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A Global Chess Match: How Geopolitical Competition Shapes Artificial Intelligence Safety

Policy in the United States and China

In November of 2023, a relatively obscure Beijing-based startup called 01.AI shot to the top of artificial intelligence leaderboards with its state-of-the-art model Yi-34B, outscoring the top models of American giants like OpenAI, Meta, and Google on human expert-level reasoning and problem-solving tasks (Knight, 2024). CEO Kai-Fu Lee stated his goal was to inspire the next wave of AI-native "killer apps" – apps like TikTok, Uber, Instagram, and Temu – that are popular across the globe (Mozur et al., 2024). Yet sharp-eyed developers noticed that 01.AI's model was almost entirely based on Meta's highly powerful, open-source generative LLaMA models. This reflected a broader trend: industry experts currently believe that the models Chinese companies build from scratch "aren't very good", leading to "Chinese companies leveraging American open-source technologies to play catch-up" (Mozur et al., 2024). But if China's AI advancements will eventually give it an economic or military edge – such as by creating Chinese-owned, AI-powered globally influential "killer apps" – then the competition between American AI and Chinese AI is deeply intertwined with national security and global hegemony.

I. Artificial Intelligence: Risk and Reward

As 01.AI's story demonstrates, next-generation artificial intelligence has the potential to transform the global economy, and the global balance of power. According to an analysis by PwC, in 2030 AI might contribute as much as $15.7 trillion to the global economy, nearly as much as China's entire gross domestic product (PwC, 2017). This windfall will

disproportionately benefit countries with technological dominance, shifting the global economic balance. Artificial intelligence may influence global political dynamics, as powerful models enable hostile "deepfake" attacks on democratic processes, or create new forms of warfare and military firepower (TED, 2023). Even the physical resources needed to fuel AI revolutions, particularly semiconductor chips, are bought and sold along geopolitical lines. Since technological superiority in AI directly translates to political, military, and economic power, countries are encouraged to vie for geopolitical and technological power in an "AI arms race".

In this arms race, the United States and China, the world's largest technological superpowers, are both developing highly advanced artificial intelligence systems. In the process, each nation must consider how to build *safe* artificial intelligence. *Safety* refers to minimizing the potential risks of deploying powerful AI in the real world. These potential risks range from privacy violations and large-scale social manipulation to rogue AI agents with misaligned interests (Bostrom, 2018). If safety is not prioritized for highly capable models, autonomous and uncontrollable AI, accelerated development of dangerous weapons, systematic discrimination, or widespread manipulation are all plausible scenarios. Currently, over 85% of industry experts agree that "generative AI presents enough of a threat that globally agreed generative AI governance is required" (Maslej et al., 2024). But without intentional government intervention to ensure safe and responsible development, powerful computational intelligence – that already beats human experts on several benchmarks – presents large, and even existential, risks to human well-being (Maslej et al., 2024).

Many policy schemes have been proposed over the past few decades to promote AI safety, such as emergency safety pauses on development, mandatory testing and certification for public models, built-in guardrails against misuse of powerful models, and other forms of strong

regulatory oversight (Huttenlocher et al., 2023). Some of these ideas have been called for, or are under consideration, in both the United States and China. However, some safety practices would also require halting or handicapping some state-of-the-art research, slowing down overall AI development in the nations that choose to implement them. AI power directly aligns with global power, so implementing certain safety policies has important geopolitical implications.

Motivated by these factors, in this paper, I will study how geopolitical competition between the United States and China shapes the specific artificial intelligence policies that are implemented. I will focus on the dual goals of *AI advancement* and *AI safety*, and argue that each nation's desire to win the "AI arms race", driving a reluctance to slow down AI advancements via regulation, is incentivizing certain unsafe policy decisions and threatening AI safety efforts around the world. I will first introduce existing scholarly literature and public sphere conversation on the history of the geopolitical and technological dynamic between the United States and China, considering both collaborative and competitive perspectives. Finally, I will provide an original analysis of AI policies in the United States and China, assessing how geopolitical competition is shaping safety in each country.

