Task Force 8
Multilateralism and Global Governance

Policy brief

A G20 TECH DIPLOMACY

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ABSTRACT

Technology and internet companies are playing an increasingly important role in international relations, effectively becoming geopolitical actors in their own right. The actions and strategies of these companies have a major impact in shaping countries' policy options. However, the UN and other international organisations have had limited success in dealing with them. The G20 needs to develop a robust diplomacy for engagement with the technology sector on the implications of existing and emerging disruptive technologies. It should develop a Tech strategy to create a multistakeholder channel of communication and debate between the G20 and Internet and Technology companies.

CHALLENGE

Internet and technology companies and social media platforms are becoming ever more important actors in international relations (Klimberg 2017). Social media platforms shape international discourse in ways they themselves are reluctant to recognise (Riordan 2019). The algorithms which drive them facilitate the spread of disinformation and fake news while undermining rational political debate (O´Neil 2016). Search engines like Google influence how both countries and issues are seen. However, neither social media platforms nor search engines have accountability or legitimacy. Efforts at self-regulation have been unsuccessful or led to situations where social media platforms have taken the decision to censor the head of a major state (Etlinger 2019). National and even regional efforts to regulate issues like privacy, data protection, and taxation have been undermined by the global nature of these companies. The decision by Facebook to issue its own digital currency shows the extent of the engagement of internet companies in international affairs (Diem Association 2020).

At the same time, emerging technologies are increasingly becoming battlegrounds for international competition and geopolitical rivalry. New technologies are embargoed or their export are limited to put pressure on rival countries. Countries fight for hegemony over new technologies, especially those relating to digital networks and artificial intelligence. Internet and technology companies cannot help but be drawn into these conflicts. Increasingly, these conflicts centre on international industrial standards for new technologies. The fallout from Huawei, for example, will ensure that the industrial standards meeting on 6G will be driven by geopolitical conflict (Lee and Chau 2017). The danger is the fragmentation of international industrial standards, with different incompatible technologies being developed in different regions. The impact on global economic development will be severe.

The challenge for the G20 is that the vast majority of major internet and technology companies are based in two countries. This tendency appears to be exacerbated by the development of AI and other emergent disruptive technologies (EDTs). Virtually, none of these companies are based in the global south. The concentration of internet, AI, and EDT companies in only two countries increases the risks of them being drawn into geopolitical conflict between their home countries. Key decisions about digital technologies, internet governance, and EDTs are taken by these companies and the countries wherein they are based. These decisions do not necessarily reflect the interests and priorities of the global south. But countries in the global south individually are not powerful enough to influence these decisions (Josukutty 2020). They need a global representative to engage with internet and technology companies on their behalf.

The key decisions which need to be influenced about the Internet and EDTs are not technical but political and geopolitical. They require a new technology diplomacy (techplomacy) to manage them.

PROPOSAL

The G20 should explore how it can best engage with major internet and technology companies, ensuring that the interests of all its members, and not just those at the technological cutting edge, are represented. As a first step, it should establish a task force to explore the role of major internet and technology companies in international relations and how the G20 can best ensure that this role be positive. The task force should be multistakeholder, bringing together academics, diplomats, and internet users. The task force should focus on:

- How social media companies operate at the international level and their impact on international relations and geopolitical stability. To what extent they contribute to the spread of disinformation and the consequent undermining of political narratives, or whether they are the innocent victims they portray themselves as. How the algorithms underlying social media platforms and search engines function, and how internet companies can be persuaded to be more transparent about them.
- The alternatives for regulating major internet companies (including social media platforms, search engines, and online retailers) at the international level. How such regulation can ensure the adequate protection of the interests of the global south.
- The role of private cybersecurity companies (Maurer 2018) in offering offensive and defensive cyber functions and in the attribution of responsibility for cyberattacks.
- The dangers of geopoliticising EDTs, and in particular new digital networking technologies. How the G20 can effectively ensure that new technological standards remain global, avoiding the fragmentation of key technologies along national and regional lines.
- How the G20 can develop effective relations with internet and technology companies to ensure that the interests of all its members are represented. What the protocol implications (eg accreditation) are of treating internet and technology companies as diplomatic or international actors.

The working group should also make recommendations on the most effective institutional arrangements through which the G20 can engage with Internet and Technology companies. One possibility would be to create a Digital Stability Board (Fay 2019). This would be analogous to the Financial Stability Board established following the 2008 financial crisis and mandated by the G20 to promote the reform of international financial regulation and supervision. Much like the regulation of the internet and EDTs, this was a controversial area where there were significant disagreements among G20 members, and yet the FSB has been able to make progress. This approach would require little institutional innovation as it would be adapting an existing formula to digital and technological governance. However, there are concerns that such multistakeholder approaches favour the global north over the global south (Josukutty 2020) and that the role of the G20 itself might be limited.

