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GLOBAL INFORMATION SOCIETY WATCH

*National and Regional Internet
Governance Forum Initiatives (NRIs)*



ASSOCIATION FOR PROGRESSIVE COMMUNICATIONS (APC)

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Global Information Society Watch 2017
National and Regional Internet Governance Forum Initiatives (NRIs)

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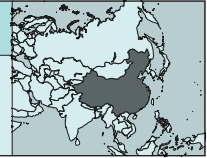
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A special edition of GISWatch, "Internet governance from the edges: NRIs in their own words", is being published as a companion edition to the 2017 GISWatch annual report. It looks at the history, challenges and achievements of NRIs, as recounted by their organisers. It is available at <https://www.giswatch.org>



Hudson Lockett

Introduction

Domestic restrictions on internet access and online activity in China are already widely known, primarily in the form of the so-called Great Firewall used to block foreign social networks (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) and news sources (e.g. *The New York Times*, BBC), as well as extensive domestic censorship of all media and surveillance of – and through – Chinese platforms including WeChat,¹ the current dominant social network and app ecosystem.²

Since late 2013, following revelations about the United States (US) government's expansive global online surveillance programme, the tightening of domestic controls over the internet and its underlying technology in China has been paired with increasingly aggressive assertions by Beijing on the global stage of its right to do so – part of a drive to confront and co-opt as necessary the levers of international internet governance to better ensure compatibility with norms established by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

Rather than submit to the inclusive, collaborative, multistakeholder approach to internet governance espoused at many Internet Governance Forums (IGFs) at the national, regional and global levels, Beijing has in recent years railed against what it considers the “internet hegemony” of the US and has demanded respect of its “cyber sovereignty” (网络主权 *wangluo zhuquan*, literally “network sovereignty”) – the right to wall off its corner of the internet to such an extent that it increasingly resembles a national intranet.

Perhaps no platform has served to crystallise the party's aims for global internet governance so much as the World Internet Conference (WIC). This state-run counterweight to prevailing ideas circulating at IGFs, held late every year since 2014 in the canal town of Wuzhen in eastern China, has been

used as a megaphone for advancing the CCP's views on internet governance to an international audience – with mixed results.

Policy and political background

The WIC's creation stems from a desire to protect domestic internet controls viewed by the party as necessary for ensuring its continued rule. Central to this effort is the Cyberspace Administration of China, formally established by President Xi Jinping in late 2013 as a means of improving coordination on internet governance between different government ministries, and led by Lu Wei, previously vice-mayor of Beijing and a canny and outspoken advocate of more stringent internet controls.³

Lu's tenure marked a departure from Beijing's previous strategy of denying or obfuscating its restrictions on online expression and organisation. Lu instead acknowledged and openly endorsed shutting down or blocking websites and companies that did not toe the party line. “I, indeed, may choose who comes into my house,” he told reporters at a conference in 2015. “They can come if they are friends.”⁴

Before his removal from office in mid-2016, Lu also advanced the case for this regime on the world stage at the first two WICs. The most recent conference under his successor showed that the programme launched under his tenure to advocate for Beijing's right to influence global internet governance standards is unlikely to change course.

The World Internet Conference 2014

The announcement of the first three-day WIC came less than a month before it commenced on 19 November 2014.⁵ State media described it as a “worldwide network summit on how the Internet

1 <https://www.wechat.com>

2 Lockett, H. (2016). Closing the door on cultural freedoms in the era of “web celebs”. In Finlay, A. (Ed.), *Global Information Society Watch 2016*. Association for Progressive Communications and International Development Research Centre. www.giswatch.org/en/country-report/economic-social-and-cultural-rights-escrs/china

3 Alsbah, N. (2016, 15 September). Information Control 2.0: The Cyberspace Administration of China tames the internet. *Mercator Institute for China Studies (MERICS)*. www.merics.org/en/merics-analysis/china-monitor/information-control-20

4 Martina, M. (2015, 9 December). China's cyber chief defends censorship ahead of Internet conference. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-internet/chinas-cyber-chief-defends-censorship-ahead-of-internet-conference-idUSKBN0tSoX720151209>

