

S&P Global Mobility perspective

Implications	New proposals by European safety group EuroNCAP and the Chinese government will force OEMs to rethink interior design ergonomics.
Outlook	The main impact of these new frameworks will be to push back on the ongoing trend among carmakers in recent years to eliminate physical buttons from the vehicle cockpit. There is growing concern from regulators that this is a retrograde step in terms of safety, due to an ever increasing possibility of distracted driving.

There is a growing movement from safety regulators, including the Chinese government, which is aimed at forcing OEMs to rethink a major recent trend in cockpit design. In recent years, OEMs have increasingly replaced traditional cockpit displays and physical controls with digital displays, including a large central touchscreen that is generally similar to a larger version of Apple’s iPad tablet. That in itself has not been an issue, but it has become apparent that carmakers, in the interest of what their design teams view as clean and modern design, have been putting more and more essential driving functions on these touchscreens. This has increased the danger of distracted driving, taking driver attention away from the road while they search for the correct function, often through multiple menus.

The influential EU-backed EuroNCAP organization, which runs the European New Car Assessment Program to assess the safety of cars sold in the EU, has recently updated its assessment protocols in a move to discourage touchscreen-only controls for essential driving tasks. For its 2026 passenger car testing protocol, in order for a vehicle to be awarded EuroNCAP’s coveted five-star rating it will need to have physical controls for its turn indicators, wipers, hazard lights, horn and SOS alert system. Vehicles that rely on a touchscreen control for any of these functions will be marked down in their assessment.

In addition, it was reported yesterday (Feb. 16, 2026) that China’s Ministry of Industry and Information Technology has proposed a range of new vehicle safety requirements, mandating physical buttons for specific functions. According to a Bloomberg News report, the proposed regulations would require a similar list to EuroNCAP of essential driving functions that must be commanded by a physical control. These include turn signals, hazard lights, gear selection and emergency calling. They must also have fixed buttons or switches with a minimum surface of 10 mm x 10 mm. It is not clear from the early reporting at the time of writing if that is the full list of functions required to have a physical switch.

Outlook and implications

While EuroNCAP is not a mandatory safety rating and is EU-backed instead of being part of a formal legislative process, its safety tests are extremely influential in terms of consumer advice and perception. Although a five-star rating is highly coveted and a very useful marketing tool, it is the vehicles that score poorly that tend to make headlines. These new protocols, in combination with the Chinese government’s new framework, will hopefully make OEMs think harder about what has become a genuine problem in finding basic vehicle functions on a touch screen, especially if the driver is not familiar with the vehicle. Drivers are understandably banned from using their mobile phones in cars, and yet they are increasingly given something akin to a giant mobile phone in the center of the dash to control a wide variety of vehicle functions. It appears largely inevitable that distracted driving has increased as a result, and EuroNCAP and the Chinese authorities have rightfully recognized this fact.

Although interior designers may dislike physical controls as they clutter the clean and modern appearance they are striving for, they are simply essential for the safe operation of certain driving functions. It is also likely that procurement managers have also welcomed interiors having fewer and fewer physical controls as there is an obvious cost saving while electrical architectures are likely to be

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more simple, and thus less expensive, too. It may seem surprising that EuroNCAP is having to specify that something as obvious as a vehicle's horn needs a physical control, but it is an important step in pushing back on certain aspects of recent interior design philosophy. Some major OEMs have already started to abandon the recent trend for screens and screen controls. For instance, the VW passenger car brand's latest interiors, particularly on revised or new vehicles such as the forthcoming ID.Polo and ID.Cross, have returned to more physical controls after customer complaints. These actions by the Chinese government and EuroNCAP will encourage more OEMs to rethink interior architectures and the potential for increasing touchscreen functionality to actually be to the detriment of safety.

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