

ICANN Hugs China's Multilateral Internet Governance Initiative

Introductory note: The views expressed in this article are solely those of the author and not of any client he represents or organization of which he is a member or otherwise affiliated.

Overview

The original title of this article was "ICANN CEO Hugs China's Multilateral Internet Governance Initiative". CEO has been dropped from the final version.

That deletion helps make one of its two essential points. Which is that since ICANN CEO Fadi Chehade accepted a formal advisory role with China's World Internet Conference (WIC, which is a proprietary project of the Chinese Communist Party) while still engaged in leading the U.S.-based technical coordinator of the DNS, and as that ICANN role almost surely played a decisive role in his being offered the position and is being prominently touted by China, then ICANN itself is inextricably linked to the WIC unless and until the organization acts to distance itself from the surprise action of its soon-departing CEO. That WIC connection may in turn create unanticipated issues in Washington for the IANA transition, where China is realistically perceived as a 21st century economic and military rival to the U.S. with a very different vision of how the world and human society should be shaped and the Internet's role in the social and economic order.

The second essential point is that, even in a world where ideals are imperfectly achieved and often overlooked when inconvenient, the Internet is still very much in its early stages of development and there are two fundamentally different and competing visions for its future governance. One is bottom up multistakeholder, with governments relegated to an advisory role, that celebrates open access to information and values privacy. The other is top down multilateral, with governments in charge and civil society expected to know its place, where blocking inconvenient information is openly condoned in the name of order, and the Internet is seen as a means of not just pervasive state surveillance but an active means of shaping "correct" views and behavior. This, like digital technology itself, is a binary choice between the 1 of freedom and the 0 of repression.

Up to now, ICANN has belonged to the first camp, a U.S.-created experiment in multistakeholderism to test if the greatest telecommunications technology in human history can be operated in a manner that minimizes governmental control and maximizes user freedom. WIC stands squarely in the second camp. Notwithstanding the attempts of jaded moral relativists to minimize the differences between the two visions

they are nonetheless quite profound, and represent distinct and divergent paths; while the tracking technologies may be similar, there is a vast difference between serving up ads for relevant goods and services and alerting authorities of visits to forbidden sources of news and information. ICANN may try to straddle this philosophical divide but ultimately a choice must be made. Indeed, the very multistakeholder model (MSM) that the IANA transition seeks to preserve and strengthen is at sharp odds with China's multilateral (ML) Internet policy views.

Beyond those two essential themes, the other major points made in this article are:

- The WIC is dedicated to advancing a multilateral view of an Internet subject to government censorship and used as a tool of pervasive state surveillance and behavior modification.
- The WIC itself is a unilateral endeavor undertaken by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).
- CEO Chehade accepted the Co-Chair role while attending WIC as an ICANN representative and at ICANN's expense; spoke there on behalf of ICANN; and attended the first meeting of the Advisory Committee while in Wuzhen – yet did not advise ICANN's Board of his decision prior to its public announcement by China.
- ICANN's Board has done little in reaction to this surprise development other than to echo Mr. Chehade's claim that this is a personal matter relating only to his post-ICANN activities.
- The activities of the Advisory Committee Co-Chaired by Mr. Chehade will intensify during 2016 within the same time period that the NTIA and US Congress will be conducting intense review of ICANN's post-transition Accountability plan.
- Alibaba, whose CEO shares WIC Co-Chair duties with Mr. Chehade, is playing an integral role in developing the algorithms that will implement China's mandatory Social Credit System (SCS) by 2020, a system designed to pervasively monitor and modify the views and behavior of all Chinese citizens. The company is also acquiring media companies that have, up to now, provided an independent voice and viewpoint within China, most notably Hong Kong's South China Press.
- The linkage of ICANN with the WIC created by Mr. Chehade's decision may erect significant obstacles in Washington for completion of the IANA transition unless ICANN's Board takes expeditious steps to disassociate itself from its CEO's action. China, for multiple valid reasons, is regarded as a major economic and military rival to the U.S. as well as a base for IP infringement and state-sanctioned hacking against the U.S. government and business.

- Mr. Chehade's involvement with WIC threatens to draw ICANN back into the very multilateral power politics that U.S. relinquishment of IANA oversight was intended to terminate.
- A Washington reaction that inordinately delayed, much less scuttled, the IANA transition might, ironically, play into China's hands by keeping the MSM lashed to the U.S. as it competes among the nations of the world against the Chinese alternative. The Chinese play Go, not Chess. Their aim is not to capture the MSM but to encircle it with their own ML initiative.
- Notwithstanding efforts to downplay the differences between the multistakeholder and multilateral models of Internet Governance (IG), they are at core fundamentally distinct and largely incompatible. Only one entity, be it civil society stakeholders or governments, can occupy the primary leadership or secondary advisory roles. ICANN and the IANA transition seek to preserve and advance the liberal democratic multistakeholder vision, while WIC is a CCP project to develop a multilateral competitor.

One final note: This article is in no way intended to be an attack on China and its people. The author is well aware of China's long and impressive history as well as its impressive economic strides over recent decades. He has welcomed Chinese companies as new members of ICANN's Business Constituency in his capacity as Chair of its Credentials Committee, and has become well acquainted with Chinese citizens who are active in China's robust domain investment sector.

Rather, it is published in the hope that the present government of China will reconsider its policies and allow its millions of Internet users access to uncensored information without concern for unceasing state surveillance and potential sanctions, ranging from loss of employment to incarceration. China's current Internet policies are an impediment to fully informed and open discourse, academic inquiry, and economic innovation, and are at odds with realizing the full potential of the Internet by the Chinese people. Hopes for progress depend on emphasizing the fundamental differences between the multistakeholder and multilateral visions of Internet technical control.

A Meeting in Wuzhen

On December 18, 2015, while attending the World Internet Conference (WIC) in Wuzhen, China, ICANN CEO posted this Tweet to his "ICANN_President" Twitter feed:

ICANN President @icann_president Dec 18

Glad to co-chair with Jack Ma #WuzhenSummit multistakeholder advisory committee in personal capacity. A post-ICANN activity to champion MSM.

That Tweet raises some intriguing and fundamental questions:

- Can the ICANN President & CEO agree to participate in any Internet Governance related activity in a truly personal capacity, and at the Co-Chair level -- even when the related work will primarily commence after his ICANN engagement ends on March 12, 2016 -- without conveying at least an implicit message that ICANN's embraces, or is at least comfortable with, the project and its goals?
- Would Mr. Chehade have been invited to join the Advisory Committee, much less been appointed its high-profile Co-Chair, if he was just a private citizen without his ICANN connection?
- Assuming that any related future travel expenses will be absorbed by China, does the Co-Chair post receive additional compensation, and in what amount?
- Is this new initiative really going to "champion MSM", given multiple indications that China will continue to pursue, and even increase its efforts, to push a multilateral Internet Governance, pro-Internet censorship "cyber sovereignty" agenda that rationalizes its "Great Firewall" and intensified pervasive monitoring of its citizens' online activities?

The WIC Through China's Lens

So exactly what was this WIC held in Wuzhen, and what is the purpose of this Advisory Committee to which private citizen Chehade has been named Co-Chair? Before turning to the critics, let's review some official China-sanctioned descriptions.

First, here's a state media [report](#) on the carefully calibrated centerpiece remarks delivered by Chinese President Xi Jinping at the WIC:

WUZHEN, Zhejiang, Dec. 16 (Xinhua) -- Chinese President Xi Jinping has called for Internet access to be expanded worldwide and for more international cooperation to manage content and ensure legality online....

He urged "reform of global Internet governance" and said "the old mentality of a zero-sum game and winners taking all should be rejected... to safeguard order in cyberspace."...

He compared cyberspace to the real world, saying the world needs to strike a balance between "order" and freedom of expression. (Emphasis added)

Nothing too shocking there—although "reform of global Internet Governance" implies that the present arrangement, which includes ICANN, the Internet Governance Forum (IGF), and the UN's World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) needs change. And, as we shall see, China sees "order" as a far higher priority than freedom of expression.

Another state news [report](#) adds this detail:

The advisory committee held its first meeting on the sidelines of the second WIC in Wuzhen of east China's Zhejiang Province. Jack Ma, founder of China's Internet giant Alibaba, and Fadi Chehade, president and CEO of ICANN, act as co-chairman of the advisory committee.

The WIC organizing committee secretariat **has invited** 31 leading Internet figures from governments, enterprises, academic institutions and technological communities to be members of the first high-level advisory committee.

The members include Li Xiaodong, president and CEO of China Internet Network Information Center; Zheng Yongnian, director of East Asian Institute, Singapore National University; Shum Heung Yeung, executive vice president of Microsoft; Werner Zorn, Father of German Internet; Denis Davydov, chairman of Russian Safe Internet League, among others. (Emphasis added)

As can be seen, Mr. Chehade's official ICANN position is prominently touted, and his work as Co-Chair is not off in the future but commenced in Wuzhen while still holding that CEO role. This implicitly associates ICANN with the goals of the initiative being advised, and may be seen by many as an endorsement or, at a minimum, acceptance of those goals. If they are advocacy of moving toward a multilateral IG model, and circumscribing access to mainstream accurate information in pursuit of "order", that would seem largely incompatible with the goal of the IANA transition -- which is to preserve and enhance a multistakeholder model of Internet Governance and an open Internet with unfettered access to information.

The use of the term "has invited" raises a question about whether all the listed members of the Advisory Committee have actually accepted the offered position, as well as to what extent the presence of ICANN's CEO as Co-Chair may have been used to address any concerns they may have expressed.