5 World Internet Conference. (2014, 7 November). The 1st World Internet Conference to Open in November, 2014. www.wicnews.cn/system/2014/11/07/020347212.shtml

should be governed” and an opportunity for Beijing to “seek consensus with Washington.”⁶

No high-level US officials attended, but top Chinese attendees included Alibaba chairman Jack Ma, Tencent chairman Pony Ma and Baidu CEO Li Yanhong.⁷

Representatives from Apple, LinkedIn, Facebook, Qualcomm, Microsoft, Amazon and Cisco Systems were also in attendance,⁸ along with Fadi Chehadé, CEO of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN).⁹ The record-setting initial public offering in September of the e-commerce conglomerate Alibaba on the New York Stock Exchange helped underscore China’s growing clout as a force to be reckoned with in the global technology sector.¹⁰

In a video message to the conference on its opening day, Xi told attendees that China was ready to “jointly build... an international governance system [based on] multilateralism, democracy and transparency.”¹¹

The first descriptor – “multilateralism” – was paramount, referring to a system primarily controlled by governments as opposed to a “multistakeholder” scheme in which power is shared among a wide range of actors including academics, representatives of civil society and businesses.

On the conference’s second day, Chinese Premier Li Keqiang spoke publicly with officials and executives from domestic and foreign companies, indicating the latter were welcome in China and that their business interests would be protected. Tweets and posts to Facebook made from Wuzhen communicating this message were enabled by a temporary hole in China’s Great Firewall that authorities had opened exclusively for WIC attendees.¹²

But this more collaborative vision was dashed when, late on the second night, a two-page draft document titled the “Wuzhen Declaration” was

slipped under the hotel doors of some attendees. An accompanying note told recipients that “many speakers and participants” had suggested such a declaration be released at the closing ceremony and that they had until 8 a.m. to request revisions to its contents.¹³

The Wuzhen Declaration called on the international community to:

1. Enhance cyberspace connectivity
2. Respect the internet sovereignty of all countries
3. Jointly safeguard cyber security
4. Jointly fight cyber terrorism
5. Advance development of internet technology
6. Vigorously develop the internet economy
7. Widely spread positive energy
8. Be dedicated to the healthy growth of young people
9. Work for a cyberspace shared and governed by all.¹⁴

In addition to items 2 and 9, which explicitly endorsed Beijing’s major goals for internet governance, items 7 and 8 employed language frequently used by the party when clamping down on expression online (see the China country reports in GISWatch 2014¹⁵ and 2016).¹⁶

But the conference ended without any mention of the declaration. News media later reported that during late-night negotiations, Western representatives refused to endorse Lu’s assertion that consensus on the declaration had been reached because some attendees had endorsed it. He reportedly walked out of the meeting in response, refusing to compromise.¹⁷

Among governments that have publicly endorsed positions from the declaration are Russia and four other nations which, on 9 January 2015, co-signed China’s submission of a new internet code of conduct to the United Nations (UN), arguing that

6 Cao, Y. (2014, 31 October). Consensus sought with US on governance of Internet. *China Daily*. www.chinadaily.com.cn/cndy/2014-10/31/content_18832672.htm

7 Wang, X. (2014, 30 October). World Internet leaders come to China in Nov. *Xinhua*. September 2014. english.cntv.cn/2014/11/18/ART1416303109508274.shtml

8 Wan, A. (2014, 21 November). Premier Li Keqiang offers reassurance for world’s biggest internet firms. *South China Morning Post*. www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1644900/premier-li-keqiang-offers-reassurance-worlds-biggest-internet-firms

9 Wang, X. (2014, 30 October). Op. cit.

10 Demos, T, & Osawa, J. (2014, 19 September). Alibaba Debut Makes a Splash. *The Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/alibaba-shares-trade-higher-in-ipo-1411142120>

11 Wong Tsoi-lai, C. (2014, 20 November). China lays out vision for Web governance. *Global Times*. www.globaltimes.cn/content/892731.shtml

