards through building coalitions, institutions and forums that reflect its own political values, this ideological consideration also weighs on China’s geopolitical pursuit (Cheng and Zeng, 2023). Within this framework, the paper will briefly

address how some core elements of these strategic plans have been implemented through the Social Credit System (SCS) to illustrate the process of realization (Wösler, 2023). At the same time, this analysis does not aim to argue for or against China’s desired structured position, but rather to highlight a different route taken at the political dimension through the ideological level, where the shift occurring at the level of international balances is evident. AI is transforming the global landscape, as its proper integration and instrumentalization turn it into a tool for reviving the West-East debate.

Therefore, the focus is on China as one of the major actors in the field of AI Governance, particularly regarding its use of AI as an instrument of political influence. However, what China brings to the surface, in my opinion, should be analyzed through a liberal perspective that goes beyond the boundaries of the American context. It is essential that China continues to participate in international summits—such as the Artificial Intelligence Action Summit in Paris (2025), the AI Seoul Summit (2024), and the AI Safety Summit at Bletchley Park (2023)—as well as to host and lead initiatives like the Wuzhen Summit (2024). Staying up to date on the latest innovations in this field and adapting AI principles to its specific context are equally important. Over the years, China has become increasingly integrated into the international scene and has played an important role, though it was not initially seen as an immediate threat. During Xi Jinping’s administration, this started to change, particularly after he envisioned AI as a tool for social and political action at all levels. The geopolitical narrative is updated in the name of technological and economic progress while staying true to the country’s values. China has therefore instrumentalized AI through concerted efforts that are undoubtedly not new. As early as 2014 (Gov.cn, 2015), China used technology and digital transformation in order to demonstrate the breadth of its capabilities, while its case raises controversial reactions, whether they have a positive or negative connotation.

Setting the research in perspective: a theoretical approach

Nowadays, there is a lot of interest in the debate concerning the AI revolution. Naturally, the dispute takes on different weight in the context of governance when the state’s regulatory role gains substantial ground through National Strategies. It is then that each country proceeds to a race for AI, while at the global level the reference indicates to the “AI Cold War” (Cai, 2025). The more each country advances in its effort to conquer AI, the more its advancements can influence geopolitical interests. Countries that recognized this dimension early on have focused their political efforts on controlling it even more effectively. Behind this political expediency—since there was a global consensus on the necessity of national action—there was the necessity to reduce the fear of its use and to operate under the cooperation of all stakeholders at the national level in the name of enhancing citizen participation. This will later be used to describe the incorporation of those values that support social stability.

Consequently, the definition of AI has been at the center of attention, since it needed to be approached based on a worldwide consensus. Depending on the perspective emphasized,

the understanding of AI is subject to variation. Concerns of transparency, bias, and accountability are raised by the argument over how this should be described as a set of data related to algorithm use. It is the broad argument on machine learning and data science. AI, on the other hand, has been defined by its social and economic effects, which are not always positive. In that framework, there are also two distinct aspects of AI that should be considered while attempting to fully understand it: AI as a definition for algorithms and AI as a metric for improving citizenship (Genicot, 2025; Gardenier et al., 2024).

It is also noteworthy that, as the concept of “AI” is explored, the human element is progressively less emphasized (Papadopoulou, 2023, 2024). Currently, the focus is on data-driven AI integration into reality while relating it to objectives and anticipated results. In this regard, AI is defined based on the level of autonomy and adaptability it reaches (OECD AI Policy Observatory, 2023). With this approach, it is also sought to emphasize the obligations of users in case of improper use of its applications. Therefore, this new definition aims to offer a more general understanding of AI, focusing on how its applications will be understood, in order to achieve a consensus for its meaning (Papadopoulou, 2024). In this context, the following question is to be answered: Governance of AI or/and Governance by AI? Whether the future is open, closed, free, or controlled may depend as much on the AI Governance as it does on political will.

In that sense, the term “Responsible AI” (Lu et al., 2024) is also connected to contemporary discussion in which methods and structures for modifying a National Strategy guarantee the incorporation of AI ethics principles (Bietti, 2019) under the broader aim of raising awareness. The normative and ethical dimensions of the use of AI are the subject of almost every discussion about it. In fact, the initiatives taken to regulate the decision-making by the decision-making centers in terms of the adoption of National Strategies are aimed at citizens to make informed decisions. The AI Governance creates new forms of risk and the main purpose of these strategies is to reduce them with an emphasis on social interactions and cooperation with international and non-international players in this direction. Under these circumstances, Global AI Governance has been transformed into an argument between competing perspectives and methods.

Thus, the link between Governance and AI is twofold: first, it deals with the conditions that AI can produce, and second, it involves the potential uses of AI. Different societies certainly take different approaches to this interaction. Undoubtedly, from a research perspective, it is viewed through the lens of “good” Governance in any setting. Good Governance is the element that unites these actions. Certainly, it has to be associated with instruments that would integrate public values in this context of Governance (Chohan and Jacobs, 2018; Madan and Ashok, 2023). It is essential to remember that the definition of “good Governance” varies greatly depending on the political system and is not universally accepted. China is categorized as an “authoritarian regime” by the Economist Intelligence Unit’s Democracy Index (EIU, 2024). The concept of “good Governance” in countries like China is inherently incompatible with liberal democratic ideals like pluralism, accountability and transparency. Conversely, it is based on state-centric concepts such as centralized authority, ideological commitment and political stability (Zeng, 2022).

Methodology

The methodology of this paper centers on the comprehension of the aforementioned argumentation in order to highlight the importance of the new geopolitical map where the players need to adapt. Geopolitical power struggles have social, ideological, and material components. In that context, the discussion about the return of geopolitics (Nickel, 2024; Leoni and Tzinieris, 2024) is interesting and, while related to the current debate, is an additional topic that consequently requires a different approach from the current setting. The present work will address the return of ideology in geopolitics, highlighting how China’s implementation of AI could potentially shift the balance of power. China is not simply adopting AI as an instrument but mostly as a means to impose a power model. I see the AI battle as an ideological battle because we are shifting away from the liberal (international) system established by the US.

Since World War II, the US has had a major impact on the liberal international order founded on the principles of multilateralism, the rule of law, individual rights, democratic governance and free markets (Ikenberry, 2018). It fosters a system of regulations where ensuring global stability is based on liberal democratic principles and international collaboration. This order has changed recently, though, due to the development of authoritarianism and democratic backsliding, with China leading the push for alternative governance norms (Diamond, 2015). China’s alternative is founded on the ideas of economic pragmatism, state sovereignty, centralized control, and a set of values that emphasize political conformity, stability and a collective mindset (Zeng et al., 2015). The CCP supports a form of Governance that challenges liberal notions of privacy, openness and freedom of speech by integrating technological advancement—including AI—with censorship, surveillance and political control mechanisms (Creemers, 2018). In line with a larger geopolitical shift, authoritarian governments are increasingly working together, exchanging technologies and supporting a multipolar global system that opposes Western domination (Feldstein, 2019). Understanding China’s AI strategy is necessary to analyze the ideological and strategic battle that is reshaping the global balance of power.