Regardless of that, the second page of the press report shows pictures of all the members, including this one, second from the top--



Fadi Chehadé

Co-Chair of the High-level Advisory Council of the Secretariat of the World Internet Conference Organizing Committee

Co-Chair of the NETMundial Initiative, **President and CEO of ICANN** (Emphasis added)

Clearly, significant prominence being accorded to Mr. Chehade and his current affiliation with ICANN. He is not just one of the members of the Advisory Committee – he and Alibaba CEO Jack Ma are the headliners. The only thing that may change after he departs ICANN in March 2016 is that the word “Former” could be placed before “President”, with ICANN still linked to the Advisory Committee well into the future.

It should be noted that there are several other business sector members on the Committee (or just invited to join; again, it’s not clear), including a Managing Partner of Sequoia Capital, a Microsoft EVP, and the President of Nokia. There’s also Paul Wilson, Director General of APNIC.

But there’s also the unsettling presence of individuals such as the Chairman of the Russian Safe Internet League -- which an online search reveals to be an organization promoting a scheme for accessing an Internet with only pre-approved, white-listed websites available.

This dry Chinese state media [report](#) was issued at the conclusion of the WIC:

WUZHEN, Zhejiang, Dec. 18 (Xinhua) -- The Second World Internet Conference (WIC) closed on Friday with the Wuzhen initiative.

The WIC Organizing Committee called on all countries to promote Internet development, foster cultural diversity in cyberspace, share the fruits of Internet development, ensure peace and security in cyberspace, and improve global Internet governance.

Lu Wei, head of the Cyberspace Administration of China, announced the conclusion of the three-day event in Wuzhen, which is southwest of Shanghai.

During the high-profile meeting, President Xi Jinping urged all countries to respect Internet sovereignty, jointly safeguard cybersecurity, cooperate with an open mind, and improve Internet governance together.

"The conference was fruitful and conducive to closer cyberspace cooperation," said Ren Xianliang, vice director of the State Internet Information Office.

More than 2,000 government officials, organization leaders and entrepreneurs from home and abroad discussed Internet governance and explored cyberspace cooperation during the meeting.

The WIC witnessed the signing of a series of cooperation deals between Chinese and overseas tech companies. (Emphasis added)

Only those who look behind the curtain of this bland description can discern the actual policies and practices being contemplated for implementation.

ICANN's Follow-Up Explanations

Questions apparently arose regarding the announcement of Mr. Chehade's acceptance of the Co-Chair role. ICANN Board member Bruce Tonkin posted this explanatory email on December 24th:

Hello All,

I have had a few requests for information on ICANN's participation in the World Internet Conference which was held in Wuzhen, China:
<http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/cnleaders/2015WIC/> and
<http://www.wicwuzhen.cn/english>

ICANN sent a contingent to the conference as part of its Strategic Goal 1.2 "Bring ICANN to the world by creating a balanced and proactive approach to regional engagement with stakeholders."

Fadi attended as CEO and gave a speech, and George Sadowsky attended as a Board member.

Subsequent to the conference, the conference organizers announced that Fadi would co-chair a high level advisory committee for the next conference.

http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-12/18/c_134928240.htm

The Board had a call with Fadi to get a briefing.

Fadi has now posted a blog that notes that he has accepted this role in his personal capacity, and the advisory committee will meet after his term as CEO is completed in March 2016.

See:

<https://www.icann.org/news/blog/my-transition-from-icann-ceo-an-update>

Regards,

Bruce Tonkin

This email makes clear that Mr. Chehade was attending the WIC at ICANN's expense and officially representing the organization there. It also implies that The Board was not apprised of his decision to accept the Co-Chair role until after the public announcement was made. As for this role being accepted solely in a "personal capacity", it is this author's view that such a characterization is transparently wishful thinking.

Indeed, Mr. Tonkin subsequently confirmed, in response to a question I posed on the email list of the CCWG-ACCT, that the Board first learned of CEO Chehade's acceptance of the Co-Chair post after China publicly announced it. Here's that December 24th exchange, with my question first and Mr. Tonkin's public reply second:

Bruce:

From your email it appears that the Board was briefed by Fadi on his role as Co-Chair of the Advisory Committee after it was publicly announced that he had accepted the position, indicating that the Board was not advised in advance of his decision to accept the role.

Is that a correct interpretation of the sequence of events?

Thank you and best regards,

Philip

Yes.

As for the assertion that "the advisory committee will meet after his term as CEI is completed", that as noted is flatly contradicted by the December 17th [press release](#), which states:

The advisory committee held its first meeting on the sidelines of the second WIC in Wuzhen of east China's Zhejiang Province. Jack Ma, founder of China's Internet giant Alibaba, and Fadi Chehade, president and CEO of ICANN, act as co-chairman of the advisory committee. (Emphasis added)

Given that the Advisory Committee's work has already commenced, and the prominent mention of Mr. Chehade's current position as ICANN CEO, it would seem reasonable to think that ICANN's Board should have learned of his decision directly and in advance,

rather than after the fact from a press release. Yet there is nothing in Mr. Tonkin's email indicating unease with how this event was orchestrated, or actively distancing ICANN from the WIC and its goals.

As for the post-WIC, December 23rd blog post referenced in that email from Bruce Tonkin, here it is in its entirety:

My Transition from ICANN CEO, an Update

As you know, I will be leaving ICANN in March 2016, and I have been sharing my future plans. [As previously announced](#), I have accepted an appointment with a financial institution, and in addition, I've been invited to serve in several part-time advisory roles post ICANN.

*I most recently accepted the invitation to co-chair a newly formed advisory committee to the World Internet Conference in Wuzhen. The first meeting of the committee will take place in Summer 2016. **My goal is to continue to advocate for global multi-stakeholder governance and a single, open, and interoperable Internet. To avoid any misunderstanding, I wish to confirm again that I have accepted this future role in my personal capacity.***

This week, I met with the Board at its request to give a debriefing on my recent activities and my plans for the coming months. I re-affirmed to the Board -- and now to the community -- that I will continue to give ICANN's operations and the IANA Stewardship Transition my full attention until the end of my tenure.

And with this, I shall close shop for 2015 and head home to celebrate with my family. I wish all of you happy holidays, with plenty of laughter, and I look forward to start a great new year with you! (Emphasis added)

This post indicates that Mr. Chehade believes that the main issue raised by his acceptance of the Co-Chair role is whether it will divert his "full attention" from his ICANN duties between now and his official March 12th departure date, and not whether the announcement made while he is still ICANN's CEO implicitly tied ICANN to the WIC and its objectives. It also additionally confirms that the Board was only advised of the Co-Chair role after its public announcement, and was not consulted with in advance to see if this decision raised any concerns among its members.

As for his declaration that his "goal is to continue to advocate for global multi-stakeholder governance and a single, open, and interoperable Internet", let's accept that as a sincere intention. Nonetheless, the clear goal of the WIC appears to be gaining broad international support for a multilateral approach to IG and an endorsement of

“cyber sovereignty” and all the state-directed censorship and monitoring activities carried out under that banner. So Mr. Chehade’s advocacy of the MSM may turn out to be the equivalent of preaching sobriety in a saloon, and equally ineffective.

Finally, we note that Mr. Chehade has displayed a rather flexible view as to how easily he can transition between his roles as ICANN CEO and private citizen. Eyebrows were raised at the recent Dublin ICANN meeting when he characterized his remarks to the Governmental Advisory Committee (GAC) as being in a private capacity, sidestepping the question of whether he would have been asked to address that entity if he were not ICANN’s CEO. Likewise, it seems questionable whether China would have asked him to Co-Chair if his ICANN role did not give some degree of MSM cover for a unilateral enterprise promoting a multilateral agenda of unbridled sovereign IG control.

Further, as this article will describe, China committed in 2014 to establishing a mandatory “Social Credit System” (SCS) in which all citizens will be required to participate by 2020, and that goal falls within the scope of the cyber sovereignty that the WIC shall be promoting. Alibaba, headed by Mr. Chehade’s Co-Chair, appears to be the leading commercial sector developer of algorithms underlying a sophisticated online social monitoring and evaluation system that is a model for the pervasive and mandatory state-operated SCS planned for the future.

A More Critical Perspective

Notwithstanding the benign and even boring official Chinese descriptions of the WIC – bringing to mind Hannah Arendt’s observation on the banality of evil -- others view it as a far more sinister and dangerous development.

In a December 18th [article](#) titled, “The Firewall Awakens: ICANN's exiting CEO takes internet governance to the dark side”, former ICANN staff member Kieren McCarthy wrote:

ICANN's exiting CEO has stunned internet governance experts by fronting a new Chinese government initiative to expand its view of how the internet should be run....

In general, ICANN takes a very dim view of efforts to limit or censor the internet, so Chehade's decision to align himself with the Chinese government, which runs the world's the most sophisticated censorship program, has come as a surprise and disappointment to many....

The conference is China's transparent effort to shift the internet governance debate away from the currently dominant Western values of openness and freedom, and build a second power base that adopts a more

restrictive perspective. The guests of honor at this [second conference](#) were the prime ministers of Russia, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

The official outline for the Wuzhen Initiative – designed by the High-Level Advisory Committee (HAC) that Chehade now co-chairs – appears harmless enough but contains what internet governance experts will immediately recognize as troubling efforts to legitimize online censorship.

The second point of five guiding principles is "Fostering cultural diversity in the cyberspace." The fourth is "Ensuring peace and security in cyberspace," and the last is "Improving the global Internet governance."

The [document](#) notes the "importance of respect for nations' sovereignty in cyberspace" and specifically fails to use the term "multi-stakeholder" in the context of internet governance, instead opting for the loaded term "multilateral," which is code for putting governments in overall control.

