ASG Analysis: ITU Election is Partial Victory for the U.S. in Global Contest Over Internet Governance

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Key takeaways

- The Biden administration and democratically aligned governments prevailed at the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), a key international technology agency, with the election of U.S. citizen Doreen Bogdan-Martin as its secretary-general.

- This result is a partial victory for the open, multi-stakeholder model of internet governance. Bogdan-Martin, a longtime ITU official and former U.S. diplomat, defeated a Russian candidate for the position – one of many diplomatic setbacks for Russia stemming from its war in Ukraine.

- The new leadership portends wider-ranging changes at the ITU. Bogdan-Martin succeeds Houlin Zhao, a Chinese national who pushed for a greater role for the ITU in global technology governance. The U.S. and some Western allies had criticized Zhao's policy initiatives as promoting Chinese tech firms' interests.

- The change of leadership will further reduce the chance of significant Chinese influence over technical changes to the technologies and protocols currently underpinning the internet. China and Russia, however, will continue to push in the ITU and other venues for their alternative vision of a more "sovereign" internet with greater national government control over information, increasing the long-term risk of a "splinternet" featuring competing internet protocols and data regimes.

New secretary-general will face immediate political pressures

Bogdan-Martin prevailed in a 139-25 vote on September 29 over Rashid Ismailov, a former Russian government official and longtime telecom industry executive who had worked for infrastructure leaders Ericsson, Nokia, and Huawei. The large margin likely reflects Russia's growing pariah status amid the ongoing war in Ukraine. A further 29 ITU member states were not present or abstained, indicating that the bigger, behind-the-scenes battle over the future of internet governance between the U.S., China, and Russia that cast a cloud over the election is far from settled.

Bogdan-Martin has worked at the ITU since 1994 and held senior leadership roles since 2008. She previously worked for the U.S. Commerce Department. While she is seen as a technocrat, the U.S. launched a comprehensive campaign for her election, with a long list of endorsements ranging from Secretary of State Antony Blinken to industry associations. Europe also backed her

candidacy, with the EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs Josep Borrell tweeting support. Her victory is a setback for Russia and China, which favored the Russian candidate.

The ITU's primary responsibilities include setting the international standards that underpin global information and communications technology (ICT) networks; managing radio communication services; and promoting better telecommunication infrastructure in developing countries. Over the past decade, the agency has become increasingly politicized largely because of U.S.-China strategic competition and attempts by some countries, including Russia and China, to promote an alternative, so-called sovereign vision of internet governance.

Outgoing Secretary-General Zhao, a Chinese national, encouraged the expansion of ITU's mandate from a telecommunications agency to a "technology agency" during his eight-year tenure. This included pushing for greater engagement by the ITU on issues such as internet architecture, the internet of things (IoT), and artificial intelligence (AI). U.S. government officials and private-sector leaders felt Zhao deviated from the secretary-general's historically technocratic role when he supported initiatives that appeared to more directly promote the interests of Chinese companies, such as Huawei.

Global debate over the internet's future rages on

The ITU's attempt to subtly shift its mandate over the years has inflamed a debate over how much control the agency and member governments should exert over internet standards and protocols. The divide can be attributed to two different internet governance models:

- **Open or multi-stakeholder internet:** The U.S. established the modern internet as a decentralized network, with the private sector, civil society, and technical communities enjoying a larger say than governments on internet governance. Key stakeholders include technical bodies like the International Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) and the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF), which are responsible for developing and maintaining the domain name system and other elements of the internet's underlying infrastructure. This model also gives influence to private-sector companies that operate fiber-optic cables, data centers, and other essential internet infrastructure. The U.S. and its allies have long opposed shifting regulatory authority to the ITU because it diminishes the sway of these organizations.

- **Closed or sovereign internet:** China, Russia, Iran, and some other nations argue that the open, multi-stakeholder model favors U.S. economic and political interests. They prefer an alternative model based on "internet sovereignty," which prioritizes governments over non-state actors in internet governance. To promote this alternative view, which has gained adherents among some emerging economies, China and Russia have led a drive to elevate the influence of the United Nations, especially the ITU, where member states drive decisions on issues under the ITU's remit.

Some other countries are caught in the middle, casting their votes at the ITU out of political, economic, or security concerns. Further complicating matters, some proponents of the multi-stakeholder model, including the EU and U.S., have started adopting policies to increase government control over user data – such as moving to control the flow of data across borders due to privacy concerns, or, in the case of the U.S., moving to limit Chinese companies' access to U.S. citizens' data, citing national security concerns.

Fact box: The "New IP" controversy The split between the multi-stakeholder and internet sovereignty models was especially evident in the controversy surrounding New IP, a proposal for a new internet architecture advanced by Huawei in 2019. A trio of powerful Chinese players – including state-run companies China Unicom and China Telecom and the country's Ministry of Industry and Information Technology – argued that a new internet protocol was necessary to account for new applications and uses that next-generation mobile data networks would generate. The Chinese argued that the ITU should take responsibility for designing the protocol. Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Russia supported the proposal, but the U.S. and other like-minded countries fiercely resisted it. Although unlikely to ever be implemented, the New IP proposal has fed political concerns in the U.S. and some other countries about China's influence over the ITU and internet governance.

Looking ahead: Fights loom over 6G, and "splinternet" risks persist

Bogdan-Martin's election will not be the end of the tussle between these rival factions. The secretary-general position, while important, does not provide significant influence over the study groups at the ITU, where important decisions are made on issues such as standards.

The ITU plenipotentiary meetings that took place alongside the leadership election included debates on issues ranging from online child safety to open radio access networks to the agency's role in developing technology standards and internet policy. The ITU could become a battleground for disagreements over which countries will participate in standard-setting and for policy debates over defining and developing standards for 6G networks, the next generation of mobile networking technology that will succeed the 5G networks currently being rolled out in many countries.

Any move by the ITU to refocus on its historical core issues, and away from a more expansive role in global technology policy, will likely push China and Russia to consider other venues to try to gain support for their preferred internet sovereignty model.

Another part of Beijing's strategy to cement greater government influence over technology standards and protocols has been to expand the footprint of Chinese companies, making debates a *fait accompli*. In many emerging markets, Chinese technology firms, led by Huawei, have become key providers of digital infrastructure. As part of its so-called Digital Silk Road plan, the Chinese government provides financial and policy support that allows its companies to offer competitive technology at lower prices than Western competitors. Meanwhile, attempts by the U.S. and other Western governments to create alternatives to China's model – including the Blue Dot Network and Build Back Better World initiative – do not appear to have gained significant traction.

China has also been attempting to play more of a convening role among emerging markets on issues like meeting sustainable development goals. A statement issued after a meeting of China's Global Development Initiative in New York during the week of September 20 emphasized the importance of digital technology for economic growth and development goals. China said that representatives from more than 60 countries and 10 international organizations attended the meeting.

As the U.S. moves to tighten restrictions on China's access to U.S. technology over national security and economic competitiveness concerns, it will increase political pressure in China to push for greater self-reliance in key technology fields. Meanwhile, efforts by both China and Russia to push for a bigger role for governments in internet governance and control of information will continue to resonate with many emerging market governments, where leaders are more skeptical of the open internet governance model.

One such market – a key one for the world's major technology companies – could be India. There, policymakers have been advancing various bills and other initiatives that would give the government significant control over user information, sparking major concerns regarding privacy, free speech, internet access, and other issues.

Although Bodgan-Martin's election as ITU secretary-general represents a partial victory for the open, multi-stakeholder model, the long-term odds of a "splinternet" featuring competing internet protocols and data regimes are increasing.

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