The Chinese government fosters a different system in which social harmony and control of the collective are prioritized over individual rights, rather than inclusive of public values in the liberal sense. Governance mechanisms like the SCS, which demonstrate how political compliance is incentivized and dissidence is sanctioned, operationalize the state’s ideological project (Creemers, 2018; Wösler, 2023). Writing a logic of control into governance, the CCP reconceives public trust through data regulation, censorship and surveillance. This is in line with what the Party calls “social Governance,” a perspective that imposes top-down control in attaining social order and cohesion. Therefore, it is necessary to comprehend the principles that underpin China’s AI strategy, which are represented in MIC25 and AIDP 2017, in the context of this particular ideological framework of China’s Governance mechanism (Triolo et al., 2020).

Through a conceptual and interpretive lens, the analysis addresses the political environment shaping these strategies by explicitly placing the texts within China’s political system

and ideological framework. This viewpoint makes it possible to recognize AI as an ideological instrument that is influenced by, reinforcing China's state-centric Governance model. Accordingly, within the methodological framework, it is only after the analysis of the selected texts that the concept of ideology is addressed—not in abstract or general terms, but in specific relation to these strategic texts and the context of China.

Even while China had started comparable attempts and incorporated them into its National Strategies as early as 2014, it was not until 2020 that the ideological foundations of these actions received substantial attention. This paper is designed to strengthen theoretical boundaries by concentrating on the Chinese example of comprehending Governance through its technological base rather than providing a comparative analysis of how the US understands China's actions. China has already changed course since the beginning of Xi Jinping's presidency in relation to the presidency of Hu Jintao and his predecessors (Clarke and Sussex, 2023), with ideology playing a key role in this shift. Ideology as a foundation follows both the official texts (as primary material) and its transfer to the strengthening of institutions.¹

Once the theoretical framework of the discussion has been determined, the limits and applicable AI perspectives will establish the boundaries and define the key connection with the idea of ideology. Using the strategic texts MIC25 and AIDP 2017 as my primary sources,² the analysis aims to demonstrate how China's use of AI has clear ideological impacts, supporting the strategic use of AI by providing a different course of action from the dominant Western model. China's 2030 Action Plan can also be referred to as ideological leadership in the global race for AI, which is a competition of ideologies. While, in that context, "ethical leadership" and the route of the necessity for National Strategies are equally significant aspects of the debate on AI, they are beyond the scope of the current analysis.

Having established the theoretical framework, the case of China will be examined using the two guiding documents (MIC25 and AIDP 2017) that were chosen. This will enable us to recognize the goals, perceptions and operationalization of the theoretical concepts in action. These two strategic documents have been selected because they represent important initiatives in China's AI strategy: MIC2025, which serves more as a systematic roadmap and AIPR 2027, which focuses exclusively on the development of AI. Their official status and comprehensiveness make them especially valuable for analyzing the ideological foundations of China's AI strategy. The study, employing a conceptual and interpretive method, explores how terms like "Governance," "Values" and "Ethics" are discursively constructed in the documents. As ideological instruments that include political meaning and reflect

normative frameworks, MIC25 and AIDP 2017 are examined rather than merely described.

China advances an alternative model of Governance based on centralized political control, technological self-reliance, and social stability. This model prioritizes the integration and operationalization of public values through technologically driven state intervention with first priority to societal harmony, ideological cohesion and top-down control over individual liberty. The forthcoming MIC25 and AIDP 2017 analysis demonstrates the manner in which such ideas are incorporated into strategic plans and exposes the ideological architecture guiding China's AI Governance.

From silicon to strategy: China-AI in the new world order

Despite the long-standing recognition of Silicon Valley's near-possessive power, China has demonstrated a strong political resolve to take the lead in AI. China recognized early on that AI has the potential to revolutionize society and that it is more than just a competition for technological superiority (De Seta, 2023). By putting AI at the forefront, it serves as a strategic pillar that reinforces its influence. At the moment, China is ahead of investments in AI research (Cheng and Zeng, 2023; GIZ, 2020a). The developments are being led by China, and in December 2024, the Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (MIIT) established a control committee to anticipate potential dangers (Mandon, 2025: p. 21). As a country, it actually makes investments in initiatives that are distinguished by their economic effectiveness (Franzen, 2025), while the long-term dedication to becoming a dominant force in AI is the vision of celebrating in 2049 the 100 years since the founding of the PRC. China's strategic ambitions are based on an ideological framework that must also be considered in addition to this vision. For Zeng (2020, 2022), AI is not a value-neutral technological tool in China but rather is part of a broader strategy to enhance authoritarian governance and project an alternative political model.

Updates on AI applications in recent years have highlighted China's increasing importance and impact, when previously there was less focus on the country's current status and achievements. Furthermore, in order to examine the evolution of AI's progress, the official texts of China's administration are frequently subjected to a comparative political analysis with other texts that exist globally, excluding, however, the specific context in which they are created and referred. This research highlights the political values embedded in these texts, providing an ideological reading that supports current functional and technical assessments, in contrast to previous studies like Ding (2018), which concentrate on capacities and talent ecosystems.

Although China presents a unified National Strategy and approach for AI Governance in its official documents, this is represented at various levels and in various texts, adjusting according to different situations and constantly prepared for modifications or corrective actions under the umbrella of sharing a common approach. The singular term "National Strategy" is used to emphasize the overarching and unified strategic vision that guides China's approach to AI, while the plural "National

¹ Within that framework, the president's speeches, which could profit as well from a different style of research, will not be analyzed here, although they undoubtedly influence the formulation of the texts being studied.

² Following the official website of the Central People's Government of China (<https://www.gov.cn/>) on these National Strategies offers insight into the ongoing adoption of these strategic texts, as well as the official responses to the criticisms they receive.

Strategies” refers to the diverse, multi-level plans—such as the MIC25 and AIDP 2017—that are continuously refined and updated in alignment with this common framework. In the Chinese example, the existence and significance of multiple levels of its National Strategy for AI Governance were established early on as a priority. But, despite China’s early development of National Strategy (Allen, 2019) in the context of global competition, these efforts reflect a unique domestic approach rather than adherence to a global liberal framework of consensus. More than any other country, China’s National Strategy (Seyringer, 2021) across different sectors reflect the distinctive characteristics of its culture and are continuously updated to reflect recent developments. China is not just shaping tools; it is shaping norms and narratives. This approach is consistent with Zeng’s (2022) framework of “AI with Chinese characteristics,” which uses technology to reinforce regime legitimation and international narrative projection and contest liberal democratic models’ intellectual hegemony.