Chehade knows only too well what this initiative means and represents. Combined with the closed organizing committee, and the closed "advisory committee," **the setup is little more than a Chinese-government-run effort to influence global internet governance.**

Regardless, Chehade gave a closing address to the conference, agreed to front the new "high-level advisory committee," and gave an [ingratiating interview](#) to the conference's organizers, available online.

Praising "Chinese innovation and Chinese ideas" and lauding "what great things can come out of China," **Chehade told the interviewer: "We all need to give a big hug to China. And China typically hugs back."** (Emphasis added)

McCarthy devotes a portion of the article to portraying the WIC as a continuation of Chehade's frustrated efforts to gain broad acceptance for the "NETmundial Initiative", opining, "the "Wuzhen Initiative" almost exactly mirrors a previous Chehade effort – the "NetMundial Initiative" – which was met with widespread criticism and has effectively died from a lack of support due to his efforts to control it". But, to this author, the more important matter is that Chehade's role as Co-Chair publicly associates ICANN with the WIC and its objectives.

McCarthy is hardly alone in viewing the WIC as a thinly veiled vehicle to promote digital multilateralism and censorship. Here's an [opinion](#) from the liberal, free market oriented Economist magazine:

Online in China: censors of the world, unite!

More than 2,000 guests, roughly half from abroad, are invited to the World Internet Conference, which President Xi Jinping opens today in Wuzhen, a charming Chinese coastal town. **The grand title is misleading: the gathering will not celebrate the joys of a borderless internet but promote “internet sovereignty”, a web made up of sovereign fiefs, gagged by official censors.** Political leaders attending are from such bastions of freedom as Russia, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The bosses of top Chinese internet firms such as Alibaba and Baidu, who have already accepted self-censorship as the price of doing business, are on show. Some foreign technology and media outfits blocked in China, such as Bloomberg, and others enduring official harassment, including Cisco and Qualcomm, are expected to turn up and kowtow. But unfriendly purveyors of “information weapons” (ie, news), such as the New York Times, have been warned to stay away. (Emphasis added)

America’s National Public Radio, generally regarded as progressive in outlook, provided this [take](#):

Heads of state, including the prime ministers of Pakistan and Russia, and major technology firms will gather Wednesday in Wuzhen, a picturesque little town of canals and boats in eastern China, to talk about the Internet.

One important theme, even if it's not stated explicitly, is how governments can keep some level of control over the Internet...

Hosting the meeting is the head of China's Cyberspace Administration, a former journalist named Lu Wei. He accompanied President Xi to the U.S. this fall, when Xi met with tech CEOs including Apple's Tim Cook and Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg.

At a recent news conference, Lu denied that China censors the Internet — even though it's a widely known fact. He said that China manages the Internet, as does every country's government.

"We learned our management of the Internet from Western, developed nations," he said, "and I can tell you that we still have not learned enough."

He admitted that China does block some foreign websites, but he unapologetically asserted China's right to pick its friends and its business partners.

"We do not welcome those who make money from China and occupy our market while vilifying us," he said — a pointed reference to online criticism of China. "No family likes to invite unfriendly people to be their guests."

China blocks many websites without which the Internet would be unimaginable in the West — including Twitter, Facebook, The New York Times and YouTube — because the government cannot control their content....

Beijing-based media scholar Zhan Jiang, a professor at Beijing Foreign Studies University, says a lot of the struggle for control of online political speech is actually going on inside the Communist Party itself. Xi has admitted that he's been stalemated in his struggle against corrupt officials.

"This shows that Xi's opponents are strong," Zhan says. "They may try to smear him, and he may need to release information about them. So the matter of who controls the discourse is very important."

Zhan says that in Xi's vision of the Internet, security outweighs individual expression.

"In today's world, the development of the Internet poses challenges for countries' sovereignty, security and development," Xi said in a speech to the National Congress of Brazil last year. "Although the Internet has the characteristic of being highly globalized, no country's sovereignty or rights in the realm of information should be infringed upon."

Zhan adds that Xi is focused far more on the Internet and less on traditional media than any of his predecessors. And he argues that China's Cyberspace Administration is more open-minded than the country's traditional propaganda apparatus.

China's vision of an Internet divided into separate national networks — a "splinternet," as some call it — is not what the Internet is really about, Zhan concedes. But China has no plans to push its model of Internet management on other countries.

From that report we can glean that China's internal debate over Internet "control" is to some extent a proxy for political jockeying between different factions within its Communist Party leadership. But if WIC is part of President Xi's strategy against Party rivals, is it appropriate for ICANN's CEO to be prominently associated with it? Political winds can shift quickly in any nation, adding to the danger of any non-political organization's leader teaming with politicians -- who always have hidden agendas. Current instability in China's financial markets is a reminder of the precarious base of the current regime.

No better evidence for that exists than the fact that Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff, with whom Mr. Chehade partnered to launch the NETmundial initiative following her highly critical remarks concerning the Snowden revelations before the UN General Assembly, now faces impeachment charges for her alleged participation in a monumental, multifaceted corruption scandal. There's also some telling irony that back in fall 2013 Chehade declared that Rousseff "spoke for the world" when she attacked the U.S. over Edward Snowden's revelations of National Security Agency (NSA) cyber-snooping in a UN General Assembly speech, giving impetus to developments that sparked the U.S. announcement of the IANA transition – but Mr. Chehade will now be advising a Chinese initiative to advance the cause of pervasive cyber censorship and surveillance rivaling any NSA project.

The preceding perspectives were from the left side of the political spectrum. Here's the [view](#) of the center-right American Enterprise Institute (AEI), which has a significant influence on the thinking of the Republican majority in the U.S. House and Senate that must let the current freeze on NTIA spending for the IANA transition expire to permit its consummation in 2016. The blog is titled "China challenges multi-stakeholder model of Internet governance":

At the summit, China's President Xi Jinping sent clear signals that China plans to continue to control its Internet borders, and called upon neighboring countries to support the right to do so. President Xi called for "cyber sovereignty," advocating that individual countries should have the right to choose how and when to regulate the Internet inside their physical borders without interference by other governments. He outlined a digital future in which governments could set online standards and challenge the free flow of information and content across borders... In the eyes of the Chinese government, this type of "cyber sovereignty" trumps free expression for individuals.

What the Internet would look like under Chinese leadership

China is notorious for blocking social media giants Facebook and Twitter and replacing them with China-based Renren, WeChat, and Sina Weibo. These local apps can – and regularly are – monitored by the government. The government also interferes with Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) and regularly blocks English speaking news websites such as The New York Times and BBC. China also has strict controls on content localization, [announcing](#) as late as last week that all online maps provided in China must be stored on servers within its borders.

China's challenge to the multi-stakeholder model

In his speech, President Xi called on governments to come together to agree on guiding principles for Internet governance, and only involving the non-governmental parts of today's Internet community once these principles are already solidified.

President Xi's comments were echoed by Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, the President of Pakistan, and prime ministers from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, many of whom had earlier in the year urged the UN to adopt an Internet "[code of conduct](#)" that would effectively give every government veto rights over technical protocols interlinking the global Internet.

China's government-led approach to Internet governance is in direct conflict with today's multi-stakeholder model, where all constituents of the online world – including NGOs, academia, the private sector, and technical experts – have seats at the table.

And while China's effort may not be in direct conflict with the exact words carefully chosen in the [World Summit on the Information Society \(WSIS+10\)](#) review at the United Nations this past week, it does seem to be in conflict with the spirit of the agreement to renew the Internet Governance Forum's mandate to continue to encourage a collaborative multi-stakeholder model that stresses openness and access to all. (Emphasis added)

Perhaps the best way to get past the bland language of most official press releases and understand WIC from the official Chinese "Party line" perspective is to review the official opinion of China Voice (Xinhuanet). As it [describes](#) itself:

*Sponsored by the Xinhua News Agency, Xinhuanet is an important central news service-oriented website, **an important information organ of the central government**, and an important platform for building up China's online international communication capacity.*

*Established on November 7, 1997, as an online news provider of the Xinhua News Agency, it was officially named Xinhuanet on March 10, 2000 and began around-the-clock news release **with leading online public opinion at home and setting a good image of China abroad as its main task...***

Xinhuanet has been entrusted to launch and operate a number of major government-run websites, including the Chinese Government Website (gov.cn), Public Security Website (chinapeace.org.cn), Chinese Civilization Website (wenming.cn), State Major Technology and Equipment Website (chinaequip.gov.cn), All-China Journalists Association Website (xinhuanet.com/zgjx), Northeast China Revitalization Website

(chinaneast.gov.cn), and the official website of the ASEAN-China Center (asean-china-center.org). **With these websites, Xinhuanet has formed the biggest cluster of government websites in China.**

With that as background on its voice of the state bona fides, here is China Voice's December 17th [editorial](#) on cyber issues:

*BEIJING, Dec. 17 (Xinhua) -- **Discussion of sovereignty over the Internet has long been a taboo, dismissed in Western media as violation of freedom.***

The time has come to drag the issue into the cold, hard light of day, and China, with an online population of 670 million -- more than twice the entire population of the United States -- and more than four million registered domains, has as much right as anyone to raise the debate.

Addressing the second World Internet Conference, President Xi Jinping asserted the right of each country to choose their own path for cyber development, their own system of cyber regulation and to participate in international cyberspace governance on an equal footing...

With so much discussion on the need to better guard cyber sovereignty and security, the criticisms of China's cyberspace sovereignty by media are irresponsible.

Some Western media or tech firms are not allowed in China because they are not willing to abide by Chinese laws. As a result, they may seize the World Internet Conference as another opportunity to show their grudges.