12 Cao, Y. (2014, 31 October). Op. cit.

13 Moser, P, & Perlez, J. (2014, 2 December). Gregarious and Direct: China’s Web Doorkeeper. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/02/world/asia/gregarious-and-direct-chinas-web-doorkeeper.html>

14 https://www.scribd.com/document/247566581/World-Internet-Conference-Draft-Declaration?ad_group=72705X1553005X77b4f9d5d11783074ec40d4691526634&campaign=Skimbit%2C+Ltd.&content=10079&irgwc=1&keyword=ft750noi&medium=affiliate&source=impacetradius

15 Lockett, H. (2014). Discourse deferred: PRC netizens swap public microblogs for the not-so-private digital dinner table. In Finlay, A. (Ed.), *Global Information Society Watch 2014*. Association for Progressive Communications and Humanist Institute for Development Cooperation (Hivos). www.giswatch.org/en/country-report/communications-surveillance/china

16 Lockett, H. (2016). Op. cit.

17 Moser, P, & Perlez, J. (2014, 2 December).

“policy authority for Internet-related public issues is the sovereign right of States.”¹⁸

The proposal also called for shifting critical functions from ICANN – the steward of the global internet’s address book and at the time still nominally accountable to the US government – to the UN’s International Telecommunication Union (ITU).

The World Internet Conference 2015

The announcement that Xi himself would deliver a keynote speech at the opening ceremony of the second WIC on 16 December 2015¹⁹ gave the second WIC a far higher profile – and effectively guaranteed attendance from higher-level officials and executives.

In his keynote speech, Xi outlined five principles necessary to “make progress in the transformation of the global Internet governance system” – the first of which was “respect for cyber sovereignty”. He also stressed that “International cyberspace governance should feature a multilateral approach with multi-party participation” that would help create a “community of common destiny”.²⁰

Lu Wei would later explain in an article published in the prestigious CCP journal *Seeking Truth* that this community was not a group of nations connected by a global network enabling the free exchange of information. Rather, it was a governance system in which all countries possessed “equal rights to participation, rights to development and rights to governance” – one in which cyber sovereignty was a given.²¹

Beijing’s promotion of state-led internet governance received another boost on the same day as Xi’s speech when the UN General Assembly adopted a document on policy and frameworks for internet governance recognising that the management of the internet as a global facility includes “multilateral”

processes. Chinese negotiators were, however, unsuccessful in excising phrases including “democratic” and “freedom of expression” from the document.²²

Yet the conference’s greatest surprise came on the final day of the conference when WIC organisers from the Cyberspace Administration of China announced that they had two days earlier established the “Wuzhen Initiative” – a “high-level advisory committee” to guide the agenda of future conferences.²³

Organisers also revealed that the committee had not only already had its first meeting on the sidelines of the WIC but that, along with Alibaba founder Jack Ma, it was co-chaired by ICANN CEO Fadi Chehadé.²⁴

This was remarkable because the Wuzhen Initiative explicitly endorsed Beijing’s positions on internet governance, emphasising the “importance of respect for nations’ sovereignty in cyberspace” and calling for improvements to global internet governance to create a “multilateral” system.²⁵

In his capacity as CEO of ICANN – whose then-ongoing transition to an independent organisation was entirely reliant on a multistakeholder model – Chehadé’s endorsement of the Wuzhen Initiative lent unprecedented institutional legitimacy to Beijing’s call for internet governance to be controlled primarily by national governments.²⁶

The World Internet Conference 2016

Though unexpected, the resignation in late June 2016 of Lu Wei from his post as director of the Cyberspace Administration of China prompted little speculation that policy would change under his successor Xu Lin, who had worked under Xi Jinping in Shanghai in 2007.²⁷

18 Letter dated 9 January 2015 from the Permanent Representatives of China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, the Russian Federation, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. www.un.org/Docs/journal/asp/ws.asp?m=A/69/723.