China has built a number of initiatives at the National Strategy and partnership levels that aim to practically implement AI tools in a wide range of situations. At this level, infrastructure development or financing through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)³ is evident. Beijing, meanwhile, frequently assumes the lead in a number of international platforms, including the BRICS (Karpunina et al., 2024). China’s National Strategy prioritizes the country’s transformation into an innovative player on the global scene, delivering the message that the world order is changing. For China, the main priority on AI is no longer to appear innovative, but to implement its innovative actions (Papadopoulou, 2025). China’s use of AI as a form of Governance builds on the principles of “Reasonable” AI (RAI) and “Explainable” AI (XAI), which adapt to rapid change, while expressing the irreversible influence of AI on society through National Strategies. In XAI, the interface between humans and decision makers is referred to as explainability. Everyone may simultaneously understand this interface, which faithfully reflects the decision maker (Sun et al., 2024; Islam et al., 2022). This vision is supported by RAI which advocates for AI systems that are not just effective but also consistent with social stability and shared values (Rane, 2024). In the same framework, the concept of “Responsible AI” (Lu et al., 2024), which refers to the ethical development of AI systems, is also an area of discussion in China; nevertheless, it must be included into this context without being reduced to liberal principles.

It is impossible to view China’s vision of leading through the transformative role of AI in fragments. Thus, its National Strategy is connected to the actions and milestones it has already established (mostly) since 2014, putting them into practice through particular political efforts that are continuously modified to the nation’s indicators and informed by global developments. The integration of evolutionary characteristics presents an execution-based Governance paradigm. With the goal to make this accessible, the MIC25 and AIDP 2017 will serve as the foundation, highlighting the central planning under both short-term and long-term planning circumstances and reflecting concerns in areas

like the SCS. The two main pillars of these plans are international competitiveness and domestic legitimacy challenging the liberal democratic approaches.

Although it is evident that China has taken a number of steps to control algorithms, its definition of the enhancement of citizenship is different from Western norms. Rather than being a “new form” of Governance, this alternative form of Governance is an indication of an intention to depart from the Western-liberal perspective on the political aspect of Governance. This demonstrates that what is referred to as an “alternative form of Governance” is actually a technical modification to long-standing authoritarian practices, rather than a departure from the past. Accordingly, it is necessary to address the SCS (Papadopoulou, 2025) as well as the manner in which the political aspects of Governance are integrated into its strategic texts under an umbrella of “political transformation” driven by AI. It triggers participation in control over the citizens themselves in the name of the proper functioning of the country—credibility of data, social integrity, and government integrity: 微信, 社会诚信, 政务诚信 (Gov.cn, 2014), as citizens in China have different expectations of governance as such. While “社会诚信” is commonly translated as “social trustworthiness,” the term “social integrity” is used here to emphasize the Chinese state’s emphasis on cultivating a morally regulated and cohesive social order.⁴

Actually, compared to other systems based on Western standards, SCS has a greater normative impact, demonstrating the existence of ideological criteria (Brussee, 2023; Kshetri, 2020). Thus, regardless of how we consider the example of the SCS, it seeks to record and give credit to the actions of citizens (Donnelly, 2021). Therefore, citizens show confidence in it as a means to improve their lives rather than as a means of control (Kostka, 2019). The culture of compliance through the SCS is really a “disruptive” strategy, where China used the power of technology to seek to shape the diffusion of political power (Papadopoulou, 2025). As a result, the focus is on using Chinese characteristics to characterize AI in terms of the strong state participation with AI’s technocratic controlling role. AI can therefore reaffirm its state legitimacy.

MIC25 as a foundation for ideological and technological leadership

Its strategic texts are a reflection of the nation’s internal and exterior purchasing strategy. Promoting the nation’s principles as an essential component of the participants’ citizenship at the national level, with little place for compromise to liberal viewpoints. These texts are framed to show that China’s priorities and values must be understood on their own terms rather than judged against foreign standards. Beijing’s efforts, such as MIC25 emphasized its competitiveness with countries like, South Korea, Japan, and Germany, where especially the case of Germany’s (Industry 4.0) model served as an inspiration (Gov.cn, 2016; Wübbecke et al., 2016) for this challenge. All of its texts—including the fundamental ones (MIC25 and AIDP 2017)—were texts that communicated precisely

³ While there is no denying the importance of the BRI and its connection to digital diplomacy—a strategic plan aimed at strengthening China’s reputation—a thorough discussion of it is outside of the scope of the current study.

⁴ Although important political and ideological concepts have their origins in Confucian philosophy and tradition, their current interpretations can vary significantly, particularly in state discourse. Concepts such as harmony and trust are also situated within this framework.

in the general spirit of developing National Strategy. The strategic texts that serve as the foundation for this study make a clear connection between national interests and strategic ideals, where AI is a part of everyday life⁵ rather than a technology of the future.

In an effort to change the technological landscape of the nation, MIC25 was introduced in May 2015. This text essentially signaled the start of China’s systematic effort to use past knowledge to guide its actions in accordance with AI. This text laid the foundation for all following acts. It can even be characterized as a blueprint for China’s tech dominance. MIC25 drew significant international criticism, particularly in terms of its implications for global power dynamics. In response, China revised key elements of the initiative in 2018 to modify its strategic messaging. As exemplified by MIC25, China has consistently employed an intertextual approach to its National Strategies, aligning various official texts under a coherent, evolving strategic vision. Germany’s plan at the time (BMW, 2015; GIZ, 2021a) served as the text’s model. Starting from this, the two primary pillars are distinguished at the basic level as follows: control of data in the interest of quality and autonomy of Chinese growth away from liberal values (Groenewegen-Lau and Laha, 2023).

Secondly, reference is made to the 10 distinct areas that Beijing’s initiatives aim to refer to as applications of AI (ISDP, 2018). In fact, these cover the entire range of the correlation of economic-social and cultural criteria, where Global AI Governance is now a contest of visions. On a third level, the correlation is related to the policies that need to be applied precisely so that the nation can demonstrate that, in spite of criticism (particularly from the US and the EU), it can lead without being bound by the “chariot” of Western liberal ideals. In response to international criticism, China counters by asserting that such critiques are rooted in a Western-centric perspective and thus lack legitimacy. China frames these objections as expressions of a “unilateral hegemony”—summed up by the implicit logic of “I can, you cannot” (一种赤裸裸的“我可以、你不可以”的单边霸权主义, Gov.cn, 2018b). Thus, this was a very important bet that had to be won. Even, when MIC25 was revised in 2018 (Gov.cn, 2018a) in response to global concerns, these changes were strategic adjustments to presentation rather than alterations to core goals, projecting cooperation without abandoning its core ideals. In this way, China envisioned the conquest of the last level, where it had the strategic goal of the international leadership in order to leave its political imprint. The success of China as an authoritarian state with significant economic expansion poses an ideological challenge to the liberal paradigm. It demonstrates that global power can exist without democracy, which undermines the liberal narrative (Ikenberry, 2018).

The timeline: 2015-2018-2021-2025-2030-2049 (Table 1) outlines a long-term strategy that aims to both assess AI’s accomplishments and successfully decrease the nation’s reliance on outside sources in key areas. These are translated to China’s geopolitical goals, which are mostly associated with its leadership in AI and smart manufacturing. And for that reason, it demonstrated two stages of progress: quickly and slowly. Behind those efforts, the

TABLE 1 The MIC25 roadmap.