Google, for example, violated a written promise made when entering the Chinese market by not filtering its search services and then blaming China by insinuation for alleged hacker attacks.

In March 2010, the search engine decided to move its search service out of the Chinese mainland.

But, few tech companies and Internet businesses can afford to ignore the burgeoning market in China. Four Chinese Internet giants, including Alibaba and Tencent, are among the top ten in the world. Internet industries are fast growing...

The sovereign nature of cyberspace entails that it is not a domain beyond the rule of law and rules are necessary in cyberspace, as is freedom.

The increasing number of users and the expanding market is the best evidence that China's policies are working. Temporary measures to

regulate cyberspace security will be meliorated and institutionalized in the future, regardless of wrong accusations from the outside. (Emphasis added)

Reviewing that opinion, it is simultaneously aggressive and defensive, and unapologetically asserts cyber sovereignty in defense of “security” measures.

The day before that ran, again during WIC, China Voice published this [opinion piece](#) in defense of “cyber sovereignty”:

China Voice: Why does cyber-sovereignty matter?

BEIJING, Dec. 16 (Xinhua) -- Over two decades after the world's most populous country gained access to the Internet, China has been fundamentally and irreversibly changed, but not in the way some Western critics expected.

Instead of bringing collapse as some predicted, the Internet in China is becoming more commercially robust and innovative despite regulation and oversight.

The achievements partly rely on China's constant resolution to uphold cyber-sovereignty - an individual country's right to choose its own Internet regulation model - which biased Western critics decry as negating the open nature of the Internet.

Chinese President Xi Jinping stressed the importance of cyber-sovereignty during his address to the Second World Internet Conference in Zhejiang province on Wednesday....

Speaking to an audience including prime ministers and business executives, Xi, who also heads China's central Internet security and informatization (sic) leading group, reiterated that the new frontier of the Internet, though highly global, "is by no means a land beyond law."

Cyber-sovereignty dictates that no surveillance or hacking against any sovereign nation should be tolerated in cyberspace....

After the out of the U.S National Security Agency's PRISM program, more countries have woken up to the fact that "absolute Internet freedom" touted by the U.S. will only end up as "absolute security" in Washington and "absolute insecurity" for the rest.

Sovereign equality, one of the basic norms in contemporary international relations enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations, should also be applicable to cyberspace.

Cyber-sovereignty is also key to the reform of the global Internet governance system where existing rules "hardly reflect the desires and interests of a majority of countries."

With its distinct competitive edges in information technology, the U.S. has turned its tenet of "unilateral globalism" into the ugly "global unilateralism" to build a cyberspace governance system that is far from being fair and just.

That's why Xi called for a reform of international cyberspace governance to one that features a multilateral approach with multi-party participation rather than "one party calling the shots."

*Only by cherishing sovereignty in cyberspace can each nation be bestowed with equal opportunity in formulating better global Internet governance rules.
(Emphasis added)*

As can be seen, in China's view "cyber-sovereignty" is the banner under which the challenge to the "ugly global unilateralism" of the present US-imposed IG model will be waged. That U.S.-developed model of course includes ICANN as the centerpiece which at this moment is being prepared to cut loose from its final remaining U.S. government tie. But that is not mentioned in the opinion piece. Nor, despite valid mention of NSA's cyber-surveillance activities, is there any mention of the massive hacking against western commercial and government websites that are known to originate from within China and are clearly tolerated, and perhaps actively promoted, by its government.

Speaking of ugly unilateralism, that appears to be exactly what WIC is. On that point we refer to a just-published [article](#) on recent IG conferences by [Wolfgang Kleinwächter](#), who just left ICANN's Board at the end of its October 2015 meeting in Dublin. Here's how he characterized WIC:

The 2nd WIC was a remarkable conference. Ten years ago nobody would have expected that the Chinese government would host such a high level international meeting and discuss a broad range of Internet issues in a rather open atmosphere. China is a great Internet power. More than 600 million Chinese people use the Internet. Chinese Internet corporations are strong private sector players. To have a Chinese voice in the global Internet Governance debate enriches the discussion.

However, the WIC was more of a unilateral than a multistakeholder event. The drafting of the program, the invitation of speakers and the announcement of the summary of the conference was in the hands of the hosting government. Wuzhen did not see negotiations among governments

to find common language on controversial issues. And Wuzhen was not the place where non-governmental stakeholders participated in an open, transparent and bottom up process in policy making or decision taking on equal footing.

At the end of the conference, the WIC Organizing Committee launched a "Wuzhen Initiative". The document with a long preamble and five proposals include references to the WSIS Geneva Declaration, the Tunis Agenda, the Montevideo Statement and the report of the Group of Governmental Experts (GGE), but ignores the IGF and the NetMundial Principles. It points to WSIS 10+, but the highly sensitive "multistakeholder"-language, which appears more than 20 times in the WSIS 10+ Outcome Document, is not supported in the published text. It includes a list of values which needs to be protected as cybersecurity, intellectual property and privacy, an important human right. But it does not include the need to protect freedom of expression, another important human right. (Emphasis added)

So, clearly, WIC was a show run by China with very specific and selective political and technical aims. It is difficult to see how co-chairing the Advisory Committee on the resulting Wuzhen Initiative to develop the 2016 WIC can equate to being an “activity to champion MSM” as described in Mr. Chehade’s Tweet.

For a last word on WIC and the wisdom of Mr. Chehade’s involvement, we turn to a recent [opinion piece](#) by Professor Milton Mueller, who has championed the multistakeholder model since ICANN’s creation:

ICANN CEO Fadi Chehade has agreed to co-chair a committee consisting of [31 business and government “leaders” that will advise](#) the Wuzhen conference’s Organizing Committee secretariat... Are Chehade and friends aligning themselves with China’s Great Firewall approach to Internet control? Or are they cleverly and pragmatically attempting to keep the doors to China open and so leaven the PRC’s repressive sovereignty with a more open perspective? Or are they just dealing themselves into an insider’s game? Rather than reacting in a knee-jerk fashion, it is best to consider this question carefully....

Typically, the argument for this kind of engagement goes like this: there are constituencies within China who are open-minded and businesses that want to make deals; greater engagement with outsiders exposes all Chinese to diverse and innovative viewpoints; greater economic engagement with the West will by osmosis lead to a softening of the harshness; if we don’t engage and leave them alone things will only be worse.

Most of these arguments are correct, but they do not justify lending one's name and advice to a Chinese government policy initiative.

Our opinion is that the advisory committee members are making a mistake....

The WIC is intended to justify and advocate a more repressive Internet. There are dozens of ways for the rest of the world to engage with China, including in institutions like ICANN and the RIRs, without cooperating with WIC. Rather than contesting ideas on a terrain in which internet freedom, bottom up initiative and openness have an advantage, they have foolishly chosen to play the conference diplomacy game on a terrain chosen by the Chinese Communist Party.

Like almost everything in China, the WIC is unabashedly state-driven. Its status as a vehicle for the Chinese Party-state's policy agenda was made clear when the original date for the 2015 conference was abruptly changed from late October to mid-December. Why? Because the PRC's President, Xi Jinping, could not make it on the original date. President Xi had to be there because he wanted to make a major keynote speech calling for "cyber sovereignty" and new rules for Internet governance that are "multilateral, democratic and transparent." This should make it clear that the purpose of WIC is to push China's political agenda in Internet governance. Translated into clearer language, "sovereignty" means a bordered Internet in which the state gets to decide what information is available, "multilateral" means intergovernmental and state-driven rather than transnational and civil society-driven, "democratic" means one country, one vote, and transparent means negotiated in intergovernmental arenas rather than in private contracts.

To whom is the Advisory Committee which Chehade and the others are joining giving advice? It is the World Internet Conference Organizing Committee Secretariat, a CCP organ....

On its own, China cannot ever become a thought leader in global Internet governance debates. Why legitimize them by participating and advising?. We do not believe in shunning or boycotting China, Chinese events, or discriminating against Chinese Internet service providers or equipment manufacturers. We do not, however, see the logic or practicality of helping President Xi promote a sovereigntist vision for the Internet...

The author agrees with Prof. Mueller's viewpoint and especially appreciates his insight that an advisor to the WIC is, for all practical purposes, an advisor to a vital organ of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

The WIC is a striking piece of evidence of the schizophrenic attitude of China's leaders toward the Internet, described [here](#):

Beyond their troubled smokestack industries, Chinese leaders see a bright digital hope... But here's the catch: Chinese leaders' boundless optimism for the Internet is running up against their anxiety about its destabilizing potential.

As China launches a technological Great Leap Forward aimed at catching up with the world's advanced economies, President [Xi Jinping](#) has unleashed a wave of political repression. The clampdown is silencing government critics on the web and preventing activists from mobilizing online....

China ranked last in a 2015 country index of Internet freedoms put together by Freedom House, a U.S. nongovernment watchdog, just below Iran and Syria.

Today, a significant constraint on China's growth potential may be political, the result of an authoritarian system that wants the benefits of digital innovation without the disruption.

Authorities are trying to forge an information-based economy while restricting free speech online; investing billions of dollars in broadband to accelerate data speeds as censors press on the brakes; and encouraging creativity yet enforcing Communist Party orthodoxy on artistic expression and academic inquiry.

Mr. Xi, apparently, doesn't see the contradictions. "As in the real world, freedom and order are both necessary in cyberspace," he told the opening of the World Internet Conference in eastern China last month. "Freedom is what order is meant for, and order is the guarantee of freedom."

Under his administration, China has reinforced the Great Firewall that blocks access to Google, [Facebook](#) and several international news websites, making it harder for researchers to acquire specialist knowledge, investors to track overseas markets and business executives to spot global trends.