An alternative would be to establish an office of the G20 representative, or ambassador, for the technology sector. In 2017, Denmark appointed an Ambassador to the Technology sector (Torres and Riordan 2020). This was not, as with other countries, a senior foreign min-

istry official with responsibility for issues relating to digital technologies (e.g., internet governance, cybersecurity or AI). Rather, his job was to represent Denmark to the technology sector, promoting Danish interests to major technology companies, talking to them about political and regulatory issues and reporting back on key developments. He was provided with three "embassies" in Silicon Valley, Copenhagen, and Beijing. The situation is not entirely analogous as Denmark is a nation state with unified foreign and technology policies. The G20 is a multilateral body with sharp policy disagreements among its members. However, the creation of a representative office to proactively engage with technology and internet companies would strengthen the role of the G20 in the governance of the Internet and new technologies and allow the G20 to serve as a channel of communication between technology and internet companies and its members. This would be particularly valuable to G20 members without developed internet and technology sectors, especially those representing the global south.

The key tasks of the G20´s representative office to the internet and technology sector would include:

- Develop a broad range of contacts among internet and technology companies that will allow the representative office to carry out their functions.

- Coordinate the position of the G20 on the political and technological implications of new technologies. The major challenges of these technologies are frequently political and ethical rather than technical. To the extent that the G20 Tech Ambassador can coordinate common G20 positions, he or she will increase the G20's ability to influence the technology sector. Once common positions have been developed, the G20's Tech Ambassador should convey them to major internet and technology companies, seeking their buy-in.

- Engage major internet and technology companies in discussion about regulatory and political issues like privacy, protection of data, cybersecurity, and managing disinformation. Seek to understand the positions of the companies on these issues and be able to report back to G20 members. Seek to mediate between the views of the companies and G20 members to negotiate common positions.

- Convince major internet and technology companies of the reality of their international roles and influence, and the political and ethical responsibility this entails.

- Engage with private cybersecurity companies on the issues of accountability for cyberattacks and the provision of cyber defence capabilities to countries in the global south. Seek to reach an agreement over common principles which can guide their behaviour in both areas.

- Work with internet and technology companies to identify new emerging disruptive technologies (EDTs). Coordinate with internet and technology companies, universities,

think tanks, and governments of G20 members to identify the political, international, and ethical implications of new EDTs and to anticipate areas where international coordination may be possible or necessary. The G20 Tech Ambassador should promote a series of events bringing together academics and government representatives from G20 companies together with representatives of key internet and technology companies to discuss the issues.

- Promote awareness around the political and international implications and challenges of existing and new EDTs among the publics in G20 countries. Encourage internet and technology companies to participate in these public debates.

- Work with internet and technology companies as well as governments of the G20 to ensure that meetings on new international industrial standards remain focused on technical issues and do not become battlefields for geopolitical rivalries and conflicts. Work with internet and technology companies to mitigate the risks of technological fragmentation and its subsequent economic costs, especially in the global south.

- Ensure that internet and technology companies understand the concerns and priorities of all G20 members, especially those from the global south. Ensure that all G20 members have a voice in the key cyber and technology debates, especially those relating to regional or global regulation of technologies. Seek to restore the balance between those G20 countries in which internet and technology companies are concentrated and the rest.

- Promote the diversification of location of the major internet and technological companies. Encourage them to locate research centres, not just production facilities, in the global south to encourage transfer of technology and skills to those G20 members that need it.

- Ensure the visibility of the G20 in the key debates about the internet, AI, and other new EDTs.

It is in the interest of the G20 that the benefits of new technologies and the internet be shared by all G20 members. The concentration of the majority of internet and technology companies in only two G20 members risks them receiving disproportionate benefits from new technologies, as well as the technologies being drawn into geopolitical conflict. Despite the recent report from the UN Open-Ended Working Group on internet governance, the UN has encountered difficulties in dealing effectively with cyberspace, let alone the implications of AI and other EDTs. Diplomats have constantly been playing catch-up on these issues. There is a role for the G20 in helping to ensure new technologies have a positive international impact and that their benefits are shared more fairly, all the more so as an organisation that includes the major technology powers as well as the global south. This role will require considerable sensitivity given the sharp differences between G20 members on some issues of internet and technology governance. The representative office will need to

focus on coordination in areas where G20 members do express common views, as well as the equally important role of representing the views of the companies themselves to the G20 companies as part of the process. The G20 representative office will have to commit to genuine multistakeholder diplomacy, engaging with users and other actors as well as governments and companies. Debates about technology and internet governance have focused so far on Western companies. It is important to engage non-Western companies too.

The G20 does not have a permanent secretariat, which can undermine follow-up decisions made for initiatives launched at G20 summits. The creation of a G20 representative office for internet and technology companies, if successful, could provide a model for similar institutional reform in other areas. Although there is nothing wrong with calling it a "representative office", establishing a "G20 Tech Ambassador" is likely to attract more attention, and help stress the key role of the G20 in internet and technology governance. It would also stress the importance of diplomacy in the functioning of the office.

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