Policy Lab on governance and artificial intelligence (AI)

16 April 2026

Executive summary

The BISA Policy Lab on governance and artificial intelligence (AI) brought together policymakers from the FCDO and Home Office, and academics from diverse disciplinary backgrounds in three sessions of debate and discussion.

Session 1 discussed the erosion of domestic-international boundaries in technology governance.

- Concerns with boundary erosion have centred on the vulnerabilities associated with interdependence. Issues of weaponised interdependence have risen alongside protectionist practices surrounding the technological competition between the US and China. Speakers noted the security implications of the AI race, particularly for states like the US that have historically been global technological leaders.
- Speakers discussed **how to conceptualise boundary erosion and creation**. AI involves both material and intangible components, and can have both horizontal and vertical boundaries, affecting where boundary creation and erosion may be occurring. One form of boundary *creation* is the current emphasis on technology sovereignty. However, the involvement of US firms may impact the extent of sovereignty possible. Boundary *erosion* is occurring through states' attempts to influence others over the technical and regulatory standards for AI.
- **AI has an ideological component**, affecting its output to users and direction by powerful individuals in Silicon Valley. Authoritarian regimes have an advantage in the development of AI, but liberal democratic approaches to AI governance are essential. There is a need for coordination surrounding governance, with risks involved in being a regulatory outlier. Previous attempts to regulate AI technology have encountered issues of slow progress as well as poor outcomes.

Session 2 examined strategic dependencies in AI adoption.

- AI relies on a triad of data, compute and algorithms, with control of global compute power and infrastructure centred in the US. The **control over supply chains and the AI information sphere held by US firms represents a potential strategic vulnerability**, while the AI speculative bubble has also created economic dependency.
- Dependency may be viewed differently by various actors: states and political actors may regard it as a vulnerability, while tech firms may view it as an opportunity. Discussion featured detailed perspectives from Greece, Romania, Canada and the UK.
- **The AI race between the US and China is different from the Cold War bipolarity; middle powers may experience dual dependency on both states for different**

technologies. China's dominance of AI may be due to a decline in US soft power, making it unappealing to align with. **China has the greatest ability to be autonomous in AI of any state, due to its vertical integration in supply and manufacturing chains and internal independence of the CCP**. China's manufacturing capabilities enable it to exert economic power but also influence global technical standards.

- Governance considerations included the potential for hybrid AI models, and a middle-powers' approach to balancing relations with the US and China. Not all states have equal capacity to innovate in AI models and infrastructure, so should focus pragmatically on their capabilities. **Democratic states may struggle to compete with China but must approach the AI challenge from a liberal democratic angle**.

Session 3 concerned digital sovereignty and alternative governance models.

- 'Sovereignty' is used by states as an expression of legitimacy, authority and control over AI and digital technology. Different manifestations of 'sovereignty' policy may cause miscommunication, and fragmentation of domestic and interstate policy. The extent to which states can achieve digital sovereignty is challenged by the involvement of corporations.
- There are also concerns surrounding the willingness of these firms to resist pressure from their home governments. **States should practically consider their aims and capacities and explore ideas of pooled sovereignty; it is not financially possible for all states to have a sovereign AI model, for example**.
- **AI governance is currently a technocratic discussion, but democratic approaches are important as they affect what forms of governance are possible**. There must be greater understanding and communication surrounding AI to give MPs and citizens the knowledge and ability to scrutinise AI and provider firms.
- Strategic considerations raised involved the risks posed to centralised AI infrastructure in a conflict scenario, funding for strategic research and soft power initiatives, and the potential for a domestic internet system to reduce external control over domestic AI models.

Following the event, participants noted that targeted interactions between academics and policymakers would be useful, with specific case studies brought by policymakers enabling a focus on practical responses to issues of AI governance. Collaboration between BISA academics, think tanks and policymakers from FCDO, DSIT and the Department for Business and Trade, would offer opportunities for targeted responses, as well as bring together siloed expertise. There is a need for more security- and defence-focused dialogue, particularly related to the unauthorised diffusion of technology. Greater public dialogue promoted through public debates, talk shows and citizens' assemblies may be necessary to build engagement with the issue and enable greater understanding of economic and political issues of AI in the UK, an important aspect for democratic governance.

For more details, please contact:

Juliet Dryden
Director and CEO
British International Studies Association (BISA)
juliet.dryden@bisa.ac.uk
www.bisa.ac.uk