At government laboratories, programmers are harnessing big data to strengthen the already formidable powers of the surveillance state. A "social credit" system under consideration would create a vast database on the entire population, measuring not just an individual's financial standing but also, in an Orwellian twist, their conduct online.

Last month, the National People's Congress passed an antiterrorism law that has drawn U.S. concern over provisions that may require foreign technology companies to join the government's snooping efforts by installing "back doors" in their systems. (Emphasis added)

Cyber Sovereignty in Practice: The Social Credit System

China already engages in pervasive monitoring of online social networks and metes out punishments for the publication of views out of step with the Party line. However, it has not yet successfully intimidated all members of the Chinese public from expressing such views. As [reported](#) in The Economist:

*It was clearly in part to intimidate feistier members of the country's online community that the authorities arrested one of the country's most prominent civil-rights activists, Pu Zhiqiang, in 2014 and eventually put him on trial on December 14th. **On the basis of seven messages posted on Weibo, China's heavily censored version of Twitter, Mr Pu was charged with "picking quarrels and stirring up trouble" as well as "inciting ethnic hatred". The court handed down a three-year suspended prison sentence, which means that Mr Pu will not be allowed to continue his widely acclaimed work as a lawyer (less than three years ago, he was the subject of a laudatory cover story in a state-controlled magazine).** "It was not the worst outcome, but it set the most odious of precedents," said a Weibo user in Beijing in a message to his nearly 57,000 online followers.*

***Mr Xi is the first Chinese leader to come to power amid the rapid growth of a middle class whose members are equipped with a powerful means of airing dissent and linking up with like-minded malcontents. He inherited an army of internet censors, but despite his efforts to give them more legal muscle (the country's first counter-terrorism law, passed on December 27th, includes restrictions on the reporting of terrorist incidents), Mr Xi is still struggling.** Support for Mr Pu both online and off has shown the scale of the challenge he faces. Some had feared that Mr Pu would be jailed for years. It is possible, in the face of huge support for the activist and a lack of strong evidence that officials blinked.*

Social-media messages relating to Mr Pu were quickly purged from the internet. Yet it is likely that some were seen by many people before disappearing. Some sensitive postings were retweeted by users with large followings before they were eventually deleted, suggesting that censors occasionally failed to keep up....

Outside the court, dozens of Mr Pu's supporters defied a heavy police presence, which included the deployment of thuggish men in plain clothes (oddly wearing smiley badges during the trial). Several protesters were dragged away, some after chanting "Pu Zhiqiang is innocent".

Internet users showed similar disdain for the censors on the anniversary on December 26th of the birth of Mao Zedong ("He wreaked greater destruction on human civilisation than any other villain," one businessman told his more than 106,000 followers). They piped up, too, after an avalanche of construction waste on December 20th in the southern city of Shenzhen that killed at least seven people and left more than 70 others missing. One Weibo user with nearly 75,000 followers lamented how effective a modern city like Shenzhen was at downplaying such news. "What's frightening is that this is the way China as a whole will be," he said. (Emphasis added)

How China will be, if President Xi has his way, includes social behavior modification accomplished via the creation of a new system of rewards and punishments based upon pervasive valuation of every aspect of an individual citizen's activities and expressions, all accomplished via secret algorithms. The term "Orwellian" is vastly overused. But sometimes it is right on target. And that seems to be the case with China's plans to implement a mandatory Social Credit System (SCS) by 2020.

As described in a BBC [report](#) (that can't be read in China, as the BBC news service is among the many western information sources blocked by the Great Firewall):

In most countries, the existence of a credit system isn't controversial. Past financial information is used to predict whether individuals will pay their mortgages or credit card bill in the future.

*But China is taking the whole concept a few steps further. **The Chinese government is building an omnipotent "social credit" system that is meant to rate each citizen's trustworthiness.***

By 2020, everyone in China will be enrolled in a vast national database that compiles fiscal and government information, including minor traffic violations, and distils it into a single number ranking each citizen.

That system isn't in place yet. For now, the government is watching how eight Chinese companies issue their own "social credit" scores under state-approved pilot projects.

One of the most high-profile projects is by Sesame Credit, the financial wing of Alibaba. With 400 million users, Alibaba is the world's biggest online

shopping platform. It's using its unique database of consumer information to compile individual "social credit" scores.

... Sesame Credit will not divulge exactly how it calculates its credit scores, explaining that it is a "complex algorithm".

The company refused to give an interview to the BBC, citing concerns that the government would refuse to grant a permanent licence to issue credit scores if it engaged with the foreign media.

Instead, their spokeswoman issued a statement, discounting persistent rumours that the organisation monitors users' social media activity when assessing their social credit.

...The Chinese authorities are watching the pilot process very carefully. The government system won't be exactly the same as the private systems, but government officials are certainly taking cues from the algorithms developed under the private projects.

A lengthy planning document from China's elite State Council explains that social credit will "forge a public opinion environment that trust-keeping is glorious", warning that the "new system will reward those who report acts of breach of trust".

Details on the inner workings of the system are vague, though it is clear that each citizen and Chinese organisation will be rated. A long list of people in certain professions will face particular scrutiny, including teachers, accountants, journalists and medical doctors. The special list even includes veterinarians and tour guides.

... Critics say the social credit system is "nightmarish" and "Orwellian". However, some believe that some kind of credit system is badly needed in China.

... few people seemed to understand that a bad score could hurt them in the future, preventing them from receiving a bank loan or signing a lease.

And, even more concerning, many didn't know they were being rated by Sesame at all. For now, the pilot credit system is voluntary, though it's difficult to circumvent. Online shopping is a part of life in modern Chinese cities and Alibaba's financial payment service is ubiquitous.... Within five years, the government's mandatory system will rank everyone within China's borders. (Emphasis added)

One European Internet activist has [written](#) that:

*this credit score isn't just affected by how well you manage credit – it also reflects how well your political opinions are in line with Chinese official opinions, and whether your friends' are, too.... **while there are benefits today for obedient people, it intends to add various sanctions for people who don't behave, like limited Internet connectivity... if any of your friends do this — publish opinions without prior permission, or report accurate but embarrassing news — your score will also deteriorate. And this will have a direct impact on your quality of life.***

“Sesame Credit, however, also uses other data to calculate the scores, such as a person's hobbies, interaction with friends, shopping habits and lifestyle.” — Quote from China Daily Asia. (Emphasis added)

Of course, it's impossible to know exactly how the SCS will be implemented until it actually is. But the 11,000-plus word 2014 [“Planning Outline for the Construction of a Social Credit System”](#), issued with an opening directive for all “provincial, autonomous region and municipal People's Governments, all State Council ministries and commissions, all directly subordinate departments” to “please implement it earnestly”, paints a picture of a pervasive technological monitoring and behavior modification system that will apply to every aspect of civic, political, economic, and social life.

This may be its most ominous section:

V, Perfect operational mechanisms for the social credit system with rewards as the focus point.

*Operational mechanisms are the institutional basis to guarantee the coordinated operation of all parts of the social credit system. **In particular, mechanisms encouraging trust-keeping and punishing breach of trust directly play a role in the credit activities of all social subjects, and are the core mechanisms for the operation of the social credit system.***

(1) Build mechanisms to incentivise trust-keeping and punish trust-breaking.

*Strengthen rewards and incentives for subjects to keep trust. **Expand rewards and propaganda strength for trust-keeping acts.** Grant rewards to enterprises and model individuals keeping trust according to regulations, broadly propagate them through news media, and forge a public opinion environment that trust-keeping is glorious. Development and reform, finance, banking, environmental protection, housing and urban construction, traffic and transportation, commercial, industrial, fiscal, quality inspection, security supervision, customs,*

intellectual property rights and other such departments must, in the process of market supervision and public service, deepen the application of credit information and credit products, and extent “green path” support and incentive mechanisms, such as preferential management, simplifying procedures, etc., to those keeping trust.

Strengthen restraint and punishment of subjects breaking trust. Strengthen administrative supervision, restraint and punishment. On the basis of the current administrative punishment measures, complete punishment structures for breach of trust, establish blacklist systems and market withdrawal mechanisms in all sectors. Promote all levels’ People’s Governments to implement categorized credit management implement categorized credit supervision and management concerning market supervision and management, public service market access, qualification accreditation, administrative examination and approval, policy support and other such areas, integrate the categories and levels of supervision and management counterparts to ensure that those breaking trust are punished. Progressively establish systems for credit commitment by administrative approval applicants, and launch inspections of applicants’ credit, ensure that applicants have credit records in government-recommended credit investigation bodies, coordinate with credit investigation bodies in launching credit information collection work. Promote the creation of marketized constraint and punishment. Formulate normative credit evaluation standard systems and evaluation methods, perfect systems to record and expose information concerning trust-breaking, ensure that those breaking trust are constrained in their market interactions. Promote the creation of sectoral constraints and punishments. Formulate sectoral self-discipline norms through sectoral associations and supervise members in obeying them. Implement warning, intra-sectoral reporting and criticism, open condemnation and other such punitive measures against those breaking trust in violation of regulations, according to the gravity of the circumstances, both for corporate members and individuals members. Promote the creation of socialized constraint and punishment. Perfect social public opinion supervision mechanisms, strengthen disclosure and exposure of trust-breaking acts, give rein to the role of the masses in appraisal, discussion, criticism and reports, shape social deterrence through social moral condemnation, and censure trust-breaking acts of members of society.

Establish rewarded reporting systems for acts of breach of trust. Realistically implement rewards for reporting individuals, and protect the lawful rights and interests of reporting individuals.

