


How are BRICS countries building AI sovereignty? Introduction to Thematic Section

Luca Belli

Professor of Law and Director, Center for Technology and Society (CTS) and CyberBRICS project, Fundação Getulio Vargas (FGV) Law School, Rio de Janeiro

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9997-2998>

Abstract

In this article, the author provides an introduction to the AJIC Thematic Section: BRICS Countries and AI Sovereignty.

Keywords

artificial intelligence (AI), sovereign AI, AI sovereignty, digital sovereignty, BRICS

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1. Introduction

What is sovereign artificial intelligence (AI), and how are BRICS countries shaping their AI sovereignty narratives and experiments? This Thematic Section of *The African Journal of Information and Communication (AJIC)*, in combination with the work presented in *AJIC* Issue 34 of 2024,¹ provides an introduction to the early findings of the CyberBRICS project's ongoing research on AI sovereignty in the BRICS countries. The research is anchored in the premise that AI sovereignty constitutes a critical facet of digital sovereignty (Belli, 2025; Jiang & Belli, 2024), reflecting the imperative of states to exercise self-determination, regulatory authority, and strategic autonomy over the development, deployment, and governance of AI systems. Conspicuously, the research provides much-needed context for understanding the relevance of the BRICS members' declarations, at the 2025 BRICS Brazil Summit, with respect to AI matters (BRICS, 2025a, 2025b).

Drawing upon the corpus of research generated under the auspices of the CyberBRICS project,² this Thematic Section provides three contributions. The first two explore the modalities through which two of the BRICS emerging economies, India (in the article by Vipra) and Russia (in the article by Ignatov and Kerimi), are navigating the complex terrain of AI sovereignty. The third item in the section (by Sengupta, Barbosa and Samdub) provides a comparative perspective on how two BRICS countries, India and Brazil, are leveraging digital public infrastructure (DPI) as a facilitator of AI governance and AI sovereignty.

As highlighted in *AJIC* 34's Thematic Section introduction (Belli, 2024), which should be read in conjunction with this one, we at the CyberBRICS project posit that the assertion of AI sovereignty plays an instrumental role in the preservation of national agency and technological autonomy, and in the mitigation of structural dependencies on exogenous technological actors. This analysis foregrounds the strategic significance of AI sovereignty as a precondition for the effective comprehension, regulation, and endogenous development of AI technologies. Our analytical framework also highlights the fact that a systemic approach and a critical

¹ <https://ajic.wits.ac.za/issue/view/1251>

² All CyberBRICS publications are available on an open access basis at <https://cyberbrics.info/cyberbrics-publications>

perspective are always needed to ascertain the extent to which AI sovereignty initiatives are concretely successful in achieving their stated purposes, and to scrutinise what could be such initiatives' collateral effects.

As we have previously argued, AI sovereignty can be situated within the broader genus of digital sovereignty, thus allowing us to elucidate its conceptual contours and juridical underpinnings. The CyberBRICS inquiry examines the legislative and regulatory instruments, as well as the industrial policy tools, that are being leveraged by the BRICS states to assert power, agency and control over their digital infrastructures and to attenuate reliance on foreign technological ecosystems. From this perspective, we contend that governance, regulation, and industrial policy must be construed as interdependent and mutually reinforcing mechanisms essential to the realisation of AI sovereignty.

Critical appraisal of selected case studies allows our research to illustrate how BRICS countries exploit alternative technological and regulatory strategies. These include, as discussed in this Thematic Section's article by Sengupta, Barbosa and Samdub, establishment of DPI as a techno-regulatory substratum conducive to digital innovation. Other strategies used are facilitative regulatory measures such as tax incentives, the designation of special industrial zones, and targeted capacity-building initiatives. Examination of such strategies illustrates the variegated successes and limitations encountered by BRICS states in their pursuit of digital sovereignty, as well as the risk of AI sovereignty initiatives being co-opted, as in the Russian case discussed in the article by Ignatov and Kerimi, to implement securitisation and control agendas.

By systematically analysing iterative regulatory practices and the trial of alternative governance models across the BRICS jurisdictions, the CyberBRICS project explores the extent to which adaptive and context-sensitive regulation can enhance the efficacy of AI governance and fortify the juridical foundations of AI sovereignty. Our outputs, including the three articles that follow in this Thematic Section, provide some of the concrete context that is necessary to situate the most recent AI-related declarations issued by the BRICS leaders.

2. Foregrounding of AI at the 2025 BRICS Summit

The increasing significance of AI governance for the BRICS nations was emphatically underscored by the outcomes of the 17th BRICS Summit in Rio de Janeiro in early July 2025. The Summit's Declaration, Strengthening Global South Cooperation for a More Inclusive and Sustainable Governance, included the following statement:

16. We recognize that Artificial Intelligence (AI) represents a milestone opportunity to boost development towards a more prosperous future. To achieve that goal, we underscore that global governance of AI should mitigate potential risks and address the needs of all countries, including those of the Global South. A collective global effort is needed to establish an AI governance that upholds our shared values, addresses risks, builds trust, and ensures broad and inclusive international collaboration and access, in accordance with sovereign laws, including capacity building for developing countries, with the United Nations at its core. To support a constructive debate towards a more balanced approach, we agreed on the BRICS Leaders' Statement on the Global Governance of Artificial Intelligence, which aims to foster responsible development, deployment, and use of AI technologies for sustainable development and inclusive growth, in compliance with national regulatory frameworks, the UN Charter and respecting the sovereignty of States. (BRICS, 2025a)

