



中國傳媒大學
COMMUNICATION UNIVERSITY OF CHINA



Institute for a Community
with Shared Future
人類命運共同體研究院



The Dawn of a New Era in Global AI Governance **China's Vision for Inclusive Cooperation Through WAICO**



By Mr. Imran Bhatti, Member Board of Experts,
Pakistan Research Center for a Community with Shared
Future (PRCCSF), Islamabad

Published on 18th July 2026

Twenty-nine countries sent representatives to Shanghai this week to sign the paperwork founding the World Artificial Intelligence Cooperation Organization — WAICO, if you want the acronym. China, Pakistan, Russia, Indonesia, Kazakhstan and Laos were among the signatories, all agreeing to a multilateral framework for AI that's supposed to be more responsible, more equitable, and more of a joint effort than what we've seen so far.



I work in policy and cybersecurity — governance, risk management, international development, that kind of thing — and my honest read is that this matters more than most launch-day announcements do. China isn't just checking an administrative box here. WAICO looks like a real attempt to answer a hard question: how do you handle something as disruptive as AI without letting a handful of countries run the table?

China's Role in Shaping Global AI Norms

China's pitch has always been that AI development needs guardrails — ethical ones, security ones, developmental ones — alongside the push for innovation. Setting up WAICO in Shanghai fits that pattern. And unlike some of the narrower, more exclusive clubs that have formed around AI governance elsewhere, this one is built so countries can join as equals no matter where they currently stand technologically. At least that's the intent.

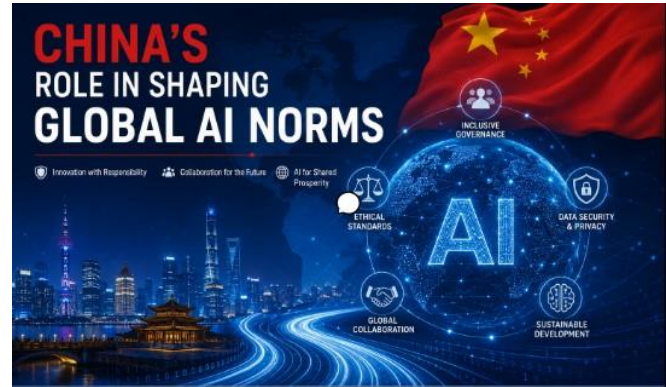
That's a big deal for developing economies especially. Plenty of countries across Asia, Africa and Latin America sit on enormous amounts of data and have young, fast-growing populations, but they rarely get a real say in how global AI standards get written. WAICO's answer is knowledge-sharing, joint research, capacity building, and standards flexible enough to respect a country's own sovereignty rather than imposing one template on everyone.

Pakistan joining makes sense given how close the relationship with China already is. The Belt and Road Initiative already deepened cooperation on digital infrastructure, smart cities and connectivity —

WAICO is really just the AI extension of that same partnership, and it gives Pakistani researchers, startups and policymakers a chance to bring local context into a global conversation.

Two Competing Models: Cooperation Versus Fragmentation

Let's be honest about where global AI stands right now: it's competitive, sometimes fractured, and a small group of powers control most of the foundational models, the data flows, and the standards everyone else has to work around. That concentration creates dependency. It widens the gap between AI haves and have-nots. And it chips away at trust between nations that are supposed to be working toward the same goals.



WAICO's bet is that cooperation built on mutual benefit beats control held by a handful of actors.

Choosing Shanghai as the founding location wasn't an accident — it's a commercial and innovation hub, and it signals that China is comfortable with open dialogue rather than closed-door dealmaking. The agreement leans heavily on language about mutual benefit, respecting different development paths, and using AI to tackle problems that don't respect borders: climate change, healthcare access, food security, and the pressures of rapid urbanization.