Year	Milestone bar (what happened)	Narrative bar (why it matters)
2015	Establishment of foundational AI pillars	Groundwork laid for national AI development
2018	Pillars modified per international standards, retaining national values	Balance between global integration and domestic priorities
2021	Initial shifts appear, highlighting a prosperous society narrative	Vision of national progress tied to AI
2025 (target year)	Publication of reports on accomplishments	Assessment phase: measuring impact and tracking progress
2030	Evidence of reduced foreign dependence on AI tech	Strategic autonomy and technological sovereignty
2049	Goal of achieving global technological leadership	Culmination of long-term AI vision: leadership and innovation dominance

ideological definition of the effort at MIC25 was largely determined by the idea of efficiency (Gov.cn, 2015, 2018a).

Internationally recognizing the role of National Strategies, Beijing invoked state intervention, demonstrating that this approach combines domestic political traditions with global technological engagement rather than following global liberal norms. The global consensus regarding National Strategies for AI does not say that this should follow liberal guidelines. And in order to show why such a viewpoint was not necessary in the years 2015–2021, it focused on critical developing industries that will help to achieve (as intermediate stations) a balance between innovation and internal requirements and global engagement. This approach is outlined in the “14th Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development (2021–2025)” and its integrated “Vision for 2035” section (Gov.cn, 2021).

The narrative of MIC25 was fully harmonized with the environment of international terminology and reflected the statements of the central political line in the name of the continuity that should govern Chinese society. With this tech leadership in mind, China positions itself not only in technological competition but also in ideological and normative contestation with the US, EU, Japan and South Korea.

Beijing has never been in favor of multilateral cooperation, and with this in mind, it is reshaping the landscape and highlighting the legitimacy of its actions amid recent actions under Trump’s administration. Thus, China is working to increase its soft power through technological initiatives, particularly in the areas of AI and quantum computing (Gov.cn, 2017c; GIZ, 2020b). Clearly, such an effect of technological and economic impact also has ideological weight (MIIT, 2024). It demonstrates the vision for an alternative form of Governance that is clearly possible. This Governance model alternative represents China’s focus on centralized power, social cohesion and technological control, differing from liberal democratic norms. AI serves as a political vehicle and development strategy in this context, communicating China’s Governance values and legitimizing the system. In this broader ideological framework, MIC25 functions as a key instrument that encourages state-driven innovation and supports the long-term vision of national renewal (Heilmann and Shih, 2013).

5 This has also led to and still causes local concerns about job loss. This paper extends beyond an understanding of the criticism of AI and the claim that it reduces the need for human employees, which is currently being debated in China (Wang et al., 2023).

Accordingly, similar to the time milestones, China builds on the ideological themes and milestones in MIC25, on the belief that each one will lead to the next. The initiative's ideological foundation explicitly prioritizes the state over the market in steering economic transformation, emphasizing quality and uniqueness in production, which aligns with the CCP's political objectives to maintain centralized control rather than promote market liberalization (Ding, 2018). The second message could be that the shift “from Made in China to Create in China” is both ideological and economic, signifying both technological autonomy and loyalty to the country. Its emphasis on innovation is combined with a compulsory commitment to the state, which illustrates how centralized control removes people of their freedom rather than promoting voluntary loyalty. Furthermore, national renewal requires not only physical infrastructure but also a bureaucracy and a society that is technically competent and politically aligned. Third, independence in technology is not only economically vital but also a sign of modernization and national pride (MIIT, 2024). Thus, China's modernization route differs from the West's in that it combines market tools, tech-driven industrial nationalism, and socialist planning (Yuan and Zhang, 2025). And finally, China must participate in world politics as a powerful, independent and leading country. Importantly, this model seeks to export an AI-based Governance system that fuses advanced technology with centralized political control, lacking political plurality, individual freedoms, and adherence to justice and equality (Table 2).

TABLE 2 Ideological milestones in MIC25.

Ideological theme	Core message	Implication
State-led long-term planning	The state, not the market, should guide the direction of economic transformation	Emphasizes central planning and policy as primary factors of economic modernization
From “Made in China” to “Created in China”	The shift is not just economic but ideological, reflecting technological autonomy and a sense of nation	Builds China's visibility as a creator rather than merely a manufacturer and fosters national pride in innovation
Societal and bureaucratic alignment	National rejuvenation requires not only infrastructure, but a technically skilled and politically loyal bureaucracy and society	Highlights the need for human capital and ideological unity across institutions and citizens
Technological self-reliance as a source of national pride	Achieving self-reliance in key technologies is both economically essential and a symbol of modernization and sovereignty	Motivates strategic investment in R&D and domestic innovation to break foreign dependencies
Chinese modernization model	China's approach combines market mechanisms, industrial nationalism, and socialist governance-distinct from Western liberal capitalism	Promotes a distinct, Chinese-inspired socialist-based growth strategy
Strengthening global engagement	China must engage with the world, but as a strong, independent leader, not a follower	Places China in a position to influence global norms, trade, and technology rather than being a passive participant in the current international structures

Therefore, from an ideological standpoint, technological independence also eliminates any ideological influence that might change a nation's ideals. Thus, while technological advancement can also influence, let alone change, traditional values, China is moving away from the latter in favor of the larger goal of exporting an AI-based Governance model, which further projects the ideological goal of treating China as the primary actor of influence in the world. That model advances China's idea of Governance abroad by using technology to monitor, influence, and control society both domestically and through international collaborations, thus reinforcing authoritarian rule (Feldstein, 2021; Yuan and Zhang, 2025). It is also possible to trace the ideological background of the milestones in relation to other international actions, such as the creation of the EU Strategic Autonomy (European Parliament, 2022), which has been an official political action since 2016 and was further strengthened in 2020 with the goal of dividing the EU-China boundaries both ideologically and non-ideologically.

Strategic narratives in motion: China's AI governance and ethical frameworks from MIC25 to AIDP 2017

In order to achieve the milestone of MIC25 with reference to the year 2018, China presented in 2017 the “New Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan/AI Development Plan” (AIDP 2017), which focused on how the country would identify and embed its values and what might be prioritized. The AIDP 2017 emphasizes the state impact, reshaping the global power framework. In that framework, the idea of reasonable AI is developing and closely relates to the country's increasing focus on human-centered, ethical, and trustworthy AI—all of which are influenced by China's distinct social, political, and regulatory setting. The notion of ethical AI advancing individual rights is incompatible with China's history of utilizing AI for surveillance and social control (Ding, 2018); hence the term “human-centered AI” requires careful interpretation within the Chinese context. Ultimately, China's efforts are aimed at mapping and controlling any potential challenges to its future leadership. Thus, this strategic text by reinforcing the ideological background of China's actions, seeks to make clear—through AI—who writes the rules and what kind of values AI systems must reflect. By taking use of the circumstances and procedures that have been established since 2015, this alternative Governance model seeks to promote development (MIC25). By prioritizing stability and progress, this model serves the needs of society while avoiding practices that hinder a unified political response to emerging pressures. By operating in the interest of stability and progress, this alternative form of Governance advances what society needs without returning to practices that, although they may seem exclusive, do not necessarily contribute to a unified political voice in managing potential disruptions.

