

AI Cold War with China? The Advantage of Public Conversations about Ethics

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“America is not prepared to defend or compete in the AI era,” Eric Schmidt, former CEO of Google, lead author of the “National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence, declared in 2021, calling for the American government and industry to actively intervene in an AI “arm’s race” with China. Schmidt is one among many Americans who view Chinese competition in AI as a threat to United States national security, the American economy, and democratic way of life. A year previously, together with Harvard Professor Graham Allison, Schmidt penned the Harvard Kennedy Center Report, *Is China Beating the U.S. to AI Supremacy?* (Allison & Schmidt, 2020). Indeed, an AI-dominant China, which has the capacity to mount AI-supercharged cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, deploy invasive surveillance technology, and develop fully autonomous weapons, is a dangerous reality Americans must face. However, Schmidt’s intervention calls for allocating massive government spending on unregulated AI while ignoring current debates about developing ethical guidelines for deployment. This paper affirms the reality of the AI challenges from China, but adopts a different tactic, arguing instead that American public debates addressing AI ethics and whatever forms of third-party oversight to which it might lead, will ultimately serve the United States better than China, which discourages such conversations and centralizes all AI production under government control. *Pace* some critics of the American AI Ethics discussion, who worry that America will forfeit its competitive advantage by asking ethical questions, this paper demonstrates how open public conversation about AI and the need for regulation best supports American industry while better serving its diverse communities.

Deeply concerned about innovation and national security, some Silicon Valley observers, like Eric Schmidt and others, view competition with China as a far greater threat to the United States than the many public harms an unregulated AI poses. They argue we must devote ourselves to winning the U.S.-China competition at any cost and worry that ethical inquiry is a distraction from this political reality. But the choice is not merely between political realism and normative reasoning. In the United States, which enjoys decentralized pluralist discussions as opposed to China's centralized government mandates, one can hear both political realist and normative ethical positions. Americans of widely disparate perspectives debate how to create high-quality datasets that address misinformation, bias, harm, and labor issues while working towards developing models that better serve the diverse publics they impact. AI Ethics in the United States is not merely one group mounting a naive political distraction, but rather many competing voices from industry, government, academia, NGOs, and social activism (Bender et al., 2021; Weinstein et al., 2021; Birhane, 2021). As this paper considers the diverse viewpoints on AI ethics, it argues for an American advantage over China because, in our context, even while clearly admitting all of America's historical, political, social, and economic flaws, inclusion and pluralism are possible. Amid all this noisy American discussion, it remains possible to adopt a potentially Rawlsian perspective, where one could argue that the American conversation on AI ethics need not cement itself into any one ideology. Through a Rawlsian "overlapping consensus" on the many possibilities of algorithmic harm, Americans might share their "considerable differences in citizens' conceptions of justice" and agree on productive paths forward despite their differing ideologies (Rawls, 2020).

Or, from non-Western frameworks, there are similarly pluralist concepts that are not merely driven by pragmatic needs to agree, but rather an acknowledgement of different values

that also serve a public good. For example, African relationality has several concepts of pluralist agreement like the Yorùbá concept of “neighborliness,” which accounts for differences in beliefs while cooperating (Badru, 2020). Islam also proposes a variety of pluralist ethical decision-making frameworks (Goodman, 2014). In addition to Islam’s virtue ethics of friendship and patience, Averroës elaborates in *The Decisive Treatise* that truth can be uncovered along multiple paths through conversations (Averroës, 2017). This approach resonates well with Chinese Confucian virtue ethics (Angle & Slote, 2013) which calls for a balance between profit and ethics, benevolence and self-cultivation. All these traditions are available for us to debate. Whereas unfortunately for China, which enjoys such a proud, long tradition in global ethics, the Chinese government claims to follow some Confucian ideals while shunning viewpoint diversity in favor of totalitarian control. Americans can protest surveillance and other algorithmic interventions, but the Chinese government uses AI for its purposes of maintaining control, turning to mass surveillance powered by big data.