19 He, H. (2015, 9 December). China’s president to make first speech to global web forum. *South China Morning Post*. www.scmp.com/news/china/article/1889118/chinas-president-make-first-speech-global-web-forum

20 Remarks by H.E. Xi Jinping President of the People’s Republic of China at the Opening Ceremony of the Second World Internet Conference. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China. www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/wjdt_665385/zjh_665391/t1327570.shtml

21 Lu, W. (2016, 29 February). Persisting in Respect for the Principle of Cyber Sovereignty, Promoting the Construction of a Community of Common Destiny in Cyberspace. *Seeking Truth*. www.qsttheory.cn/dukan/qs/2016-02/29/c_1118164592.htm Translation referenced from China Copyright and Media: <https://chinacopyrightandmedia.wordpress.com/2016/03/02/persisting-in-respect-for-the-principle-of-cyber-sovereignty-promoting-the-construction-of-a-community-of-common-destiny-in-cyberspace>

22 Levin, D. (2015, 16 December). At U.N., China Tries to Influence Fight Over Internet Control. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/17/technology/china-wins-battle-with-un-over-word-in-internet-control-document.html>

23 World Internet Conference. (2015, 18 December). The 2nd WIC Organizing Committee proposes the Wuzhen Initiative. www.wuzhenwic.org/2015-12/18/c_48241.htm

24 World Internet Conference. (2015, 21 December). High-level advisory committee established for World Internet Conference. www.wuzhenwic.org/2015-12/21/c_48303.htm

25 World Internet Conference. (2015, 18 December). Op. cit.

26 Although Chehadé’s membership in the Wuzhen Initiative provoked conflict and helped spur US legislators to attempt to halt ICANN’s transition to a multistakeholder model, the US government relinquished control of ICANN on 1 October, about 10 days before the third WIC was announced for 16–18 November. See: Moyer, E. (2016, 1 October). US hands internet control to ICANN. *CNET*. <https://www.cnet.com/news/us-internet-control-ted-cruz-free-speech-russia-china-internet-corporation-assigned-names-numbers>

27 Perlez, J., & Moser, P. (2016, 29 June). Lu Wei, China’s Internet Czar, Will Step Down From Post. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/30/business/international/china-internet-lu-wei.html?_r=0

In a video message on the WIC's first day, Xi reiterated that China would work with the international community to "uphold cyber sovereignty, promote more fair and equitable global internet governance and bring about an open, inclusive and secure cyberspace."²⁸

Yet without the presence of Xi onstage, the event's prestige was inevitably lessened. Attendance fell by 400 and coverage of the WIC by foreign media was diminished. While the attention of the latter was largely monopolised at the time by the 2016 US presidential election, the conference's lower international profile may also have been exacerbated by the decision to no longer grant attendees unfiltered access to the global internet.²⁹ Despite enthusiastic coverage from state media, the third WIC closed without much fanfare, leaving its fate in the grand scheme of Beijing's internet strategy uncertain – even if the strategy's direction is anything but.

In July 2017, the Cyberspace Administration of China organising committee for the WIC announced that the fourth conference would be held in early December.³⁰

Staging indirect influence

It can reasonably be argued that the WIC has had little to no direct impact on other IGFs at the regional and global level. Despite a picturesque location, high-profile foreign attendees and an ostensibly international moniker, the WIC is largely China-focused.

Almost every panel, forum or event from its first three years has been dominated by party-state officials, academics from Beijing-backed think tanks or representatives from Chinese information technology companies. Among the 49 individuals named in the agenda for panels and events at the 2016 conference, only three were not from China.

To the extent that the WIC does touch on the internet governance principles of openness, transparency and inclusiveness, it does so in direct opposition to these principles. Though state media coverage highlights other topics of discussion at the conference, the emphasis placed on cyber sovereignty and multilateral internet governance in

keynote speeches makes the core message of the WIC clear.

To the extent that the WIC influences other internet governance gatherings, including the global IGF, it does so indirectly by establishing a counterpoint to the values typically espoused at these forums. It also reminds global tech firms – a key cohort in the multistakeholder model of global internet governance – that their presence in China is contingent on total compliance with demands from Beijing.

Conclusion

The CCP has used its own, state-backed forum on internet governance to advance the view that its "cyber sovereignty" over online activity within its borders should not just be respected by other nations – it should be adopted as the global standard in order to counter what it views as the prevailing "internet hegemony" of the US.