II. Shared Global Mission or International Arms Race?

AI safety is a fundamentally global issue, as dangerous AI in any one nation can easily influence the whole world. Thus global collaboration, through organizations like the United Nations, could help implement AI safety across borders. In a 2023 report, the UN AI Advisory Body assessed the difficulty of institutionalizing certain safety practices. In contrast with "softer" safety actions like "preparing a horizon-scanning report" and "convening stakeholders regularly", it deemed many crucial functions, such as collectively developed off-switches for models, "information sharing mechanisms", and "elaborate oversight and verification schemes"

as extremely difficult to institutionalize (*Interim Report: Governing AI for Humanity*, 2023). These safety policies require countries to cede power to international bodies, allowing foreign parties control over the nation's most powerful technology. It is no coincidence that the "hardest" policies to institutionalize also most directly allow AI safety to actually be enforced, and are most likely to impede technological advancements.

This challenge was realized at the 2023 AI Safety Summit, where 30 countries, including the United States and China, signed the Bletchley Declaration. The Declaration affirmed that AI's use should be "human-centric, trustworthy, and responsible", and the signing parties explicitly resolved to build an understanding of shared AI safety risks and enact "risk-based policies" specific to each party's "national circumstances" (*The Bletchley Declaration*, 2023). But while this agreement was heralded as a foundational step towards establishing global conversation and mitigating AI's risks, in terms of actionable safety policy, it left much to be desired. In fact, the Declaration acknowledged on multiple occasions each nation's autonomy, foreshadowing potential disagreement over policies with more binding legal power.

Although global AI safety movements have not yet produced concrete action, the United States and China – the most important players in AI safety – do share a long history of fruitful collaboration in AI research. In 2019, the two nations alone contributed 65% of the world's most highly cited AI research, with 24% of these coming from collaborative work between American and Chinese researchers (Acharya & Dunn, 2022). Moreover, in 2024 researchers originally from China made up 38% of top AI researchers employed in the United States, and the majority of Chinese nationals that complete doctorates at U.S. institutions end up staying in the country, providing crucial venues for intellectual cross-pollination (Mozur & Metz, 2024). In the past, AI research in both the United States and China has benefited significantly from the U.S.-China

collaboration, thanks to the global nature of the field's top venues, conferences, and institutions. This trend has been tentatively reinforced by the November 2023 agreement between the U.S. President Joe Biden and Chinese General Secretary Xi Jinping to open a new bilateral channel for discussion and consensus-building around artificial intelligence. Should collaborative efforts maintain momentum, the United States and China could engage in productive and open dialogue about AI risk mitigation and safety practices.

On the other hand, some scholars believe that geopolitical rivalry between the U.S. and China is forcing a dangerous competition over AI dominance. In a 2018 *International Affairs* paper*,* authors Andrew Kennedy and Darren Lim outlined what the "innovation imperative" – that "rising states", like China, must become leaders in technology to catch up to the "dominant state", like the United States, which could cause strategic competition (Kennedy & Lim, 2018). This suggests that technological growth is inherently a geopolitical dynamic, and that growing AI capabilities in China may threaten U.S. hegemony, prompting more competition-oriented technological policy worldwide. Their theories are corroborated by aggressive policy actions by both countries, such as moves to restrict semiconductor exports and control cutting-edge chip development, or the recent Congressional push to force Chinese company ByteDance to sell off the U.S. branch of TikTok over data privacy and national security concerns. U.S. legislators have also been increasingly concerned about Chinese espionage, even prosecuting Chinese nationals accused of transmitting AI secrets from U.S. technological companies (Mozur & Metz, 2024). Continued competitive policies could further increase the aggression of global AI development.