The AIDP 2017 (Gov.cn, 2017c; Gov.cn, 2017b), which was officially introduced in 2017, expressed Xi Jinping's ideas in accordance with the principles of the CCP's 18th National Congress (Gov.cn, 2017c), which were later linked to the “14th Five-Year

Plan for National Economic and Social Development (2021–2025)” (Gov.cn, 2021). By consolidating strategic, ideological, and technological objectives, the AIDP 2017 could be referred to a broader effort in terms of competing for Global Governance and redefining modernity (even without democracy?). This consistency shows how China incorporates centralized political power into its strategic technological aspirations and offers an alternative model of modernization that rejects liberal democratic norms. As such, this text can be seen as an expression of ideological instrumentalization. This instrumentalization demonstrates how the CCP normalizes its political ideology through national development plans such as the AIDP 2017, which combine themes of controlled social order, national rejuvenation and concentrated state authority with its technological vision. The use of ideology in this case seeks to reinforce itself, making AI a tool in this effort.

In order to maintain complete control over public information, the CCP has decided to establish control systems that will preserve its power. Rather than embracing universal ethical standards for the use of AI, it chose to establish rules that primarily restrict business activity without extending to the impact of these rules on the daily lives of citizens. Thus, the Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST) was instrumental in the creation of the AIDP 2017, which included all of the nation’s theoretical tools for addressing AI and connecting its past actions with its goals for 2030. In fact, a dedicated “AI Plan Promotion Office” (Gov.cn, 2017a) was established by MOST to handle the implementation and coordination of the development of AI applications. MOST supervised the establishment of committees to develop the national plan while keeping ethical standards in mind (Gov.cn, 2017c), while only (consistently) in 2021 did China start discussing the significance of regulatory frameworks (Sheehan, 2023) as a mechanism to manage the online dissemination of information.

The AIDP 2017 (Gov.cn, 2017b,c) established the foundation for China’s ambition to become a leader in AI, with 2030 as the third milestone (Seyringer, 2021). The plan aimed to fortify the nation both politically and technologically (Wu et al., 2020). China capitalizes on this strategy to strike a balance between information control and the need for China to lead the way in technology. In the official text, the term “deep fakes” was avoided in favor of “deep synthesis” after Tencent made a proposal (Tang, 2019; Sheehan, 2023) that eventually became part of its official papers. The purpose of this shift was to avoid negative moral implications, as if altering the term used to explain moral problems would solve them. In this sense, the phrase change serves as a mask, tacitly endorsing such activities (Papadopoulos, 2025).

With a focus on data quality, China implemented major reforms in 2023 to strengthen and improve control over algorithms. The country’s National Strategy included key concepts including truth, impartiality, diversity, and accuracy (Gov.cn, 2017b). In this context, a register system for algorithms has been put in place, requiring developers to sign legally binding statements regarding the functionality and transparency of their systems. Additionally, audits were prioritized to make sure generative AI applications do not discriminate based on gender (in alignment with Responsible AI approach) or other characteristics (Gov.cn, 2017c) as part of broader social Governance objectives (MIIT, 2024). In China, the concept of social Governance functions as

a tool for enforcing ideological conformity through extensive monitoring and mechanisms designed to discourage opposition to state authority (Creemers, 2017). The main objective is the constructive development of AI that, by cooperative control, improves quality living conditions for citizens. In this context, “cooperative control” represents a Governance model in which commitment is expected rather than bargained and strategic language frequently used to justify state power under ethical or developmental objectives (Beraja et al., 2023). However, even those ethical guidelines (Gov.cn, 2017c) were established to help China achieve its long-term goal of becoming the world’s leading country in AI. Nonetheless, the word “ethics” in Chinese strategic documents should be interpreted within the CCP’s political framework, where ethical standards are used to support control and surveillance measures meant to preserve regime stability rather than reduce state power (Chin and Lin, 2022; Strittmatter, 2021). In a context where ethical principles have not traditionally taken center stage, the attempt to introduce changes based on the social ideals that the CCP creates as a foundation or incorporates into any of its reform plans is challenging in practice.

Although China has attended nearly every international summit on integrating ethical concepts into AI design and implementation, the embrace of fundamentally ethical principles has happened at a slower pace. The primary goal of incorporating such principles remains the need to ensure that algorithms are checked, so as to reduce the possibility of them escaping political monitoring (Gov.cn, 2017c). Furthermore, China does not seek an international reference point when integrating public values, favoring selective implementation of social ideals consistent with Party aims (MIIT, 2024). When it comes to regulators, China is quite different from other countries. It aims to apply “ethical” principles on a case-by-case basis, making the outcomes of the intervention more evident within the particular socio-political environment, rather than imposing a uniform regulatory framework with universal application. However, this selective approach, mainly focused on controlling algorithms, raises important questions about oversight gaps. And these gaps remain without clear predictions for resolution in practice.

By simultaneously fortifying and enhancing MIC25, the AIDP 2017 aimed to anticipate developments in AI and digital transformation (in 2020) to position China competitively relative to other countries by 2025. For that purpose, in the name of digital transformation, in 2022 the Chinese government proceeded to “东数西算” (Data in the East, Computing in the West; GIZ, 2022), where it was important to modernize regional technological capacities and balance resource distribution. In fact, it closely monitors the success of these actions (Gov.cn, 2024). And based on those steps, it will be at the forefront of the previously stated areas in 2030 (MIIT, 2024). The accomplishment of these also pertains to AI Governance “with Chinese Characteristics” in order to properly develop the 2049 protocols’ perspective as well. Due to the SCS and strict control of data, the foundations (material and human) have already been established at this level, disregarding the ethical viewpoints as established by Western societies. It established data interoperability and unified data centers in order to remove

the boundaries between business-related and government efforts (Gov.cn, 2020).

The priority set is the control of data with the ultimate goal of efficiency and robustness as mechanisms. In this context, moral values were incorporated to serve the same purpose. The ethical principles are not recognized as self-values having a normative character, but exist as tools to serve social norms (collective wellbeing), as defined by the state apparatus with National Strategies as a vehicle. This conceptualization is consistent with China's Governance model, which holds that individual liberties must yield to collective order, which the CCP contends is necessary for maintaining national stability and unity, and that social harmony and regime legitimacy are maintained by central power (Heilmann and Shih, 2013). Therefore, it is clear that even while Beijing seems to take actions that are comparable to those of other nations, such releasing ethical guidelines and these actions must be interested in the context of China's political priorities. There is a delay in the integration of ethical principles, of course, and yet these efforts clearly satisfy international expectations on the surface. However, the pace of development in the integration of AI is significantly faster. Beyond this, China is not attempting to embrace AI technology in ways that would conflict with its own political requirements. At this level of argumentation, the projected message is not that the values expressed by the Chinese way of thinking are inferior. They are simply different. This automatically highlights the argument to undermine universalist liberal claims (Zeng, 2022). It represents the shift in global power toward a multipolar reality while projecting a Chinese development path where the rules are still being negotiated. And because of this transition, the power and development paradigm needs to adapt as well. Under the Chinese model, economic modernization is achieved through technocratic, Party-led planning rather than political liberalization; efficiency and control are viewed as essential components to development rather than oppositional (Heilmann and Shih, 2013).