In contrast to the open and multistakeholder model advocated by the global IGF, Beijing's vision of the global internet, as demonstrated by speeches and policy statements at the WIC, is one of a web of tenuously connected intranets overseen by multilateral institutions and controlled by sovereign states able to police all online activity that occurs within their borders with absolute authority.

The WIC is one front in a campaign to advance Beijing's model which is complemented by multilateral institutions like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation,³¹ all but one member of which were signatories to China's 2015 proposal to overhaul internet governance at the UN.

Incidents like the Wuzhen Declaration conflict in 2014 indicate that Beijing has made little headway in bringing Western nations around to its way of thinking on internet governance. But the CCP's ability to use economic sway over members of other multilateral institutions to shield itself from criticism over domestic crackdowns on expression – both online and offline – should not be underestimated. In June 2017, Greece, a major recipient of economic aid from China, successfully blocked a European Union statement at the United Nations criticising Beijing's human rights record.³²

Nor should the impact of messaging to tech companies be ignored. Just days after the close of the third WIC, Facebook was reported to have

²⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Os-oc3lqM4Y>.

²⁹ Dou, E. (2016, 16 November). China's Xi Jinping Opens Tech Conference With Call for 'Cyber Sovereignty'. *The Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-xi-jinping-opens-tech-conference-with-call-for-cyber-sovereignty-1479273347>

³⁰ World Internet Conference. (2017, 17 July). Call for World Leading Internet Scientific and Technological Achievements to be Released at the 4th World Internet Conference. www.wuzhenwic.org/2017-07/17/c_84191.htm

³¹ eng.sectsc.org/about_sco

³² Emmott, R, & Koutantou, A. (2017, 18 June). Greece blocks EU statement on China human rights at U.N. *Reuters*. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-un-rights/greece-blocks-eu-statement-on-china-human-rights-at-u-n-idUSKBN199oFP>

internally developed a censorship tool to filter certain posts based on geographic location as a means of potentially entering the China market.³³ In July 2017, Apple removed apps enabling unrestricted internet access from its app store in China at Beijing's request.³⁴

Action steps

The following action steps can be suggested for China:

- Since civil society is essentially barred from participation in China's governance more generally, the onus falls on parties interacting with Beijing on the matter of internet governance to be aware of its goals and remain sensitive to the language and terms it employs to promote them.
- Members of civil society, academics and technical experts participating in regional and global IGFs elsewhere in the world should remain vigilant when dealing with governments and corporations with ties to Beijing or which have a substantial presence in the China market.
- Despite its diminished stature in 2016, the WIC is likely to continue being held every year in Wuzhen for the foreseeable future and will remain Beijing's primary platform for enunciating its views on internet governance. Participants should realise that their presence may provide greater legitimacy to these views and that their express endorsement may not be seen as necessary for a "consensus" document to be issued by organisers.

33 Isaac, M. (2016, 22 November). Facebook Said to Create Censorship Tool to Get Back Into China. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/22/technology/facebook-censorship-tool-china.html>.

34 Pierson, D. (2017, 31 July). Apple removes VPN services from App Store in China, making it harder to circumvent online censors. *Los Angeles Times*. www.latimes.com/business/la-fi-tn-apple-china-vpn-20170731-story.html

National and Regional Internet Governance Forum Initiatives (NRIs)

National and Regional Internet Governance Forum Initiatives (NRIs) are now widely recognised as a vital element of the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) process. In fact, they are seen to be the key to the sustainability and ongoing evolution of collaborative, inclusive and multistakeholder approaches to internet policy development and implementation.

A total of 54 reports on NRIs are gathered in this year's Global Information Society Watch (GISWatch). These include 40 country reports from contexts as diverse as the United States, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Italy, Pakistan, the Republic of Korea and Colombia.

The country reports are rich in approach and style and highlight several challenges faced by activists organising and participating in national IGFs, including broadening stakeholder participation, capacity building, the unsettled role of governments, and impact.

Seven regional reports analyse the impact of regional IGFs, their evolution and challenges, and the risks they still need to take to shift governance to the next level, while seven thematic reports offer critical perspectives on NRIs as well as mapping initiatives globally.

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