As alluded to in the Declaration, at the Summit the BRICS leadership collectively adopted a formal statement on AI matters, entitled the BRICS Leaders' Statement on the Global Governance of Artificial Intelligence (BRICS, 2025b), thereby marking a critical juncture in the bloc's engagement with international technology policy. In addition, the Leaders' Statement articulates a comprehensive vision that situates AI not merely as technological innovation but also as a transformative opportunity capable of advancing equitable development on a global scale, contingent upon the establishment of governance frameworks that are inclusive, representative, and attentive to the particular needs of developing countries. The document thus lays the groundwork for a robust BRICS approach to AI governance.

The Leaders' Statement reflects a nuanced understanding of the current international AI landscape, which is characterised by fragmented—or, in some respects, absent—governance mechanisms. The Statement posits that multilateralism constitutes an indispensable approach to remedy this governance deficit and to preclude a deleterious “race to the bottom” among states and corporate actors. In this context, the United Nations is identified as the central institution capable of orchestrating a coordinated response to the challenges posed by AI, thereby ensuring that regulatory frameworks are harmonised and that shared (technical) standards are upheld globally, while also promoting cooperation on research and development (R&D) and on innovative AI-governance mechanisms. In addressing the modalities of AI governance, the Statement emphasises the critical role of open-source collaboration and the development of inclusive, interoperable international standards. Such mechanisms are envisaged as essential enablers of innovation, particularly for countries with limited technological and financial resources. The document further highlights the necessity of confronting market distortions, monopolistic practices, and technological exclusion, which presently impede equitable access to AI technologies.

The Statement identifies environmental sustainability, decent work, and the enhancement of digital infrastructure as foundational pillars for the responsible deployment of AI—thus establishing a clear link between the BRICS AI-related initiatives and the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and underscoring the potential of AI to contribute meaningfully to advancements in access to health, agriculture, energy, and education. This approach reflects a development-centred perspective that seeks to harness digital transformation as a means of reducing existing inequalities and addressing structural asymmetries within and among nations. Conspicuously, the principle of fair and equitable access to AI technologies and computing infrastructure is emphasised as a prerequisite for enabling widespread adoption and development.

Importantly, the proposed BRICS vision also delineates the need for a balanced approach to data governance,³ which must safeguard the public interest while respecting intellectual property rights and copyright protections. This balance is deemed necessary to prevent exploitative data extraction and violations of privacy, which could undermine trust and the ethical use of AI systems. Moreover, the BRICS leaders express concern regarding algorithmic bias, particularly its impact on marginalised groups, and caution against the proliferation of misinformation and the misuse of generative AI technologies. They advocate for the development of enhanced detection tools and the promotion of media literacy as essential measures to mitigate these risks.

Underpinning the statement are several guiding principles that reflect the collective approach of the BRICS members. These include the pursuit of a shared approach and common vision for AI governance grounded in consensus-based decision-making, as well as full respect for the digital sovereignty of each member state, which entails the right to regulate AI in accordance with national policies and priorities. The document further commits to openness, transparency, accountability, and the equitable sharing of information and resources, which are deemed as instrumental conditions to foster a more trustworthy AI ecosystem. Finally, the statement affirms a commitment to mutually beneficial cooperation within BRICS and extends this spirit of collaboration to the broader Global South, advocating for win-win partnerships that transcend regional boundaries.

The adoption of this Leaders Statement was the culmination of extensive negotiations and is a unique consensus document shaped by the leading economies of the Global Majority. The Statement's development-oriented and sovereignty-respecting governance framework challenges existing paradigms dominated by developed countries and multinational corporations, thereby asserting the interests of emerging economies and developing nations in shaping the future trajectory of AI governance.

3 This topic is explored in Belli and Gaspar (2025). For an introduction to data governance in the BRICS, see Belli and Doneda (2023).

3. Conclusion

By emphasising national regulatory frameworks grounded in the UN Charter and respecting sovereignty, the BRICS Rio Declaration (BRICS, 2025a) quoted above articulates a governance model that balances global cooperation with the autonomy of individual states. However, these statements always need to be analysed critically, with an eye to understanding the extent to which the words reflect reality. The CyberBRICS project's research and outputs—including the three outputs provided in the Thematic Section that follows—aim to provide the necessary critical lens.

With respect to the AI sovereignty ambitions of BRICS nations, our critical framing emphasises that such sovereignty is not merely about control over technology but also about creating the capacity to understand, develop and regulate AI systems. To achieve these purposes, the BRICS leaders consider it essential to establish data governance, open scientific collaboration, and capacity-building tailored to the specific needs each member country. This type of sovereignty perspective reinforces the BRICS commitment to a multilateral yet decentralised global AI governance structure, where each nation has the possibility to shape AI policies aligned with its social, economic, and cultural contexts while contributing to a shared effort towards a global vision.

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