Even in their later integration actions, ethical questions and dilemmas can be identified (MIIT, 2024). These issues were, of course, primarily related to the development of trustworthy AI systems, but the problem grew more serious because any ethical principles must be integrated in the right environment. Without the framework to support them, ethical principles cannot be effectively incorporated into a system as beliefs or as infrastructure (Hine and Floridi, 2024). The quality of the data produced by AI must align with the fundamental principles and guidelines of the political structure. This requirement is a constant element in the AI Governance in China. The country's National Strategy for AI provides that the regulatory framework should be subject to continuous review and adaptation, depending on developments. The legitimacy of these continuous adaptations is based on the need for flexibility and preparedness for the country to respond effectively to the changes brought about by AI.

Thus, at the ethical level, Beijing has fostered collaborations between political and private actors in keeping with the purpose of National Strategy. Qiao-Franco and Zhu (2024) categorize the Chinese government's gradual actions—which are justified by their consistently delayed inclusion in AI efforts—into three stages of varying ethics-related concern. Consequently, it had to start looking for ways to integrate ethical concerns in its

strategic initiatives in 2019 after starting with only conversations about the role of ethics as early as 2015 (Qiao-Franco and Zhu, 2024: p. 191). Its strategy document MIC25 thus falls within that early era, when strategic planning did not include the integration of ethical values. With the AIDP 2017, it appeared to take on a new significance by providing an ethical context for subsequent activities. As a narrative and a strategic move, Beijing has been promoting ethical standards (since 2019) as a controlled mechanism to mitigate possible risks associated with AI implementation rather than as a universally normative framework. From the standpoint of its tradition (Kung and Ma, 2014) the understanding and interpretation of even these ethical principles—despite their connection to Western standards—take on a distinct dimension. These ideas are communicated as part of the regulatory framework that the AIDP 2017 strategic text promotes, where laws support the existence of ethical criteria but are constantly subject to governmental supervision (Gov.cn, 2017c). Beijing views them merely as ethical criteria (more practical and context specific) rather than ethical principles, arguing that while they could have similarities with Western equivalents, they are not the same because they strive to be applied to different sociopolitical and cultural contexts. More instrumental and state-driven applications of ethics are explained in that, although at surface level China's AI ethical principles may appear comparable to Western paradigms, they are couched in a sociopolitical order that prioritizes Party-state authority, collective welfare, and technological sovereignty (Roberts et al., 2021). By comparison, AI ethics are more likely to be expressed as normative constraints on power and guarantees of individual autonomy in plural democracies.

Both MIC25 and AIDP 2017 present a holistic and harmonized approach combining political control, state capacity and national identity—deliberately avoiding the language of risk and uncertainty (in contrast to the EU; Leone, 2024) and instead emphasizing stability and confidence. The CCP's overarching goal of “national rejuvenation,” which targets reestablishing China's historical primacy through the CCP's technological leadership, strategic autonomy, and ideological authority, depends on these elements. The digital transformation is political. All of them serve to further China's governance model, which is different from liberal—democratic digital approaches. In this Governance model, AI functions as a political power pillar to support ideological control, facilitate state monitoring and shape the public sphere in accordance with CCP's directives (Creemers, 2017). The national vision of technocratic growth has its foundation in centralized governance, digital modernization, and socialist ideals. The outcome should be founded on equitable access to resources (such as computing power), balanced regional development, and top-down coordination. Thus, these strategic texts, precisely because with complementary texts that are created, are constantly adapted to the new conditions due to intertextuality from 2020⁶ onwards,

⁶ The intertextuality of these texts has not been sufficiently taken into account in previous research by linking them to the political aspect of these narratives in the name of sovereignty, using a tool that was not initially accepted as having the capacity to play a significant role with an ideological connotation.

serve the framework of data value, digital industrialization and digital governance (“数据价值化”, “数字产业化”, “产业数字化”, “数字化治理”, CAIST, 2020). The term “ideology” holds a significant place in these political leadership’s strategy documents, both as a spoken narrative and as a conceptual indicator of how the Chinese government integrates it into its strategic decision-making (Gov.cn, 2023). This ideology reflects values that align with China’s distinct approach to growth and governance. These “values,” which come from a political culture that favors social cohesiveness and government guidance over individual liberties, include stability, order, prosperity, and Party loyalty rather than individual liberty. Moreover, there is a consistent (both conceptually and structurally) connection between Xi Jinping, the CCP’s objectives, and national AI initiatives that demonstrates the necessity of state-led control. State leadership over AI is seen as necessary to safeguard narrative control, ensure ideological alignment and prevent decentralized technological power from undermining Party authority. Consequently, it seems that the ideology is based on language that challenges western norms and promotes sovereignty. China argues that it has the sovereign right to establish its own political and ethical order by framing liberal democratic principles as culturally relative rather than universal. This allows China to reject what it views as ideological pressure masked as “universal values” (Kelly, 2013).

The ideological blueprint

Conditions for ideological marginalization were established by the long-term lack of a clear ideological confrontation and the primacy of the economy over the political elements. The “on the end of ideology” (Bell, 1960) and subsequently the “end of history” (Fukuyama, 1989) positions established the course, treating the liberal viewpoint as the dominant (silently or not) ideology for what can be called a “good society.” According to this theoretical perspective, political beliefs can no longer be a determining factor in a society’s development, or, even if they can, they can only be accepted in exchange for an implicit agreement that liberal ideals should come first.

The emotional implication that accompanies China’s rise to power through AI further endorses this return of ideology. China’s rise invites a reconsideration of ideology and how it reshapes our understanding of reality. This refers to the reassertion of a state-centric ideological framework, rather than to a revival of a single doctrinal system. China’s continuous effort to distinguish itself in the field of AI is an expression of political discourse. In its case—as Žižek (1989) would point out—every political or social discourse is always ideologically charged. After an extended period of de-ideologization, the return of ideology suggests that ideology may still adjust to changing circumstances, despite the seeming contradiction between technocratic reasoning and ideological positions. Moreover, when discussing the return of ideology through the lens of AI tools, it becomes clear that this phenomenon is not confined to the Chinese context alone. Definitely, the question of who will establish the ideological framework and by what parameters is a crucial one; in this question, everyone wants to be a shareholder.

By establishing challenging AI standards, Xi Jinping—since taking power in 2012—has renewed the discussion over the West’s decline. He articulates a worldview by imagining a pragmatic AI future where change is feasible. This rethinking takes place under the ideological framework of “authoritarian adaptability,” where ideological imperatives and technocratic Governance are combined (Heilmann and Shih 2013). AI is used to support ideological narratives without coming off as explicitly ideological. AI serves as an ideological infrastructure. In China, such infrastructure reinforces the authority of the Party by integrating political agendas into digital systems, as Yuan and Zhang (2025) clarify. At the same time, this practical framework makes no attempt to appear of possessing any meta-ideology. Ideology is structural in China’s case. China questions liberal meta-ideology (see Yearwood, 2025), which holds that value-neutral, post-ideological Governance is either desirable or feasible.⁷ Given the enormity of AI’s potential, Beijing is positioning itself to challenge this perspective and highlighting how claims of neutrality may be unstable. And even if this is conceivable, what specific Western values will serve as a foundation in the absence of consensus? This leads to the broader question of whether a post-ideological form of Governance based on AI is feasible.