Establish joint credit reward and punishment mechanisms across multiple departments and regions. Through credit information exchange and sharing, realize credit reward alliances across multiple departments and regions, ensure that those keeping trust receive benefit in all respect, and those breaking trust meet with difficulty at every step.

As can be seen, the Outline proposes a system of pervasive rewards and punishments to guide social behavior. Anyone familiar with the practices of the infamous [Stasi](#) of communist East Germany can see the parallels, with this being an updated 21st Century version aided by Internet social networking and big data analysis. In particular, the Stasi perfected a technique of psychological harassment described by German historian Hubertus Knabe:

...the Stasi often used a method which was really diabolic. It was called Zersetzung, and it's described in another guideline. The word is difficult to translate because it means originally "biodegradation". But actually, it's a quite accurate description. The goal was to destroy secretly the self-confidence of people, for example by damaging their reputation, by organizing failures in their work, and by destroying their personal relationships. Considering this, East Germany was a very modern dictatorship. The Stasi didn't try to arrest every dissident. It preferred to paralyze them, and it could do so because it had access to so much personal information and to so many institutions.

China's planned Social Credit System could well be a more efficient digital version of Zersetzung, as the state will have access to vast amounts of personal information, and the policy will be implemented across every aspect of society with the aim of degrading social reputation, blocking career paths and inflicting other "difficulties" on those receiving low ratings, and after that promoting their isolation by penalizing continued social relationships with them.

As noted above, Alibaba, led by WIC Advisory Committee Co-Chair Jack Ma, appears to be playing a leading role in developing the algorithms that will be employed in the SCS. Alibaba has also just acquired control of Hong Kong's South China Morning Post (SCMP) newspaper for a price of \$266 million; SCMP provides the leading English language perspective on developments within China. That acquisition has led to concerns that the acquisition is intended to stifle an independent Hong Kong-based voice that has often been critical of Chinese practices and plans.

As [reported](#) by the N.Y. Times:

The Alibaba Group, the Chinese Internet giant, is making an ambitious play to reshape media coverage of its home country, taking aim at what company executives call the “negative” portrayal of China in the Western media.

As the backbone of this effort, Alibaba agreed on Friday to buy the media assets of the SCMP Group, including one of Hong Kong’s most influential English language daily newspapers, The South China Morning Post. Alibaba is acquiring an award-winning newspaper that for decades has reported aggressively on subjects that China’s state-run media outlets are forbidden to cover, like political scandals and human-rights cases.

Alibaba said the deal was fueled by a desire to improve China’s image and offer an alternative to what it calls the biased lens of Western news outlets. While Alibaba said the Chinese government had no role in its deal to buy the Hong Kong newspaper, the company’s position aligns closely with that of the Communist Party, which has grown increasingly critical of the way Western news organizations cover China.

This coverage, the company said, influences how investors and others outside China regard Alibaba. The company said its shares, which are listed in New York, were being affected by all the negative reports about China.

“Our business is so rooted in China, and touches so many aspects of the Chinese economy, that when people don’t really understand China and have the wrong perception of China, they also have a lot of misconceptions about Alibaba,” Joseph C. Tsai, Alibaba’s executive vice chairman, said in an interview.

“What’s good for China is also good for Alibaba,” Mr. Tsai added...

The bigger risk is reputational, as Alibaba leaps into the realm of politics. In owning The South China Morning Post, Alibaba will control a news organization that operates along a border that separates two systems, one in Hong Kong with a relatively free press and another in mainland China with strict censorship controls.

As speculation of a deal began in recent weeks, some critics in Hong Kong had already started to worry about whether Alibaba was seeking to tame the paper’s coverage in order to curry favor with the Chinese leadership.

Willy Lam, a political commentator and former editor at the South China Morning Post, said an Alibaba takeover would most likely exacerbate a trend at the paper toward self-censorship on sensitive political issues.

Alibaba, however, said it had no intention of interfering with the day-to-day operations of the paper and would not censor articles. The company said it would ensure the paper's journalistic independence and integrity.

"We'll operate on principles," said Mr. Tsai of Alibaba. "We'll let the editors make their judgment on what to publish and not to publish. I can't think of anything being off-limits."

But Mr. Tsai did not offer details about how Alibaba would execute its vision for more positive coverage on China without sacrificing editorial independence, two agendas that are seemingly at odds. He said that more "fair and accurate" articles would translate, over time, into a more positive image of the country....

Some free press advocates worry that a mainland entrepreneur could face intense pressure from the Chinese government to restrict news coverage or to follow directives of the propaganda arm of the Communist Party. In recent years, there have been growing concerns in Hong Kong that the Chinese government has asked entrepreneurs and advertisers to withdraw support of any publication that is deemed to be hostile to the Communist Party.....

Behind the scenes, Eric X. Li, the prominent Shanghai-based venture capitalist who was an early investor in Youku, helped advise Alibaba on its acquisition of SCMP Group's media assets. Mr. Li has gained notoriety in recent years as a political commentator known for aggressively critiquing American-style democracy and extolling the virtues of the Communist Party, like China's leadership system.

"China's re-emergence is perhaps the most consequential development for the world in the 21st century," Mr. Li said in an interview. "Media coverage of China in the West has been too ideological and biased."

He said Alibaba's ownership would "give the paper a unique and powerful vantage point to offer global readers a more pluralistic and realistic view of China." (Emphasis added)

The Wall Street Journal [reported](#) on Mr. Ma's defense of the acquisition and his dismissal of fears that Alibaba would abet censorship:

In an interview on the sidelines of China's World Internet Conference on Wednesday, Mr. Ma said there was no basis to think that the SCMP would lose editorial independence while under the ownership of the e-commerce company he founded.

“Trust us. Why do people have to think that if we have it, it will lose its independence? Why not with others?” he said. “We also read the newspapers. We also want media independence and fairness. What basis is there that with us, there will be no more independence?”

Asked about [critics who say](#) Alibaba would feel pressure from Chinese leaders to change the newspaper’s coverage, he said, “I think those people think too little of us.”...

Alibaba is a privately-owned company, but its extensive e-commerce and other businesses on the mainland have [led critics to say](#) that it may be pressured by Beijing to curb the paper’s independence to please Chinese authorities. In a letter to SCMP readers, Alibaba Executive Vice Chairman Joe Tsai said, “China’s rise as an economic power and its importance to world stability is too important for there to be a singular thesis.”

Asked whether Alibaba was requested by authorities to purchase the SCMP, Mr. Ma said, “I have always encountered speculation from other people. If I had to bother about what other people speculated about, how would I get anything done?” (Emphasis added)

The acquisition also prompted a statement of concern from the Hong Kong Journalist Association, as reported [here](#):

In a statement released Friday, the Hong Kong Journalists Association said it was “concerned” by Alibaba’s acquisition of the Post, particularly with Mr. Tsai’s stated goal of presenting alternative views of China, which some worry would simply mean promoting a positive spin on China news.

“[A] professional media should employ the universal values on human rights...in its reporting on any country,” [the HKJA said](#), adding that it fears Mr. Tsai’s comment suggests there could be “further restrictions on the Post’s reporting on China.”

Reports on the acquisition and Mr. Tsai’s comments were kept mostly terse on the mainland. The Communist Party’s main mouthpiece People’s Daily ran the news as [a two-paragraph clip on its second page](#), reproducing just the basics from a report by state-run Xinhua News Agency. Xinhua itself [stuck to a just-the-facts report](#).

But some others in the Chinese capital just couldn’t help themselves. The Beijing News Media Research Institute, a think tank under a leading newspaper in the nation’s capital, headlined its report posted on social media by saying that SCMP

has become “Ma Mei,” which means “Ma’s Media,” a reference to Alibaba founder and executive chairman Jack Ma...

The acquisition has sent jitters through some sections of Hong Kong over the rise of censorship in the territory. Press freedom in Hong Kong [has been steadily deteriorating](#) in recent years, according to [media watchdog organizations](#), as journalists have suffered both physical and cyberattacks. The territory [ranked No. 70 in Reporters Without Borders’ 2015 Press Freedom Index](#), down from No. 61 in 2014 and No. 34 in 2010.

Hong Kong was handed back from the U.K. to China in 1997. But the ex-colony enjoys its own terms of governance, including an unfettered Internet, financial freedom and an often-boisterous local media. (Emphasis added)

Alibaba’s central role in advising the WIC, abetting the development of the SCS, and acquiring media outlets that have provided an independent perspective on China bears continued monitoring and scrutiny.

WIC vs. WSIS

Just prior to the WIC meeting in Wuzhen, half a world away in New York City the WSIS+10 (World Summit on the Information Society) meeting was held at the United Nations. U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Sepulveda published this [description](#) of its achievements on behalf of the multistakeholder model of Internet Governance:

*The U.S. delegation worked with our colleagues toward consensus in **recognizing, reaffirming, and committing to the existing multistakeholder model for Internet governance** and harnessing ICTs [Information and Communication Technologies] for development, and in securing an extension of the mandate of the Internet Governance Forum. Our team succeeded. Just as important, **the stakeholders at the Summit achieved consensus on evaluating the success of the development of the information society going forward not just in economic terms, but also by the degree to which it enables people everywhere to exercise their human rights and fundamental freedoms.***

That commitment to an information society dedicated to human rights and fundamental freedoms stands in stark contrast to WIC’s commitment to a cyber sovereignty that sublimates information freedom to state priorities.