As someone who spends a lot of time thinking about security, I'll admit the emphasis on shared standards is the part I find most encouraging. AI systems come with their own bag of risks — adversarial attacks, data poisoning, biased models, and vulnerabilities baked into the data centers running all of this. Getting countries to coordinate on secure-by-design principles and incident response won't be easy, but it's exactly the kind of thing that's much harder to do alone.

What Developing Nations Stand to Gain

For Pakistan, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Laos and countries in a similar position, joining WAICO could mean real, practical gains:



- Training and education — joint programs, scholarships and research exchanges that grow AI talent at home instead of exporting it.
- Infrastructure support — help building sovereign data centers, high-performance computing, and secure connectivity.
- Applications that actually match local needs — AI for agriculture, disaster response, public health and e-governance, the areas where developing nations feel the pinch most.
- A hand in writing policy — frameworks that help governments regulate AI without choking off innovation or ignoring privacy and security.

None of this is guaranteed to work perfectly, but it's a meaningfully different model from approaches that, whether by design or by accident, end up restricting technology transfer or forcing standards built for wealthier economies onto everyone else.

The Real Test Is Implementation

Signing an agreement is the easy part. What happens next is where things usually fall apart — or don't. Getting dozens of countries with different interests to actually align, spreading resources fairly, keeping the technology from fragmenting anyway, and holding the whole thing together through geopolitical friction: none of that is trivial.

So far China has played this carefully, hosting the founding event and pushing consensus over unilateral decisions. Whether that holds will come down to how transparent WAICO's internal governance actually is, whether it sets deliverables that mean something, and whether progress gets measured honestly — pilot projects, shared datasets with real safeguards, regular check-ins on what's working and what isn't.

There's also a structural question. WAICO would do well to take the parts of existing international bodies that function and skip the bureaucratic bloat that slows the rest down. Cybersecurity and data protection can't be an afterthought here — they need to be built in from day one if member states are going to trust each other enough to actually share anything.

It would also help to bring in the private sector, universities and civil society, not just government delegations. Public-private partnerships tend to get things done faster, and they're more likely to make sure any benefits reach ordinary people rather than stopping at the ministerial level.

A Forward-Looking Vision

Underneath all of this is a fairly simple idea: AI is too consequential to leave entirely to markets or to whichever handful of countries got there first. China is framing it instead as something closer to a public good — meant to serve human development, cultural diversity and environmental sustainability rather than any one nation's advantage. Whether that framing holds up in practice is a fair question, but it's the stated goal.



For people working in policy, technology and security, this opens up real work to do. Governance specialists, cybersecurity people, AI ethicists — someone has to turn a high-level agreement into actual national strategy, and that's not a small job.

A Few Recommendations

- Invest seriously in STEM education, AI research hubs and vocational training that match each country's own development priorities.
- Push for shared standards on transparency, accountability, bias and cybersecurity that actually work across borders, not just on paper.
- Back open-source contributions and startups from developing countries instead of letting a few large players dominate by default.
- Build in real evaluation — track what's working, adjust what isn't, and don't be afraid to admit when something needs fixing.
- Use WAICO to complement existing regional bodies rather than compete with them or duplicate their work.



中国传媒大学
COMMUNICATION UNIVERSITY OF CHINA



Institute for a Community
with Shared Future
人类命运共同体研究院

The Shanghai signing was more than a photo opportunity. It's a bet on a version of the future where AI development isn't a zero-sum race, and where no country is simply priced out of the conversation. Whether China follows through is something we'll only know with time, but the intent behind founding WAICO looks genuine, at least on paper.

Technology is only going to keep shaping geopolitics and everyday life more than it already does, and frameworks like this offer something other than pure competition. Cooperation over confrontation, inclusion over exclusion — that's the wager. It's not guaranteed to pay off, but it's a better starting point than most of the alternatives on the table right now.

What comes next needs sustained effort, real trust between partners who don't always trust each other, and governance flexible enough to adapt as circumstances change. Shanghai gave this a solid foundation. What gets built on top of it is still an open question.