The AI context which the Chinese people currently live in should serve as a warning to Americans, which is why our already vociferously diverse debates should increase in scope and volume rather than decrease. Juxtaposing the American debate with China’s lack of discussion, it is possible to reveal flawed American perspectives, especially ones that urge sacrificing ethics because these supposedly interfere with innovation. On the contrary, such conversations encourage a better and safer AI development for Americans, one that can better account for how these AI will interact with humanity, and, which, if any high-risk models, should be created.

## Literature Review

With the Biden Administration's recently enacted ban on semiconductor exports to China, discussion surrounding U.S.-China competition has demonstrated to many Americans the need to reconsider the value of ethics in a global AI arms race. Let us first consider China's government, its AI policies, and military perspectives before surveying the diverse commentary in the United States, starting with the government and military perspectives, and moving toward industry, academic, and NGO perspectives.

### AI Ethics in China

While Americans spend a lot of time arguing about what ethics principles algorithms should follow, China offers a monolithic definition of ethics: Algorithms are ethical if they serve the state (Chinese Communist Party, 2022). For China, there's a clear division between AI made by corporations and governmental AI. Corporate AI is heavily regulated, examined to make sure they are in line with party ideals. Yet, when the government uses AI, there are few limits; if AI is required for government purposes, then the only ethical requirement is that the algorithm serve national interests. Due to the Chinese leadership's need for AI tools to control the state, such government-run algorithms have no other purpose. In their *Position Paper of the People's Republic of China on Strengthening Ethical Governance of Artificial Intelligence*, there is an emphasis on making AI that is controllable. There is no mention of ethics values like equality or fairness, only reliability and capability (Chinese Communist Party, 2022). This definition of ethics suits the needs of the Chinese government, where AI is used as an instrument to preserve the ruling leadership's hold on the nation. For instance, in one article of the *Internet Information Service Algorithmic Recommendation Management*

*Provisions*, published by the Cyberspace Administration of China, engineers were instructed to evoke positive energy and advance algorithms in the direction of good, immediately followed by a warning that all such services must align with national interests (State Internet Information Office, 2021). Such association of social morality and ethics with the notion of state security further clarifies the Chinese government perspective that ethics only exists as a means to the state's preservation. The papers both address "enhanced risk awareness" and "safety of AI" as key goals in the development of "ethical AI," which they define as measures that ensure a nation's stability.

### **Chinese Military Investment in AI**

In China, military technology serves a centralized plan for what it deems are national security issues and for competition with the United States (Hannas & Tatlow, 2020; Diamond & Schell, 2019). In 2017, the Ministry of Science and Technology of China assembled experts from Chinese universities, industry, and government to draft the *New Generation of Artificial Intelligence Development Plan* (2017). According to the *China Global Television Network*, China is keen to export unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), but still suffers from several weaknesses in accuracy that fail to compete with American military technology. In other respects, the competition appears much closer: China now has hypersonic missiles that evade most defenses, a technology still under development in the U.S. But China has not been in any wars in the last 45 years (Gale, 2022). Despite being relatively inactive in the combat field, China has found a renewed focus on developing military applications of AI, with the Chinese military spending an estimated 1.6 billion annually in AI endeavors (Fedasiuk, Melot, & Murphy, 2021).

China's motivation in pursuing this matter also stems from U.S. investment into similar technology, as both countries have published government reports labeling the other as a critical threat (N. Xu, 2023). In light of the increased usage of AI within military contexts, China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs published their stance on the governance of such matters. Espousing values of open international communication and global cooperation, the paper asserts that ethics is a necessity and that the "military application of artificial intelligence should not become a tool for waging war and pursuing hegemony" [in Chinese in the original, translation by author] (Department of Arms Control, 2023). While their position aligns with American ideals in theory, the Chinese government's usage of similar technologies for invasive surveillance practices only further demonstrates the difference in defining ethics between the U.S. and China. China's involvement in military usages of AI partly derives from attempts to improve surveillance capabilities, a practice which has been consistently used to target minority groups. Both the United States and China have a history of surveilling and harming marginalized groups, especially Black Americans who remain disproportionately incarcerated and algorithmically surveilled (Benjamin, 2019) and American Muslims, whom the U.S. government subjected to increased surveillance after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks (Byng, 2008). However, China engages in fewer racial justice conversations for several reasons. First, ideologically, communism is supposed to unite all races. And second, there is much greater racial homogeneity in China. Due to the disproportional race demographic in China, the government is able to use AI to profile minorities. In the United States, however, interacting with people of different racial backgrounds is common, which has led to the formation of ethical guidelines which ensure the fair treatment of all. China's polarized racial demographics make it much rarer for these cross-cultural exchanges, leading to a different idea of ethical