In the case of China, it is also important to make the distinction between ideology as a theoretical construct in its reference environment and how any external actor interprets it. Its dynamics are demonstrated by the way it adjusts to the changing conditions while being influenced by both domestic and international factors. As it must be based on national values, it should actually promote national development as a whole. Therefore, it was expected from the start that the AI tool would be the most suitable for this task. AI-powered shaping ideology has been built on the idea of resolving political issues in the sake of social stability, which can lead to “ideological governance through rectification” (Cheek, 2006). When trying (through the AIDP 2017) to comprehend how citizens relate to political facts, it is also important to consider China’s cultural context and Confucian tradition (Hine and Floridi, 2024; Kung and Ma, 2014). The stability and coherence offered by this tradition is a strong foundation for the state to more easily promote its AI strategies. Therefore, this tradition keeps central administration linked to local authorities (GIZ, 2021b; CAIST, 2020; GIZ, 2020c), despite their diversity, which makes the country’s attempt to lead AI Governance even more successful (Khanal et al., 2025). Furthermore, it was required to implement AI specifically for this purpose on the grounds that the pragmatic aspect of ideology was significant. In this way, the concept “ideology” gains a material dimension grounded in the nation’s technological innovations. China demonstrated its capacity for long-term planning by establishing specific milestones, which helped to effectively reinforce this ideology—which is obviously not a panacea. China has learned from its past that simply a strong ideology is not enough. It provides a base for legitimacy, but stability is what sets it apart and will be a clear message on the global scene.

The fact cannot be avoided that our perceptions (as citizens) of a situation are shaped by our presumptions and ideas, which

⁷ The Ideological State Apparatus (ISA 2.0) can be also part of this argumentation.

ultimately determine the meaning we provide to reality. This makes AI, which is clearly not a closed system for exclusive use by only a few players, a field of ideological battle for its conquest. Each player refers to it using terms with social and political connotation, giving them different meanings. Thus, with the use of AI, terms such as “freedom,” “self-determination,” “equality,” and “democracy” come back to the fore to be defined from AI’s perspective. However, this “perspective” is not AI’s own; rather, it is created by the political system that uses it, which sets the parameters of meaning. Given that there has always been a great deal of discussion over these terms, it is likely that they will come up again when reinterpreted from an AI standpoint—especially in relation to China’s role in shaping their use. In China’s case, we can be even more certain that technology cannot be discussed without reference to its underlying values. The use of technology is never value-free, even though it may be neutral in theory (Gao and An, 2024). Here, AI’s strategic application reflects the CCP’s ideological requirements.

Apparently, this process can also be interpreted as an opportunity for the liberal world to redefine its ideological foundations while China is reviving the material aspect of ideas and converting them into political action to influence reality through the transformative nature of AI. China demonstrates how social and historical circumstances develop an ideology using the example of AI. As a result, it offers an alternative viewpoint for understanding the world by affecting our perception of reality. The basis of this is the type of society that is envisioned through the narrative that technological development via AI goes beyond mere efficacy. China attempts to increase the coherence of the chosen principles by reflecting the shared experiences of people brought about by the use of AI in the name of a collaborative strategy for societal stability. Yet, this framing functions primarily as a rhetorical strategy to legitimize centralized, authoritarian leadership in the CCP than a genuine participatory process. In such circumstances, it generates new technological and regulatory frameworks for leadership determination that shift the global power dynamics. This shift suggests a multipolar future where normative and digital Governance models compete, with China favoring state-led, sovereignty-first AI frameworks over liberal-democratic ones. Increased dispersion of international AI standards and the emergence of alternative, non-Western Governance models are the likely results. Therefore, any examination of mainstream AI has to take into consideration its ideological dimensions, particularly in the wake of China’s approach reshaping domestic Governance and global norms.

In this case, ideology plays a function that unifies theory and practice while highlighting its social nature. This is a Governance-oriented ideology prioritizing centralized control, state-directed development and narrative sovereignty, as appropriate to China’s distinctive political tradition. Additionally, a strong focus is placed on the sense of belonging. In this interpretation, Beijing does not explicitly deny that this emphasis is a manifestation of power. Therefore, as long as the vehicle of mobilization of AI is strengthened, it will continue to be strengthened as a means of expression of the political system. Thus, the expression of this closed system of thought brings back to the forefront ideology. It is not merely an abstract reversion; rather, it represents

a reaffirmation of a state-centric perspective that is rooted in principles of stability and strategic planning, which offers explanations as a neutral and objective construct. Nevertheless, this purported neutrality fulfills a rhetorical function (Feldstein, 2021), allowing China to obscure the fundamental ideological governance beneath a discourse of efficiency and order, all while portraying its authoritarian framework as both technologically viable and amenable for global dissemination.

While established ethical criteria are embedded in global discussions, they ultimately become integrated into—and shaped by—China’s broader political agenda. This agenda illustrates how Governance principles, including technological superiority, policy centralization, and national cohesion, have been strategically included into AI regulation. As a result, the Chinese approach cannot be evaluated exclusively using external norms that disregard local conditions and the unique characteristics of the Chinese political and social landscape. Rather, it must be interpreted in the context of China’s political system, where CCP supervision guides both normative frameworks and administrative operations. China has taken a methodical and multi-layered approach to regulating AI, and what is considered political in this context is mostly decided by its institutional and ideological framework. This encompasses the interlinking of principal regulatory entities with ideological mandates that position technological progress as a mechanism for preserving the legitimacy of the regime. The institutional architecture, based on entities like the State Council, the Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC) and the Central Comprehensively Deepening Reforms Commission (CCDR), guarantees AI Governance is consistent with centralized power and socialist values and is an example of the CCP’s direct control (Zhang and Luo, 2024).

The foundation of AI Governance is the shared involvement of all stakeholders who have participated in building the subject regulatory framework over the years, following a political agenda established by the government. This is also part of the initiative of the Central Science and Technology Commission (CSTC), which in spring 2023 undertook the coordination between various stakeholders and research institutions, with the aim of developing national strategic texts for AI Governance, in line with new developments (Papadopoulou, 2025). As it turns out, Beijing’s AI-based alternative form of Governance also reflects an ideological statement about how it envisions the future. This alternative is based on a state-led, algorithmically controlled system that combines centralized authority with digital infrastructure and supports a Governance model that puts national sovereignty, efficiency and order ahead of pluralism and liberal ideals. Practically, this framework incorporates AI into the fields of information control, public administration and surveillance, where ethical principles are employed more for facilitating political cohesion rather than safeguarding individual freedoms (Table 3).

Conclusions

Given that the debate has a broad scope, the parameters and limitations of the analysis are clearly outlined to underscore

TABLE 3 Ideology and China in the context of AI governance.