Both nations' intentions for artificial intelligence development are already revealed through their existing written policies, which reflect overarching U.S.-China relations. A 2022 *AI & Society* study found that policies in both countries state a desire for global leadership in AI and

acknowledge the importance of national values in AI development (Hine & Floridi). The United States first began implementing AI policy in 2016, under the Obama administration. Since then, HAI has reported consistent increases in the level of governance, with 25 total regulations to date (Maslej et al., 2024). The 2020 "American Artificial Intelligence Initiative" report explicitly stated that "global leadership in AI matters" and placed value on protection "against strategic competitors and foreign adversaries" (Hine & Floridi, 2022). Similarly, China created its first piece of artificial intelligence policy in 2017 with "A New Generation AI Development Plan", which set the national goal of becoming "the world's primary AI innovation center" by 2030 (Hine & Floridi, 2022). It established the nation's desire to "create new competitive advantage" with AI, and to "achieve world-leading levels" in AI by 2030, "becoming a leading innovation-style nation" (Webster et al., 2017). This echoes broader trends in China's development, as the nation aims to become more technologically advanced and globally competitive in new domains like social media, personal computing, and artificial intelligence.

Clearly, each country's approach to AI governance attempts to balance the competing influences of nationalist ideals, geopolitical competition, and global safety. While significant work has analyzed the intricacies of Sino-American collaboration and competition on technology, there has been little research focused on how U.S.-China geopolitics influences AI safety policy. But by understanding the impact of geopolitics on the development of safe AI, we can better mitigate AI's global dangers, and democratize these next-generation technologies. In the remainder of this paper, I analyze how artificial intelligence safety in the U.S. and China has been influenced by geopolitics. To draw my conclusions, I analyzed both American public and private sphere rhetoric around AI safety, and specific policy case studies from both the U.S. and China. I focus on the distinction between *band-aid policy* – governance approaches that address

only singular, high-profile safety concerns – and *foundational policy* – legislation that creates broad and enforceable standards to promote safety across the board. This framework is directly shaped by geopolitical competition, as *foundational policies* implement more drastic provisions and pose a greater threat to AI progress, compared to *band-aid policies*.

III.   Case Study: AI Policy in China

An excellent example of *band-aid policies* are the binding regulations and new bureaucratic tools that have been implemented in China. Since 2017, the Chinese government has produced multiple pieces of public-facing legislation aiming to manage powerful AI systems. China's 2022 "Provisions on the Administration of Deep Synthesis Internet Information Services", addressing generative AI and particularly deepfakes, required companies to clearly label AI-generated content, verify identities, and ensure content "adheres to the correct political direction" and does not "disturb economic and social order" (Translate, 2022). Similarly, the 2021 "Provisions on the Management of Algorithmic Recommendations in Internet Information Services" established a government-controlled algorithm registry, in which developers would have to report the training and directions given to algorithms. It also required providers of recommender algorithms to "uphold mainstream value orientations'" and allow manual intervention on trending topics (Sheehan, 2023). In practice, the Chinese government can shut down registered models that promote non-mainstream content or controversial topics.

Taking this a step further, current drafts of broader regulation for all generative text models require that they embody national values, ensure the fidelity of input training data, protect intellectual property rights, while also giving the government the ability to shut down models for violations (Sheehan, 2023). Overall, China has clearly implemented firm regulations, placing responsibility on companies to follow stringent rules. These rules directly align with

individual, high-profile concerns the Chinese government has, such as AI systems disrupting political and social order. Though these actions represent band-aid policies, addressing just singular issues, they could actually pose significant hurdles to Chinese companies and researchers building frontier AI systems, limiting their training data and slowing down model deployment. However, China's published regulations only apply to AI algorithms "provided to the public", potentially excluding powerful AI systems built directly into enterprise or government applications (Sheehan, 2023). This lack of *foundational policies* in Chinese legislation leaves significant freedom for China to develop advanced and potentially unsafe AI at an increasingly past face.

The Chinese government has indeed, in practice, invested heavily in and even deployed artificial intelligence systems with unsafe implications, which are exempt from its public-facing band-aid policies. These include world-leading computer vision-based surveillance systems, which have been used to pursue large-scale population control in regions like Xinjiang, as well as AI-based military systems and even AI-enabled weaponry (Bresnick, 2024). Furthermore, China has been accused of using AI-generated political deepfakes to influence political processes in other nations, including in Taiwanese politics and even the 2020 United States election (Cohen et al., 2024). The Chinese government's use of AI clearly increases its political and military power domestically and around the world, but these use cases also deeply threaten global AI safety. Thus while China's *band-aid* regulations address key safety issues that could threaten domestic political and social order, it is clearly still a national priority to use AI for political, economic, and military advantage. Driven by the desire for geopolitical power, China is unwilling to self-impose *foundational* safety regulations restricting this advantage.