policy. Hence, ethics remain constricted to a narrow obligation to national security rather than social well-being of minority groups.

### **Chinese Use of AI in Centralized Security**

Granted, every nation seeks stability and security, but China's use of algorithms for national security focuses on its preoccupation that their non-Han ethnic groups present a terrorist threat (Keck, 2018). Asserting a need for counter-terrorist measures against such groups, the Chinese government has deployed a centralized security approach including extensive algorithmic surveillance, GPS tracking, voice and facial recognition technologies, and other algorithmic systems. Yet, while China and America compete for AI superiority, American tech corporations still demonstrate their willingness to collaborate with China's targeted surveillance efforts.

Luckily for Americans in this context, employees can protest what their companies do, just as our newspapers and researchers are free to criticize tech corporations. Such a freedom of speech must be seen as inseparable from our own spirit of innovation and decentralized cultures and economy. In contrast, China's major disadvantage is its centralization. For all their efforts to devote national energies to sustaining party power, they find themselves lagging behind in innovation.

### **China's Centralized Economy and AI**

Confronting such disadvantages, China encourages its tech corporations to present centralization as an advantage. For example, a Chinese AI corporation outlined the advantages they perceived in the Chinese marketplace as government policies which promote AI and the



vast data reserves China holds. All that data fuels China's AI surveillance economy, which appears to be booming. Yet, some Chinese observers have noted the persistent problem that Chinese AI remains disadvantaged by a lack of high-level expertise in the workforce and a general dearth of understanding about the underlying theory behind AI (AI扑社, 2020). This education gap results from the misplaced priority of centralization. In contrast, the American university and corporate research context produces diverse ideas that are highly contested (Allen, 2019). While it would seem China has the advantage of a singular focus on national well-being, the priority of preserving party power at all costs undermines both educational and industry innovation.

As a result of these large education and innovation gaps, some Chinese start-ups take advantage of the situation by over-promising potential AI applications, which has led to a run of bankruptcies in Chinese AI start-ups. Without the proper base of understanding for AI technologies, investors and venture capitalists in China have been more willing to fund such initiatives. Increased scrutiny by the organization AI扑社 has revealed this influx of investment to harbor a significant amount of fraud. This environment of deception is only made possible by a deficiency in AI understanding. Moreover, the government regulations which typically prevent this type of behavior fail to extend to smaller start-ups (AI扑社, 2020).

### **American Military Investment in AI**

Despite all of the CCP's self-inflicted disadvantages in their race to AI supremacy, they remain a formidable competitor Americans must take seriously. Stanford University Professor and Hoover Institution Director, Dr. Condoleezza Rice has long reminded policy advisors to consider China's strategic interests and their harm to the United States: "China's success in