Ideological element	How it manifests in China	Implications/significance
Ideology as structure	Deeply established in the Party-state structure and strengthened by national cohesion and Confucian principles	Centralized power and continuity serve to legitimize stability and Governance
Pragmatic ideology	AI is employed to address political issues (such as stability and social control) without explicitly stating a dogmatic ideology	Provides an adaptable structure that harmonizes National Strategy and technology with ideology
Materialization of ideology	AI becomes the technological vehicle through which political values are implemented (e.g., Social Credit System, surveillance)	Demonstrates how ideology is made tangible; it is made real through strategic steps, tech and infrastructure
Challenge to liberal universality	Challenges Western assumptions that Governance can be value-free or neutral	Forces global re-evaluation of concepts like democracy, freedom, and equality in AI discourse
Ideological adaptation	Adaptable reaction to shifting national and global circumstances (iterative strategy adjustment)	Demonstrates that ideology in China is not static but strategic and responsive
AI as ideological infrastructure	Technologies are created and employed to manage information, strengthen legitimacy, and support political narratives	Blurs the line between tech deployment and political messaging; integrates ideology with functionality
An alternative to liberal hegemony	Offers a State-led, sovereignty-first, technocratic-authoritarian Governance model, combining digital infrastructure with ideological control	Raises the question of whether this centralized model represents a viable global alternative—or a systemic threat—to liberal democratic norms

how AI is particularly adaptable for ideological use due to its fundamental architecture of large data and algorithms and how this adaptability has been intentionally used in China to reinforce CCP narratives, connecting this technological tool firmly to the ideological setting. Technological competition is a strategic move and this is not only true for China. The aim of the study has been to build the case for China's ideological application of AI by reviving the ideological discussion and redefining the geopolitical map through a focused analysis of China's example, rather than by comparing it to the US, where it is widely used. It has illustrated a Governance framework centered on centralized, party-led control that integrates technological innovation with ideological control to project influence globally and contest liberal Governance norms. This approach moves away from treating China's case as merely a particular revival of ideology.

This study contributes to understanding how China's core AI strategy documents—primarily MIC25 and the AIDP 2017—embed ideological concepts and state-driven goals, reflecting

a broader return of ideological authority in shaping China's Governance model. Moving beyond technical clarifications, it critically engages with the integration of AI development into CCP discourses, centralized authority and China's broader geopolitical agenda. Through analysis of narratives around social stability and collective wellbeing, the study maintains a balanced perspective that acknowledges China's technological achievements while also highlighting the political imperatives that drive them. Further research could explore how these ideological imperatives inform the appeal of China's Governance model beyond its borders. Additional studies could utilize quantitative methods like linear regression and comparative cross-national analysis to further the understanding of how China's approach challenges liberal-democratic ideals and to systematically assess the role of ideological narratives on AI Governance indicators worldwide.

Regardless of geopolitical borders, AI is articulated and interpreted in terms of social benefit. Therefore, in China's case, AI—as both a process and a structure—is presented in strategic papers as “AI for all,” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, The People's Republic of China, 2024) and framed as a tool to strengthen social stability and collective welfare under a centralized government. Consequently, China initially sought to actively encourage the spread of AI rather than impose severe regulations or limitations. Its approach therefore had a different starting point and, consequently, served different objectives. It is important to consider this distinction in starting point and goal setting while analyzing China's AI initiatives. As opposed to adopting a liberalized or neoliberal model, which would be fundamentally incompatible with China's political structure, China's approach is based on ideological alignment, state control and the strategic use of AI to maintain regime legitimacy. Early on, China developed strategies that prevented AI from deviating from social standards, both as a recommendation system and as an interpretation tool. Moreover, with national AI Governance initiatives serving as a central pillar, China also confronts the risk of technological isolation in the absence of AI. In fact, in order to control the appearance of such issues in its official texts, it clearly distinguishes between data protection and AI decision-making.

Despite a clear delay in the incorporation of ethical principles into China's approach, whether in rhetorical narratives or in practical implementation, their inclusion has been primarily linked to data control, which presents issues relating to accountability, transparency, and bias. The primary emphasis is on the effects on society of the concentration of power in particular groups which may not always reflect the values of central administration. Here, the dominant national ideology, centered on CCP's authority, stability and collective order, defines how Governance is framed. These ideological foundations impact the notion that governance in general has inherent value, stressing the importance of public engagement but only as a way to negotiate the social meaning of AI within Party-defined bounds rather than as a source of power checks.

China views AI as a vertical axis of National Strategy, in contrast, for example, to the EU, which takes a more horizontal and cohesive structured approach. Unlike the EU, China does

not implement a single regulatory framework for AI. Instead, it follows a tactic of continuous and selective corrections, integrating AI into the broader plan to strengthen national power and technological superiority. However, the absence of a uniform regulatory approach does not mean the absence of political intentions. On the contrary, China's choices are based on the pursuit of information control, with the aim of maintaining social stability, a fundamental political goal with roots in CCP ideology, which portrays AI-powered Governance and dissent management as necessary for maintaining national cohesion and regime legitimacy. This approach is accompanied by a continuous effort to adapt the regulatory framework to reflect evolving domestic and global conditions. The ability of countries to adjust to ongoing change is essential, as it highlights the “economic, social, and institutional realities” of each nation (Mandon, 2025: p. 21)—a mindset that China appears to embrace. Given that and the assertion that China is more normative than Europe, may a change in perspective lead to a more powerful Europe? Moreover, in view of the Trump administration's recent decisions, it appears that Europe must decide whether to be more West or East.

As I have questioned elsewhere (Papadopoulos, 2025), can the use of Chinese instruments and methods as models of “good practice”—each time tailored to the specific institutional and political context—be separated from their role in advancing an authoritarian model of Governance? Or, on the contrary, is such a model considered from the outset incompatible with—or even threatening to—liberal democratic standards of Governance? Whether such a model is ultimately rejected because it lacks functionality, or because it threatens liberal ideological supremacy precisely through its effectiveness remains a question worth confronting. China's AI accomplishments are noteworthy, but they must be viewed as a component of a larger plan to reframe centralized, state-driven Governance as a globally exportable alternative—and to legitimize total control in the name of social stability.

From this perspective, the analysis suggests that rejecting China's achievements outright offers limited insight. The results it has achieved are undeniable and cannot be overlooked. It is crucial to view the Chinese experience as an example of how AI Governance can be implemented—acknowledging, of course, the specificities, divergences, and potential risks that come with it. When current alliances that need to be strengthened are unable to communicate effectively about the use of AI, China is positioned to transform the world and lead innovations. The objective of a global model of AI Governance is the subject of much attention, yet evidence suggests it may not be feasible. Likewise, prior efforts and the other consensus pillar—such as the necessity of ethical AI leadership or Governance—present significant challenges. It is apparent that conventional approaches would be insufficient

and China recognized this challenge early on. China actually demonstrates with its example that we must consider more than just the straightforward instrumentalization of AI, as it transforms not just the economic landscape but also the context in which the global political system functions.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

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