IV.   Case Study: AI Policy in the United States

Like China, recent United States policy decisions have also implemented *band-aid* safety policies. A national approach to AI safety was established in the 2023 White House Executive Order on the Safe, Secure, and Trustworthy Development and Use of Artificial Intelligence, created by President Biden. The Executive Order outlined concrete safety provisions particular to specific AI safety concerns, such as the synthesis of dangerous biological materials, and the spread of AI-enabled deceptive or fraudulent content. For example, it mandated the Department of Commerce to develop authentication and watermarking standards for AI-generated content (Biden, 2023). It also restricted the distribution of certain biological sequences, and increased security standards for sensitive national intellectual property. These highly action-oriented provisions addressed pressing and high-profile threats to national security and safety, but do not actually threaten to slow down frontier model development or American AI innovation, exemplifying *band-aid policy*.

In contrast, another section of the Executive Order targeted "dual-use foundation models" – massive, highly capable models representing the frontiers of artificial intelligence – creating some of the first safety provisions the United States has enacted against ultra-powerful, general-purpose systems (Biden, 2023). Specifically, the order requires companies to share with the Federal Government a record of training activity, and report on physical and cybersecurity protections in place. It also required companies and researchers to develop internal red-teaming and safety testing according to federal standards, and share results with the government. However, it also leaves significant leeway to technology companies and research labs, allowing them to develop their own evaluations under federal guidelines. Though American policymaking is always relatively slow, this still suggests the U.S. government was either unable or unwilling to implement *foundational safety policy*, at least in the moment. Overall, the Executive Order's

"whack-a-mole" approach to legislation – addressing just the low-hanging fruit and creating safety regulations for singular, narrow threats, while avoiding more impactful safety regulations – reflects a reluctance to legislate more broadly that is shaped by geopolitical rivalry.

Aside from the 2023 Executive Order, other U.S. policy documents express a similar goal of "[driving] technological breakthroughs in AI" (Trump, 2019). However, these documents also express the belief that maintaining America's global leadership in AI requires an unencumbered innovation and development environment. In its annual report, the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy declared that "America will maintain its global leadership in AI not through top-down government policy, but through our unparalleled innovation ecosystem", and that "continued leadership is not predetermined" (Kratsios & Parker, 2020). This rhetoric reveals that U.S. policymakers want to keep federal regulations to a minimum, and allow companies significant autonomy to pursue frontier AI research – after all, the nation's current advantage in AI is in large part due to the nearly unregulated ecosystem in Silicon Valley. By leaving significant control over AI safety and regulation to developers, the Executive Order implicitly prioritizes American dominance in AI over more comprehensive safety provisions. It also suggests that private sector rhetoric on AI safety and U.S.-China relations could indeed have significant influence over the government's actions, and could even be discouraging the implementation of more broadly enforceable safety policy.

V.   American Rhetoric on AI, Safety, and China

In the private sector, technology industry leaders have spoken at length on U.S.-China relations and global technological competition. On one hand, Google CEO Sundar Pichai commented on China's AI capabilities at the APEC CEO Summit, stating that the world has a "shared incentive" to make AI safe – since unsafe AI in one country can quickly spread around

the world, safety cannot happen unilaterally. He also expressed that no long-term progress can be made without U.S.-China communication and collaboration (Chang, 2023). Pichai's relatively neutral view towards the geopolitics of AI balances fear and optimism, and might be considered representative of less vocal leaders, who are not directly concerned by competition with China.

