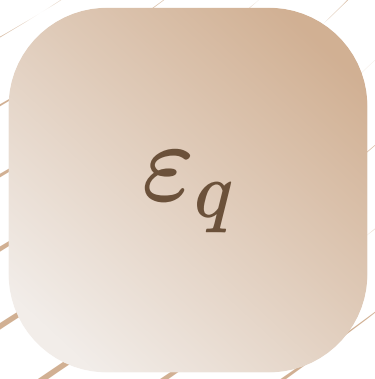
International Cooperation for Responsible AI

Commentary I

Joël Christoph, Rafael Andersson Lipcsey, Jonas Kgomo

Forging a Third Pole Beyond Great Power Rivalry



Forging a Third Pole Beyond Great Power Rivalry

(Commentary I)

International Cooperation for
Responsible AI

Author : Joël Christoph, Rafael Andersson Lipcsey, Jonas Kgomo
Report Theme: Commentary I
Partners: Equiano Institute

Equiano Institute
Responsible AI Diffusion Lab

International Cooperation for Responsible AI Diffusion: Forging a Third Pole Beyond Great Power Rivalry

By Joël Christoph and Jonas Kgomo

Commentary I

Partners: Equiano Institute, Responsible AI Diffusion Lab

In an age of rapid technological advances, nowhere are the stakes higher than in the realm of artificial intelligence (AI). As AI capabilities outpace governance structures around the world, the urgent question is how to ensure their safe, inclusive, and beneficial deployment. With the United States and China occupying two poles of this technological race, the rest of humanity risks being relegated to the role of passive recipients—reliant on external AI systems that may not align with local needs or safeguard their well-being.

This risk is exacerbated by the second Trump administration's unilateralist stance, which curtailed international engagement on AI governance while imposing stringent export controls and prioritizing narrow national interests. Such policies, mirrored or countered by other great powers, create a precarious environment in which AI is either hoarded by a few or proliferated without robust safety measures. The danger is clear: humanity as a whole could be denied both equitable access to AI's benefits and adequate protection against its perils. In response, an emerging "third-pole strategy" aims to empower the global majority by building an international coalition—one that can check the excesses of great power competition and champion responsible, inclusive AI diffusion. This coalition does not seek to pit itself antagonistically against the United States or China but to elevate shared interests, foster cooperation, and make unilateralism too costly to sustain.

1 The AI Diffusion Crisis

AI diffusion—the spread of advanced AI capabilities across borders, industries, and communities—is proceeding at an unprecedented pace. This creates a paradox of concentrated power, on one hand, and uncoordinated proliferation, on the other. Rafael comprehensively explored diffusion in LMICs and micro-level economic considerations of diffusion as A Blessing or a Curse?

1.1 Concentration of Power

When a handful of corporations or countries control key AI technologies—such as large language models, computer vision systems, or advanced robotics—global inequalities deepen (Grand View Research, 2023). Under-resourced nations, lacking local research capacity or cloud infrastructure, become dependent on external providers whose priorities may not align with local contexts. This dynamic can create a digital colonialism, where access to data and technical expertise remains the privilege of an elite few (Muro & Vipra, 2023).

1.2 Uncoordinated Proliferation

Conversely, AI might spread worldwide without proper safeguards, raising profound safety and ethical concerns. From mass surveillance tools deployed without oversight to autonomous systems that heighten security risks, the lack of common standards can lead to unmanageable threats that transcend national borders (Built In, 2023; Center for AI Safety, 2023). Equitable AI diffusion requires robust international frameworks that protect smaller players and ensure every region can contribute to—and benefit from—these technologies responsibly.

1.3 Why a Third Pole Matters

A third-pole strategy involves organizing the vast majority of nations—especially those in Europe, Africa, Southeast Asia, and beyond—into an influential bloc that promotes responsible AI governance (APEC, 2024). By acting together, these nations can:

- **Incentivize Responsible Behavior:** A collective front can make unilateral moves by great powers—such as restrictive export controls or unfair licensing practices—politically and economically costly. Multilateral pressure can nudge major AI powers toward greater transparency, shared safety research, and more inclusive technology transfer (Brookings Institution, 2021).
- **Elevate Shared Interests:** Smaller and medium-sized nations often have urgent, context-specific AI needs: healthcare analytics for underserved regions, sustainable agriculture solutions, and digital finance platforms for unbanked populations. A unified voice can ensure that global AI governance prioritizes these diverse interests rather than catering solely to superpower competition.
- **Build Local Capacity:** Pooling resources—technical expertise, research funding, computing infrastructure—can enable meaningful AI initiatives within regions that currently lack the capacity to stand on their own. This collective capacity-building helps ensure that the promise of AI is not confined to Silicon Valley or Beijing.

