

Opinion – AI Nationalism and the Multipolar Future

Written by Nicholas Morieson

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NICHOLAS MORIESON, OCT 7 2025

Artificial intelligence is often portrayed as a universal technology, promising the same tools and opportunities to all. However, it may be becoming one of the most parochial projects of our time. Nations are rewriting code to mirror their own traditions, values, and political systems. AI Nationalism, or the use of artificial intelligence to advance national interests – by protecting domestic industries, projecting power abroad, and embedding national values into code – is becoming more prevalent globally. Much of the policy debate treats AI Nationalism as protectionist measures designed to subsidise local firms, control chip exports, and ensure that data remains within national borders. For example, Susan Aaronson has rightly warned that such policies may backfire by reducing global innovation and trust. She is also correct when she argues that AI Nationalism will divide the world into “AI haves and have-nots” or wealthy nations producing their own AI systems, and poorer ones reliant on imports.

Others describe the trend as a “digital cold war.” Mark Esposito, writing for the World Economic Forum, notes that a decoupling between China and the United States could force their allies into rigid technological blocs, leaving other states to navigate separate digital universes with incompatible standards and restricted flows of hardware and data. This economic and geopolitical framing is essential, but it is not the whole story. For China and India especially, AI sovereignty is not merely about protecting jobs or subsidising industries. It is about ensuring that the values and political systems embedded in AI are not dictated by Washington. Both governments draw on nationalist and civilizational narratives to justify sovereignty over data, infrastructure, and algorithms.

The United States leads the world in technological innovation, including in AI. The Trump Administration is eager to protect this advantage, particularly because it sees AI as having the “potential to reshape the global balance of power”. Maintaining America’s “unquestioned and unchallenged global technological dominance”, according to President Trump, is “a national security imperative for the United States”. As a result of this national security framing, Washington is increasingly attempting to restrict Chinese access to high-speed chips and technologies vital to the development of AI.

It should not be surprising that Beijing seeks to develop and export its own AI technology. Beijing’s New Generation AI Development Plan insists that AI must embody “Chinese characteristics,” strengthen party control, and insulate society from Western ideological influence. In a similar way, India’s Bharatiya Janata Party government has argued that AI must reflect India’s civilizational values and developmental priorities. In both cases, digital sovereignty is presented as non-negotiable. In China’s AI discourse there is tension between rhetoric and reality. On the world’s stage, Beijing presents itself as a champion of international cooperation. In 2023, Xi claimed that his vision for cyberspace would enhance “mutual learning between civilizations”. China’s Global AI Governance Initiative speaks of “the progress of human civilization,” while the World Internet Conference is branded around “digital civilization” and “a shared future for mankind”. This language suggests inclusivity and universalism. However, Chinese AI policy is far more nationalist in practice.

Within China, official plans stress self-reliance and control, particularly in response to U.S. export restrictions. Chinese AI development is consistently tied to national security, economic sovereignty, and party authority. Algorithms must embody “socialist core values,” embedding ideological conformity and legitimising the marginalisation of party critics. Internationally, Beijing’s efforts to shape governance standards are tied to securing supply chains, protecting access to advanced chips, and expanding markets for Chinese firms. Chinese AI discourse

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operates on two registers. At the nationalist level, official plans stress sovereignty, security, and Party control. At the civilizational level, Xi Jinping frequently invokes “five thousand years of continuous civilization” and portrays his Communist Party as custodian of this legacy. Initiatives such as the 2025 AI-backed Chinese language database aim to digitise oracle bones, ancient texts, and inscriptions to build a “Chinese civilization corpus” for AI. Universities and firms have launched projects like GujiBERT and SikuGPT to process classical texts, while heritage-focused models such as ICH-Qwen train on intangible cultural heritage sources. These initiatives transform heritage into AI infrastructure, reinforcing national identity at home and projecting Chinese language and culture abroad.

India’s AI Nationalism is less about universalist diplomacy and more about anchoring technology in civilizational revival. The government has invested heavily in programs that fuse heritage with innovation. The Science and Heritage Research Initiative and Indian Heritage in Digital Space projects digitise ancient sites such as Ajanta, Ellora, and Dwarka. The *Gyan Bharatam* mission aims to preserve and digitise manuscripts, while AI4Bharat and Bhashini develop Indian-language tools to ensure AI reflects the country’s linguistic diversity. In health, initiatives link AI with Ayurveda and “ayurgenomics,” combining modern genomics with traditional medicine. India’s leaders are explicit about the civilizational dimension. Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Foreign Minister Subrahmanyam Jaishankar frequently describe India as a civilizational state undergoing renewal, rooted in ancient traditions but embracing modern technology. For India, AI sovereignty is part of its claim to independent authority in a multipolar world. It projects soft power by digitising heritage and promoting Indian knowledge systems abroad, while reinforcing domestic legitimacy by framing modernization as consistent with India’s civilizational past.

What can we learn from this discussion of AI Nationalism? China and India share the conviction that AI must reflect their unique civilizational identities and values rather than Western liberal norms. Both invest in heritage-based AI projects, including digitising manuscripts, building language corpora, encoding traditions into models. Both use civilizational rhetoric to justify sovereignty over data, infrastructure, and algorithms. However, China wraps its AI Nationalism in internationalist rhetoric, presenting itself as protector of “digital civilization” for all, while India is more direct, arguing that its techno-civilizational vision is a proud assertion of heritage and diversity with little emphasis on universalism. China’s approach is authoritarian and centralized, embedding party ideology in algorithms. India’s is comparatively pluralist, but is also designed to align AI with a Hindu civilizational identity that legitimises its rise as a major power.

If we view AI Nationalism only through the lens of protectionism, we miss its deeper significance. The race for AI supremacy is as much about legitimacy, identity, and the authority to decide which values will be embedded in infrastructures that increasingly govern human life as it is about economics. For Beijing and Delhi, what Washington calls “universal” principles are exclusively Western, and irrelevant beyond the borders of the West. AI Nationalism, then, is a way of ending the presumption that any single set of norms should govern the world, and of asserting instead that technology must reflect the values of each culture.

China and India represent two versions of AI Nationalism. China cloaks its nationalism in internationalist rhetoric, presenting itself as custodian of “digital civilization”, while in practice embedding party ideology into algorithms. India is more direct, fusing heritage and diversity into its AI projects while continuing to rely on American security guarantees. Despite their differences, both are determined to secure digital sovereignty, align AI with their civilizational traditions, and hasten the arrival of a multipolar order. Thus, what begins as AI Nationalism may, in fact, be part of the larger project of building a multipolar world where no single governance model dominates.

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