CEO Chehade published his own [blog post](#) on WSIS at ICANN’s website, and had this to say:

*We were pleased to see that the Outcome Document shows that **the issue of Internet governance no longer evolves around the question of whether it should be multilateral or multistakeholder**. Instead it recognizes the “Internet as a global facility includes **multilateral, transparent, democratic and multi-stakeholder processes**, with the full involvement of Governments, the private sector, civil society, international organizations, technical and academic communities, and all other relevant stakeholders in accordance with their respective roles and responsibilities.”... This is a reminder that the Internet is not centralized, and its governance model is polycentric. (Emphasis in original)*

As can be seen, that statement seeks to downplay the very real differences between multistakeholder versus multilateral approaches to Internet Governance. We do not know whether, when Mr. Chehade penned it, he had already accepted the WIC Co-Chair post – but that very uncertainty illustrates once again how his decision has intertwined ICANN and WIC in unpredictable ways and places a single individual in two seemingly incompatible roles.

Meanwhile, the author has received a private communication from an active member of the ICANN community who participated in the WSIS+10 document sessions, and who wishes to remain anonymous, stating that this individual and other WSIS participants were shocked and disappointed to learn of Mr. Chehade’s acceptance of the WIC Advisory Committee Co-Chair role. The email further pointed out that, “The language in the WIC text reproduces word for word the language that China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Cuba tried to force into the WSIS review outcome.” Rejected at WSIS but, sadly, resurrected at WIC immediately thereafter.

The question of “multilateral or multistakeholder” IG continues to be critical, fundamental, irreconcilable, and far from being resolved. Notwithstanding efforts to downplay the contrast, WSIS+10 and WIC present starkly different visions for the future evolution of the Internet’s underlying technology and the ends it should serve.

Potential Impact on the IANA Transition

While CEO Chehade had much to do with driving the IANA transition, particularly through his partnering with Brazilian President Rousseff to launch the NETmundial Initiative, he will depart from ICANN prior to the transition’s completion.

And that completion, while likely, is by no means assured. The FY 2016 U.S. government funding bill recently passed by Congress and signed by President Obama [extends](#) the freeze on NTIA’s ability to complete the transition through September 30, 2016. In January 2015, NTIA head Lawrence Strickling publicly [acknowledged](#) that this IANA transition freeze language barred the transition so long as it remained in effect, stating:

The act does restrict NTIA from using appropriated dollars to relinquish our stewardship during fiscal year 2015 with respect to Internet domain name system functions. We take that seriously. Accordingly, we will not use appropriated funds to terminate the IANA functions contract with ICANN prior to the contract's current expiration date of September 30, 2015. Nor will we use appropriated dollars to amend the cooperative agreement with Verisign to eliminate NTIA's role in approving changes to the authoritative root zone file prior to September 30. On these points, there is no ambiguity.

The NTIA's March 14, 2014 [announcement](#) of the transition listed four principles that any transition plan would be judged on – and then added this additional caveat:

NTIA will not accept a proposal that replaces the NTIA role with a government-led or an inter-governmental organization solution.

According to a very recent [article](#) co-authored by a Fellow at the Heritage Foundation, which greatly influences the views of Congressional Republicans, the near-final Accountability proposal currently being reviewed by ICANN's Chartering Organizations fails to meet that NTIA test:

While the draft proposal is greatly improved from earlier drafts in clarity, specificity, and accountability measures, overall the draft proposal has a number of significant weaknesses, ambiguity and gaps. Unless and until these issues are addressed, the NTIA and Congress should oppose this transition...

The third draft proposal would increase the board threshold for rejecting the Governmental Advisory Committee advice to a two-thirds majority, but would also limit special consideration of GAC advice by the board to consensus advice and defining that advice as general agreement without formal objection. Concerns include what, if any, obligations the board has in regards to non-consensus GAC advice, nailing down the specific process for approving or rejecting consensus GAC advice, and making certain that board-approved GAC advice is subject to appeal by the community...

Also worth noting is that the increase in the threshold from a simple majority to two-thirds majority for the board to reject GAC advice violates the testimony of ICANN CEO Fadi Chehade at a Feb. 2015 Senate hearing where he stated that requiring a two-thirds board majority to reject GAC advice was "off the table."

In addition, the GAC is also likely to participate as a voting member in the proposed post-transition ICANN community governing body called the

“Empowered Community.” Such participation would represent an expansion of GAC authority in ICANN by granting it powers that it does not currently possess.

We strongly believe that an acceptable proposal that preserves the privileged advisory role of the GAC to the board must not allow the GAC to be a decisional participant in the Empowered Community. Specifically, the GAC role must be limited to a non-decisional advisory role in the Empowered Community. (Emphasis added)

The author played some role in the development in the current language of the Proposal’s Stress Test 18 relating to Board consideration of GAC advice. While he is not yet ready to express an opinion on how Congress should treat the overall Proposal – because it is not yet final – he is concerned that its current language may create an implication that, after some passage of time, GAC consensus advice that was not explicitly rejected by at least two-thirds of ICANN’s Board might be deemed automatically accepted. He is also concerned that the GAC’s option to participate in an accountability escalation process that depends on Board member removal as the ultimate enforcement tool might be employed in some potential scenarios to influence the Board’s treatment of GAC advice.

But enough of ICANN inside accountability baseball and back to U.S. political realities -- both the White House and Congressional leaders have issued statements that not much should be expected in the way of cooperative legislative progress in the pivotal Presidential election year of 2016. Congressional leaders have also ritually stated that they really intend to pass separate appropriations bills in 2016 and not a 2,000-page omnibus monstrosity like the one just signed. But it is far more likely that in the closing days of September 2016, with the election just weeks away, a politically divided Congress will again pass a simple continuing appropriations bill to keep the government funded until after the election.

In that continuing resolution scenario all current funding restrictions are generally extended automatically, meaning that it would take an affirmative decision by Congress to terminate the IANA transition freeze to allow it to proceed as of October 1, 2016 (assuming that the NTIA and Congress have found the Accountability Proposal to meet their approval criteria). Several oversight hearings on the transition plan are likely to be held by key committees next year, and while ICANN’s as yet unnamed new CEO will likely be its official witness, up to now Mr. Chehade has been the primary face and voice of ICANN for these legislators as they contemplate the transition. His dalliance with the CCP’s WIC will not be warmly regarded on either side of the U.S. political aisle, and his successor CEO may well face very pointed questioning from elected officials such as Senate Commerce Committee members (and leading Republican Presidential

aspirants) Senators Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio, both of whom have had significant involvement with the IANA transition..

The MSM versus ML debate must be understood within a much broader geopolitical context. As this article on “A Bigger, Bolder China in 2016” [reports](#):

China’s efforts to project its economic and military clout around the world are set to accelerate as the country fleshes out plans for new trade routes between Europe and Asia in 2016 and tries to consolidate its grasp over disputed islands in the South China Sea.

With Beijing holding the rotating presidency of the Group of 20 nations next year, Chinese President [Xi Jinping](#) is expected to press ahead with his drive to challenge U.S. dominance of the global financial and security order.

That threatens to put Beijing increasingly at odds with Washington, although U.S. President Barack, preoccupied by Russia and the Mideast, is expected to avoid a major confrontation with China in his final year in office...

Cybersecurity attacks, a more recent strain in relations, were tackled in 2015 with a new dialogue mechanism agreed upon in September. The coming year will test how quickly Beijing carries out investigations of past attacks, and how well the mechanism manages allegations of fresh attacks. U.S. officials say sanctions remain an option.

Both China and the U.S. have sought to play down tensions over the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, or AIIB, which Beijing established in 2015 as a counterpart to the U.S.-dominated World Bank and Japan-dominated Asian Development Bank.

The AIIB is due to dispense its first loans in 2016, providing the first indications of whether it will [complement existing institutions, as Beijing says](#), or undermine international governance standards, as Washington fears.

Similarly, the Eurasia Group prepared a summary of the “Top 10 Risks to the World in 2016” for Time magazine, including [this](#):

3. The China Footprint

Never has a country at China’s modest level of economic and political development produced such a powerful global footprint. China is the only country of scale today with a global economic strategy. The recognition in 2016 that China is both the most important and most uncertain driver of a series of global outcomes will increasingly unnerve other international players who aren’t ready

for it, don't understand or agree with Chinese priorities, and won't know how to respond to it.

Therefore, news that Mr. Chehade has agreed to Co-Chair a Chinese Internet initiative to further the position that governments, not stakeholders, should have the leading role in Internet Governance may disconcert key members of Congress and substantially complicate efforts to lift the IANA transfer funding freeze. For most U.S. politicians, mentioning China and the Internet in the same breath rouses negative feelings about the Great Firewall, its pervasive hacking of U.S. government and private sector computers, and continuing intellectual property infringement, all within a context of heightened military and economic competition and potential confrontation.

The fact that Mr. Chehade apparently accepted the WIC Co-Chair role without first advising ICANN's Board could have assisted the organization in disassociating itself from the Wuzhen Initiative, but the Board's passive reaction has mostly squandered that possibility. Further, as Mr. Chehade's December 23rd ICANN blog noted, the Committee he will Co-Chair will kick off full scale activities in summer 2016 -- exactly the time when Congress will be intensely scrutinizing the Accountability plan.

All in all, his and thereby ICANN's association with the WIC will not help and will likely considerably complicate the efforts to get the IANA transition green-lighted later this year as Congress ponders the extent to which a post-transition ICANN, and especially its Board, is committed to resisting governmental pressure for technological measures that abet state censorship and surveillance.

When the author testified before Congress last spring he lamented the fact that ICANN's Board and senior staff had yet to demonstrate a "culture of accountability". No accountability plan can wholly assure such a change in consciousness. And the Board's passive acceptance of Mr. Chehade's WIC announcement demonstrates its continued absence. In addition, it is not at all clear that the proposed Accountability proposal, which provides a remedy for Board inaction that violates ICANN's Bylaws, could be invoked if it were in place today (adding further that, based upon email discussions, it is not clear that there is an ICANN community consensus on whether Mr. Chehade's action was a prudent and appropriate one).