2 Foundations of the Third-Pole Strategy

The development and governance of artificial intelligence (AI) are heavily influenced by the United States and China, which together represent 21.7% of the world's population. For the other 87%—the Global Majority—having a say in AI's future depends on working together across borders. International cooperation isn't just a nice idea; it's a practical way to make sure AI reflects more than just a few perspectives. The Third-Pole Strategy suggests that existing regional organizations, like the European Union (EU), African Union (AU), and ASEAN, could play a role by coordinating what they already do well. This section looks at how these groups might contribute, step by step, to a more shared approach.

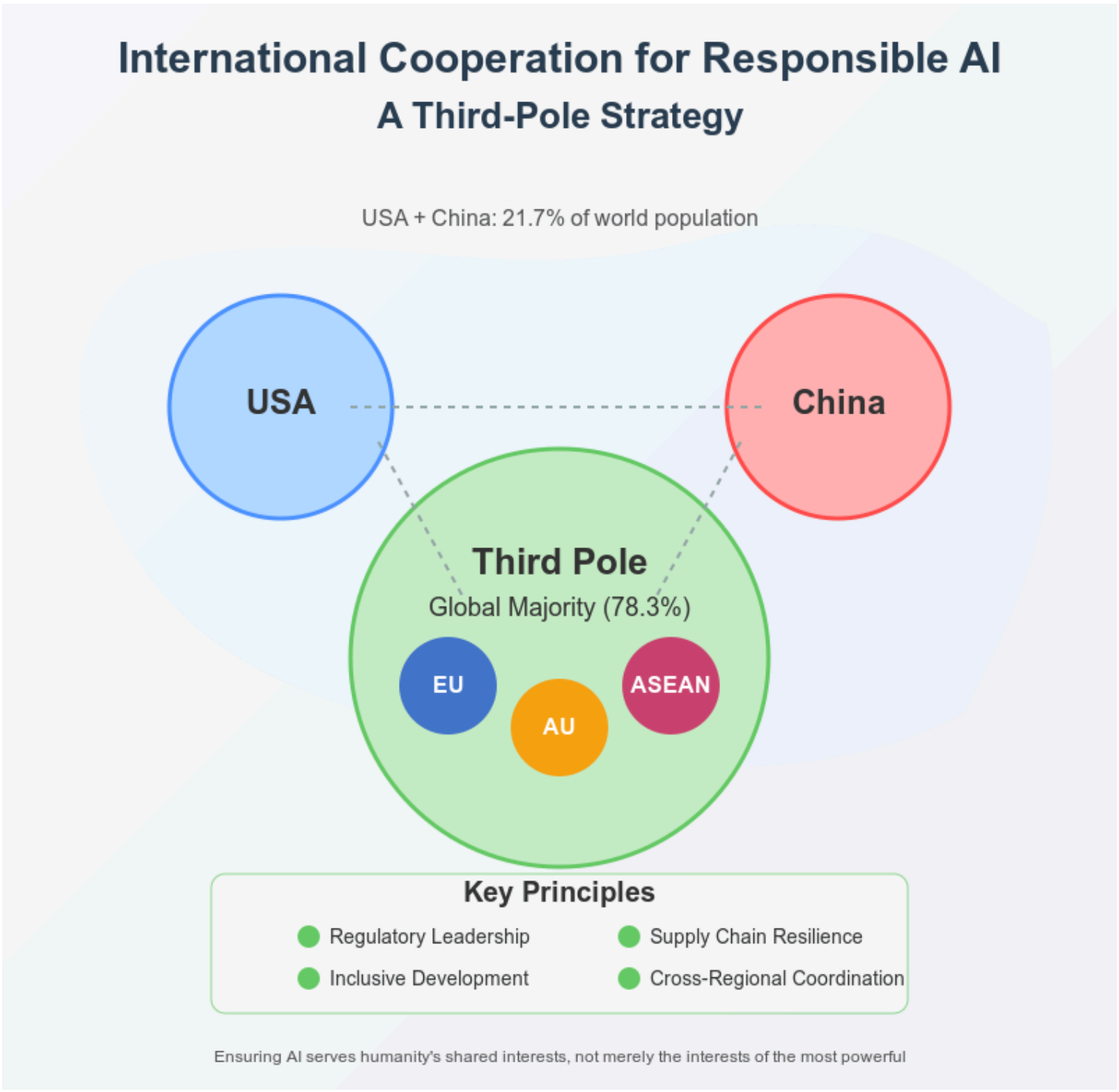


Figure 1: A diagram illustrating a tripolar coordination with a Third Pole representing the Global Majority (87%)