On the other hand, other prominent figures have expressed strong opinions about China and AI competition. Soon after the release of OpenAI's ChatGPT, hundreds of high-profile tech leaders and researchers signed an open letter calling for an immediate pause on the "out-of-control race" to develop more powerful AI systems for at least 6 months, so that safety risks could be comprehensively assessed (Metz and Smith, 2023). Yet in an interview with the Australian Financial Review, former Google CEO Eric Schmidt argued "'I'm not in favor of a six-month pause because it will simply benefit China'"; China, with no legal or moral reason to also adhere to a hiatus, would simply have 6+ additional months to catch up to American technology (Novak, 2023). Prominent Silicon Valley technology investor Vinod Khosla echoed Schmidt's sentiment, calling the hiatus "misguided" while emphasizing that, against China, "we shouldn't take for granted we will lead in AI technology 20 years from now" and that "we need to win this race" (Chang, 2024; McBride & Chapman, 2023). Over a year later, no steps have been taken towards a six-month pause, likely in part due to this belief that, as geopolitical competition over AI is already so fierce, the U.S. cannot risk a unilateral pause, even if it does have safety benefits. This real-world manifestation of U.S.-China competition in AI safety rhetoric could foreshadow future unwillingness to compromise on a global scale.

Exemplified by the reluctance of American researchers to enact a hiatus, many safety regulations being considered today are also viewed as damaging to U.S. innovation. This conversation between AI leaders and government officials parallels earlier discussions around

Americans' data privacy, and the need to compete with China. In a Congressional hearing, Meta CEO Mark Zuckerberg argued that "we still need to make it so that American companies can innovate in those areas… or else we're going to fall behind Chinese competitors", implying that regulation and geopolitical dominance could be at odds (Lomas, 2018). Zuckerberg's sentiments were echoed by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Senior Vice President Jordan Crenshaw, who referred to regulations as "digital red tape" that "subjects innovators [to] unnecessary impact assessments", explicitly associating legislation with threats to America's advancements in AI (Crenshaw, 2022).

This theme – balancing U.S. values and regulations against the race with China – continues to impact perspectives on AI governance today. Today's safety policies could also be considered "digital red tape" that would inevitably prevent innovators from following the oft-quoted Silicon Valley mantra – "move fast and break things". As demonstrated by both the years-earlier conversation around data privacy and the current rhetoric of prominent technology leaders, many regulators and industry figures still firmly believe that if the U.S. enforces more stringent regulation on technology than its geopolitical competitors, it risks losing global dominance. Given America's emphasis on private-sector innovation for global AI leadership, it's evident that geopolitical competition with China is making the government reliant on *band-aid policies* and reluctant to pursue more restrictive, *foundational* safety policies. But this resistance to creating enforceable safety standards in the United States and China has dire implications for the future of AI safety, suggesting these superpowers may be trapped in a "race to the bottom".

VI.   Discussion

In this paper, my research revealed the particular importance of the U.S.-China geopolitical dynamic on conversation around regulating artificial intelligence, and on the actual

safety regulations that get made. Taken altogether, policy documents and rhetoric in the United States and China paint a complex and multi-dimensional picture of the relationship between geopolitical competition and AI safety. Driven by global competition to advance AI, both the United States and China both lack firm foundations for AI governance, having only institutionalized *band-aid* safety policies for individual domestic issues. Furthermore, analysis of the Chinese government's use of AI to generate global power, as well as American public and private sphere rhetoric around Chinese AI systems, suggests that geopolitical competition is a major factor in AI policy decisions, and both countries will remain reluctant to pursue foundational safety legislation. Paired with a lack of global collective action, the end result is that frontier artificial intelligence models will likely get increasingly dangerous.

But innovation and safety are still not inherently at odds with each other. Comprehensive approaches to AI governance, grounded in game theory and international relations, could force even geopolitical rivals to cooperate on global goals. For example, rather than competing over *creating* AI, superpowers could be incentivized to compete over *regulating* AI instead, and being the nation to set global standards. In fact, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer has already stated that China's regulations are threatening to "write the rules of the road" for AI (Sheehan, 2023). But in order to create a world safe from dangerous artificial intelligence systems, it is imperative that we develop a deep understanding of the impact of geopolitical dynamics on AI safety. As my research has demonstrated, technological competition between the United States and China is an incredibly important relationship that has shaped, and will continue to shape, the global landscape of AI safety. Continued and comprehensive consideration of the U.S.-China dynamic, extending the findings of this paper, is imperative for ensuring that the future of artificial intelligence is safe and trustworthy around the world.

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