It could well be an ironic outcome of ICANN's unintended WIC involvement that a delay, much less political cancelation, of the IANA transition would likely be viewed by China as a positive outcome. Its national game is Go, not Chess. "Go is a deeper game than chess", as noted in a [report](#) noting that supercomputers have yet to be programmed to defeat a Go master, as IBM's Deep Blue did to world Chess champion Garry Kasparov in 1997. China's may have no aim to capture the MSM established by the U.S. and other western nations, but to encircle it with its own ML approach to IG. Continued association

of ICANN with the U.S. could further China's ability to market its own IG vision to nations on the fence.

Before closing out this section on the political and strategic aspects of Cyber Geopolitics, we'll reference these [thoughts](#), co-authored by a former President of the European Union Commission, regarding China's strategic Internet strategy and guaranteed presence as a major player going forward:

[I]n the Information Age, a country's comprehensive power has become inseparable from her presence in the cyberspace.

Chinese policy makers have not only integrated the various dimensions of geopolitics but they have rightly paid great attention to the rapidly evolving domain of cyberpolitics.

By almost exclusively focusing on what it perceives as the limitations and the imperfections of the Chinese internet, the West has not yet fully realized the significance of the Chinese digital transformation. At the intersection of China's global projection and of her quest for innovation, digital China is one of the most significant stories of our time...

China missed the Industrial Revolution but it is a co-architect of the Information Age.

Global cyberspace, like the post WWII system of international relations, is bipolar, not structured around Washington D.C. and Moscow, but articulated around the U.S. and China. The current digital bipolarity is reflected in the competition between internet companies : Google, Twitter, YouTube, Amazon, eBay, Uber, Expedia and Apple Pay are the icons of digital America while Baidu, Tencent's Wechat, Youku, JD.com, Alibaba, DidiKuaidi, Ctrip and Alipay symbolize China's cyberspace. In a sense, global cyberspace is a tale of two internets.

Today, the two top languages of the World Wide Web are English (851 million users) and Chinese (704 million users) but with the rise of the internet penetration in the Middle Country (around 50% internet penetration in China against 87% for the U.S.), Mandarin might be soon the internet number one language...

Some would argue that despite the quantitative dimension of the Chinese internet, China has been qualitatively a mere follower of the Silicon Valley. However, by choosing to protect the development of her own giants she has not only be able to narrow the gap very aptly, but the country's existing

digital ecosystem put her in a position to genuinely innovate in the infrastructure and the systems of the cyberspace.

The data that the Chinese internet companies have been accumulating give them an absolute advantage in what will be soon the world's largest economy, and in the field of e-payment where more than 200 firms serve the Chinese consumers, the Middle Country's initiatives have become driving forces...

Alibaba, the e-commerce giant created 16 years ago by Jack Ma and whose IPO raised a record \$25 billion on the New York Stock Exchange, is increasing its presence in the European Union in a move which will immediately benefit the Sino-European trade relations. However, when European companies export to China through trading platforms conceived by Alibaba they become dependent on a new kind of vehicle upon which they have no direct control.

The 20th century Internet was U.S.-led and English-centric. The 21st century Internet is a bipolar entity in which Washington and Beijing, and English and Mandarin, will share the stage.

Privacy, Censorship and Security

Admittedly, the debate on Internet free speech, blocking of dangerous information, and related national security concerns is hardly confined to China. Within the US we are witnessing a lively debate about the extent to which the government and private sector should have access to and report on email and social media expressions of support for violent actions and indoctrination, especially as regards ISIS propaganda and recruitment. On December 19th the NY Times reported on its front page, in a [story](#) entitled “Internet Firms Urged to Limit Work of Anwar al-Awlaki”, on the current debate regarding whether and how to limit access to that deceased individual’s online texts and videos urging violent jihad and providing instructions on bomb-making. The story noted that the subject is “raising a tangle of issues involving technology, national security, religion and freedom of speech”.

Notwithstanding the U.S. Constitution’s First Amendment protection of free speech, that right is not absolute, with general recognition that the Constitution is not a “[suicide pact](#)” and that certain forms of speech cross the line from expression to incitement and thereby lose such protection. Another December 27th N.Y. Times [story](#) discusses the active debate among legal scholars as to whether it is time to reexamine the “clear and present danger” standard for speech that no longer enjoys first amendment protection. It reports:

Cass R. Sunstein, a Harvard law professor and former Obama administration official, broached the subject in [an article on Bloomberg View](#). He called the clear and present danger test “the greatest American contribution to the theory and practice of free speech.” In view of the Islamic State’s successful use of the Internet to nurture terrorists, he said, “it’s worth asking whether that test may be ripe for reconsideration.”

A more forceful case and a legislative proposal were put forth by Eric Posner, a professor of law at the University of Chicago, in [an article for Slate](#). “Never before in our history have enemies outside the United States been able to propagate genuinely dangerous ideas on American territory in such an effective way,” Mr. Posner wrote. The Islamic State’s ability to spread “ideas that lead directly to terrorist attacks,” he said, “calls for new thinking about limits on freedom of speech.”

Mr. Posner supported urging companies like Facebook and YouTube to crack down on propaganda by the Islamic State, which is also known as ISIS or ISIL, but said that could never be fully effective. He proposed, in addition, passing a law to deter potential consumers from viewing dangerous sites....legal experts, including Mr. Posner, agree that if today’s Supreme Court considered his proposed law, it would be struck down.

As the debate on the acceptable tradeoff between free speech and security continues in the U.S., Apple is leading a technology sector pushback against the UK’s proposed Investigatory Powers bill which aims to codify the authority of that nation’s intelligence services to access its citizen’s digital communications. Apple and other tech firms allege that it will encourage other nations to enact similar measures and paralyze multinational Internet-related companies.

So there can clearly be valid and reasonable discussions of the extent to which governments and a cooperative private sector should monitor and even block certain Internet content, even within multiparty liberal democracies. But there is a big difference between censoring a narrow range of content that preaches hate, incites to violence, and instructs on weapons building, versus far broader censorship that blocks individuals’ ability to access factual content and wide-ranging expressions of opinion.

Unfortunately, in China the N.Y. Times hyperlinks appearing in the paragraphs above cannot be accessed without circumventing government-erected firewalls. That is the type of technology-abetted censorship that one would hope and expect ICANN to avoid even the appearance of condoning through association.

Meanwhile, in China, the crackdown on information flows continues and is being ratcheted up. Again, the N.Y. Times is the source for a December 27th [report](#) that:

China's legislature approved an antiterrorism law on Sunday after months of international controversy, including criticism from human rights groups, business lobbies and President Obama.

Critics had said that the draft version of the law used a recklessly broad definition of terrorism, gave the government new censorship powers and authorized state access to sensitive commercial data.

The government argued that the measures were needed to prevent terrorist attacks. Opponents countered that the new powers could be abused to monitor peaceful citizens and steal technological secrets...

Human rights groups have warned that the law will give even more intrusive powers to the Chinese government, which already has broad, virtually unchecked authority to monitor and detain citizens and to demand information from companies and Internet services....In January, foreign business groups [wrote to President Xi Jinping](#) to voice collective unease about China's Internet policies...(Emphasis added)

Some parties will undoubtedly wave the cynical and dispirited banner of “moral equivalence” and assert that what China is pursuing is not all that different from government and private sector activities in the U.S. But there is a very significant difference between a nation with a one-party government system, crony capitalism, and a belief in multilateral IG with one that has a robust and raucous democracy, First Amendment protections, and a two-decade history of support for multistakeholder IG. Edward Snowden's NSA cybersurveillance revelations were widely reported across the websites and apps of western news organizations – where is the similar reporting within China of its pervasive domestic and international cybersurveillance activities?

The answer to that question reveals the fundamental difference between an open and closed society. Anyone considering China's aims for the WIC and the Wuzhen Initiative should keep that in the forefront of their minds.

Conclusion

As competing models of Internet Governance are discussed, and implemented at the national and global levels, it is important to understand that ideals matter, even if their attainment in the real world is often imperfect.

One ideal is for an Internet led by stakeholders from the business and technology sectors, civil society, academia, and elsewhere. In this model, governments participate and advise, but do not command.

The competing model, advocated by China and other nations, places governments in charge and subordinates all other interests to those of the state.

What will the future bring? An Internet of, by, and for the people – or of, by, and for the state? An Internet in which the default position is free access to information, with the state intervening only to address high level threats to peace and security – or an Internet in which only websites that comport with the Party line can be viewed without technological evasion and potential legal and societal sanctions?

Mr. Chehade has chosen to become an advisor to the CCP's WIC, which appears to be dedicated to advancing a concept of cyber sovereignty in which the Internet becomes a major implementing tool of a pervasive, behavior modifying Social Credit System. The SCS will rank every individual on the basis of their fealty to the Chinese state and the goals of its single ruling party.

Let us hope that as the WIC project proceeds, and if he retains his Co-Chair role, he will at least loudly and publicly advise China that it is following the wrong path, and that it leads to a destination at odds with the Internet's near-unlimited potential to expand the bounds of human freedom.

His decision to accept a prominent role within the WIC is between him, his karma, and the ICANN Board. But the entire ICANN community, and beyond that the world, will be watching China's efforts to advance its vision of a censored and subservient Internet -- as well as watching ICANN's Board to see if it intends to say or do more about its unanticipated entanglement with the WIC and its suffocating ML agenda.