controlling the balance of power depends in large part on America's reaction to the challenge” (Rice, 2000). Americans concerned about China urge U.S. tech corporations to maintain the American edge in experience and innovation, because China has already shown how quickly it can catch up to American levels of production and technological development (Hannas & Tatlow, 2020). In 2021, the U.S. National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence describes how in the period of twenty years China has developed from a “non-competitor” into a “near peer” and clearly asserts America’s role is to “win” the AI race: “...we must win the AI competition that is intensifying strategic competition with China... We take seriously China’s ambition to surpass the United States as the world’s AI leader within a decade.” (Schmidt et al., 2021, p.2). Given such concern about China’s goal of surpassing the U.S., Project Maven seemed to many China watchers, especially Schmidt as he was stepping down from his role as Alphabet’s CEO, as the right type of relationship between national defense and industry. Project Maven hoped to enlist the help of Google engineers to develop more precise drone targeting technology by using better AI for computer vision. Many observers noted that at the same time as Google contracted with Project Maven in late 2017, by 2018 Google quietly changed its longstanding slogan from “don’t be evil” to “do the right thing,” (Crofts & van Rijswijk, 2020). However, many Google employees demanded that Google stick to the principles they agreed to work. Many protested that they had signed on to build civilian technologies, not military ones, and refused to work on a project whose goal was to eliminate human targets more efficiently. 4,500 Googlers signed the letter protesting:

**We cannot outsource the moral responsibility of our technologies to third parties.** Google’s stated values make this clear: *Every one of our users is trusting us. Never jeopardize that. Ever.* This contract puts Google’s

reputation at risk and stands in direct opposition to our core values. **Building this technology to assist the U.S. Government in military surveillance – and potentially lethal outcomes – is not acceptable.**

(Letter to Google C.E.O., 2018; bold and italics in the original) Arguing with a rhetoric of urgency in staccato sentences and bolded fonts, these protesters reminded the public of Google's obligations to user safety given the highly invasive roles their algorithms play in real lives. Indeed, the worker protests highlighted the fact that in addition to helping people search for answers and shop, Google surveils its users, and if involved in the Pentagon project, it may even kill them. "Caught flat-footed" by the protest, Google ultimately decided against renewing the contract and announced guiding principles for future AI projects that forbid work on weapons and surveillance projects "violating internationally accepted norms." (Simonite, 2021). Critics of the Google protests pointed to China as a nation that would better support AI development, given that with harsher labor laws, employees could not walk out of such important projects without notice (Zheng, Yang, & Shen 2022). Surely, an authoritarian workplace secures silence and conformity, but without such discussion other developments also remain stunted.

While China's outward lack of dissent among workers may seem appealing to ethics critics, to maintain such a system, they sacrifice the democratic virtues of free speech and innovation that America proudly espouses. For example, China has no independent labor unions. Rather, all unions in China are required to register with the All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU), an organization that has shown it prioritizes the wishes of the government and the corporations themselves over its union members. Due to an increase in corporate power, the ACFTU frequently needs to contact employers for permission to represent

their workforce, an arrangement that often leads to concessions on the behalf of employees. NYU Law professor Cynthia Estlund described the U.S. and China's difference in labor law as "China is committed to maintaining its monopolistic, party-controlled union structure, while unions in the U.S., for all their troubles, are independent of the government" (Estlund, 2015). Because of the inefficacy of labor unions in China, corporations rarely face strikes or walk-outs from their workers. The trade-off, however, remains that China has less motivation to innovate and negotiate with labor forces.

In America, however, such freedoms of expression are not mutually exclusive with achieving progress. Consider how corporate military contracts came roaring back after 2020. While many protests rocked the Google campus in 2018, those who believed technology corporations have an obligation to serve American national security stepped up. Palantir took over the Project Maven contract, and eventually Google quietly circled back to the Pentagon. As of late 2022, Google has gained the increased security clearing Amazon and Microsoft enjoy as Google continues to work on military projects. In December 2022, the Pentagon reported that Amazon, Google, Microsoft, and Oracle received a cloud-computing contract that can reach as high as \$9 billion total through 2028 (Novett, 2022). While corporate tech dissent appears to have been quelled by the outcome of Project Maven, the conversation has simply moved elsewhere (Simonite, 2021). Google, despite the public backlash they initially received, is back and stronger than ever in the military tech game. Meanwhile, Microsoft, long criticized for "naively giving" China too much of American technology in a belief that cultivating technological cooperation will better China-American relations, has also revised its position on China (Lundvall & Rikap, 2022). These events demonstrate that American free speech and

criticism of corporations promote a larger public awareness that has not undermined corporate abilities to serve the Department of Defense.