2.1 European Union: Regulatory Leadership

With robust data privacy regulations (e.g., GDPR) and the proposed AI Act, the EU wields significant influence over global technology standards (European Commission, 2023), (European Commission, 2021)). To foster responsible AI diffusion:

- **AI Diplomacy Initiative:** The EU could dispatch AI policy experts worldwide to share regulatory lessons. By aligning frameworks with partner nations in Africa and Asia, the EU paves the way for a "common rulebook" that protects citizens while encouraging innovation.
- **EU AI Safety and Evaluation Center:** Centralizing the evaluation of frontier AI systems in Europe, with open collaboration from other regions, ensures that safety is not reliant on systems designed primarily in the U.S. or China (European Commission, 2023).
- **Data-Sharing Partnerships:** New agreements could encourage secure data-sharing with nations that opt into EU-aligned privacy and accountability standards. This lays the groundwork for globally interoperable and ethically sound AI systems (European Commission, 2021).

2.2 African Union: Inclusive AI Development

Africa's vibrant youth population, diverse markets, and wealth of natural resources position it as an emerging AI powerhouse—if it can retain talent and direct AI toward local needs (African Union, 2024).

- **African AI Talent Consortium:** By unifying investments in AI education, the AU can reduce the brain drain. Local researchers can shape AI to address agriculture, healthcare, and infrastructure challenges unique to Africa (Future of Privacy Forum, 2024).
- **Pan-African AI Use Cases:** Developing AI solutions for pressing issues—like drought prediction or disease surveillance—ensures that research delivers tangible social and economic benefits rather than a mere replication of Western or Chinese platforms.
- **Regional Computing Infrastructure:** Establishing data centers and shared cloud resources can jumpstart domestic AI ecosystems, reducing reliance on foreign cloud providers and strengthening digital sovereignty.

2.3 ASEAN: Supply Chain Resilience

With a pivotal role in global manufacturing, Southeast Asian countries can harness their collective influence to shape AI hardware and deployment standards (C3 AI, 2023).

- **AI Chips Initiative:** Coordinating regional semiconductor policies can mitigate the risk of supply chain choke points and ensure equitable access to core AI technologies (MIT Technology Review, 2024).
- **AI Ethics Standards:** An ASEAN-driven approach to AI ethics—aligned with cultural norms and social needs—can provide a powerful model beyond Western or Chinese paradigms (ASEAN, 2023).
- **AI Security Alliance:** By sharing information on AI-enabled cybersecurity threats, ASEAN members can collectively bolster their defenses and reduce vulnerability to external manipulation.

The Third-Pole Strategy doesn't promise to solve everything or reshape the world overnight. It's simply a way to build on what's already there—letting the EU's rules, the AU's local focus, and ASEAN's practical strengths come together a bit more. For the 87% of the world outside the U.S.-China focus, this could mean a slightly bigger say in how AI develops, step by step. It's less about grand victories and more about quiet progress, making sure AI reflects a few more voices in a way that feels fair and doable.

2.4 Conclusion

The unchecked diffusion of AI threatens to entrench global disparities unless countered by a unified third-pole strategy (Grand View Research, 2023). By harnessing the EU's regulatory prowess (European Commission, 2023), the AU's inclusive innovation (African Union, 2024), and ASEAN's supply chain resilience (MIT Technology Review, 2024), this coalition can ensure AI serves the global majority—87% of humanity—rather than a privileged few (APEC, 2024). Success demands overcoming unilateralism and capacity gaps through cooperation (Brookings Institution, 2021), making the third pole not just a vision, but a necessity for equitable AI governance (Center for AI Safety, 2023). The time to act is now.

Bibliography

African Union. (2024,). *African Ministers Adopt Landmark Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy*.

APEC. (2024,). *AI Governance: Why Cooperation Matters*.

ASEAN. (2023,). *ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics*.

Brookings Institution. (2021,). *Strengthening international cooperation on AI*.

Built In. (2023,). *14 Dangers of Artificial Intelligence (AI)*.

C3 AI. (2023,). *The Power of AI in Supply Chain Management*.

Center for AI Safety. (2023,). *AI risks that could lead to catastrophe*.

European Commission. (2021,). *Proposal for a Regulation laying down harmonised rules on artificial intelligence (Artificial Intelligence Act)*.

European Commission. (2023,). *European approach to artificial intelligence*.

Future of Privacy Forum. (2024,). *The African Union's Continental AI Strategy: Data Protection and Governance Laws Set to Play a Key Role in AI Regulation*.

Grand View Research. (2023,). *Artificial Intelligence Market Size | Industry Report, 2030*.

MIT Technology Review. (2024,). *Building supply chain resilience with AI*.

Muro, M., & Vipra, J. (2023). Market concentration implications of foundation models: The Invisible Hand of ChatGPT. *Brookings Institution*.