Such debates on technology's role within military and diplomatic settings are only possible in America. For American military personnel, conversations about technology and ethics are vital. Soldiers and medics serving in the field, like one of the authors of this paper, have emphasized the importance of technological transparency, especially after witnessing first-hand the fatal Black Hawk training exercise in 2020 (Altman, 2020). Areas such as trauma care, surveillance, communications, and vehicle safety are particularly critical, and highlight the necessity of discussions about technology and their usage. Through this case and others, it has become apparent that frequent correspondence via reports from the field and conversations about algorithmic harms is not only necessary, but also helps produce better military technology that serves our soldiers and the public.

### **Public Conversations about Algorithms in the United States.**

In addition to serving military personnel and civilians, public conversations about algorithms may lead to greater innovation. Boudreaux maintains that even “supposedly unethical actors [China] also care about operational and strategic risks—after all, it's not in their interests to build uncontrollable or proliferating systems that could destabilize their authoritarian regimes” (Boudreaux, 2019). He highlights the importance of ethics in AI as a necessary global pursuit, which counters this ethics gap in China. Some contrary views also demonstrate the need for better ethics discussions than we currently have. In a paper titled “The Uselessness of AI Ethics” published in 2022, Munn claims that ethical principles are too abstract to be of use, and fail to lessen racial, social, and environmental losses caused by AI. He argues that AI ethics “is a dangerous distraction, diverting immense financial and human

resources away from potentially more effective activity” (Munn, 2022). This statement accurately diagnoses the lack of enforceability and the amount of time and energy devoted to AI ethics. Yet, its claim that AI ethics and AI development are competing for similar resources remains incorrect, as augmenting development requires increased computational power and data quantity while augmenting ethics instead necessitates increased oversight and data quality.

### **Discussion**

Where some other fields can provide analogies, the question remains about which ethics frameworks companies follow, since there is no official regulation. In a 2021 study, senior research officer for digital technologies with the National Research Council of Canada, Stephen Downes, claimed that the issue with ethics was the lack of common agreement on guiding principles, and that consensus only existed in specific cultural, professional, or social groups (Downes, 2021). This observation, however, was not due to an inherent flaw in ethics, but in the absence of diversity among those developing ethical standards. While there may be many competing ethics frameworks as well as different in-house rules for every corporation, there are widely accepted professional standards from organizations like the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) and the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE). Such organizations are not present in China since the government defines the meaning and parameters of AI ethics. For instance, fairness and quality of datasets remains an integral part of developing AI regardless of one’s opinions on ethics. While critics often complain that the entire discussion is a distraction from innovation, we have proven this statement to be untrue.

## Conclusion

Regarding the question of how AI ethics affects the global power dynamic between the U.S. and China, RAND Policy Analyst Benjamin Boudreaux states: “Instead of worrying about an ethics gap, U.S. policymakers and the military community could proudly demonstrate a commitment to leading in AI ethics, and build standards of responsible AI behavior reflecting American values that can rally the international community” (Boudreaux, 2019). By pursuing ethics, America is not put at a disadvantage compared to less ethical nations. If we must convince ourselves to forgo ethics for the development of some AI system, then such a system should not be built. For as an end goal, AI should be used for the betterment of society, a metric that depends on ethics and the needs of the overall populace. While eschewing ethics may appear profitable or more competitive in the short term, our study of the state of AI in China shows the government’s definition of ethics of serving its interests at all costs has also sacrificed innovation and technical excellence in the classrooms, in industry, and on the battlefield. As China’s flaws materialize in their system that forgoes ethics for fast AI development and short-term progress, Americans should take note and play the long game. As Americans debate outloud, protest, and try out different directions, we witness our ability to maintain an innovative spirit *because of*, not despite the challenges we face. In asking about algorithmic ethics, Americans have a better chance of leading the global industry rather than succumbing to a disastrous race to the bottom.

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