Internet Governance: Foreign Policy and the Backbone of the Digital World

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MAKING GERMAN FOREIGN POLICY FIT FOR PURPOSE

Internet Governance
Foreign Policy & the Backbone of the Digital World

By David Hagebölling

An open and global internet is in Germany's strategic interest and creates the conditions for societal exchange and economic development around the world. Yet power-political issues, particularly between the United States and China, are causing cracks to appear deep in its technical foundations; voices warning of a fragmenting internet are growing louder. The new electoral term in Germany comes at a key moment, with the World Summit on the Information Society due to be held in 2025. The next German government should strengthen multi-stakeholder institutions that support the technical development of the internet, and go beyond existing partnerships to forge a broad consensus in the Global South in support of an open and global internet.

The internet's infrastructure is the backbone of our digital world. It is the basis for the internet as a "network of networks," which creates the conditions for societal exchange and economic development around the world. As one of the world's most globalized countries, Germany is a major beneficiary of this infrastructure. It is the foundation for e-commerce, which contributed around €100 billion to GDP in 2019, and for Germany's leading role in Industry 4.0.

Yet internet governance – i.e. the administration and development of this infrastructure – is at a crossroads. It is caught between two competing visions of the internet – an open and decentralized internet, or an internet that is nation-state-based and centralized – and cracks have developed as a result of power-political issues, especially between the United States and China. These dynamics threaten to undermine the core of the internet as a global public good – and thus to seriously affect one of Germany's core interests.

BACKGROUND
One Internet, Two Visions, Many Stakeholders

An open and global internet allows every device to exchange packets with every other device worldwide. The precondition for this is its logical infrastructure (e.g. the TCP/IP protocol suite, DNS) and physical infrastructure (e.g. submarine cables). The governance of this infrastructure – i.e. of the internet itself – is often overshadowed by substantive and societal issues on the internet, such as the regulation of internet services.

Internet governance is based on the multi-stakeholder model. Stakeholders from the tech community, business, civil society, and governments jointly advance the development of the internet in specialized institutions, usually on the basis of a "rough consensus". For example, the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF) establishes uniform protocols and standards. For its part, the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) manages key functions such as the Domain Name System (DNS)

– the internet's telephone book. The Internet Society (ISOC), an NGO, steers the maintenance and development of the internet.

Yet political forces are exerting a growing influence on this institutional structure. In essence, there is a clash between two visions of the internet. Germany and the EU, together with the United States, are advocates for an internet that is subject to decentralized management by multi-stakeholder institutions. As a result of how the internet was developed, Western participants still hold key positions in these institutions today.

By contrast, a group of countries, including China and Russia, are seeking to shift internet governance to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), where decisions are taken by nation-states. The post of ITU Secretary-General is currently held by a Chinese national, while Russia aims to take over this post in 2022. In May, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken therefore stressed the global importance of decisions on who should fill the top roles at ITU.

CHALLENGES
The Foundation of the Global Internet Is Shaking

Technical developments, political objectives, and commercial interests are inextricably linked when it comes to the internet. One key challenge is to keep the rise in fragmentary tendencies on the internet from affecting the foundation of the internet itself.

The logical infrastructure is already part of the efforts to achieve an internet organized on nation-state lines. Russia is developing a national DNS and is planning to be able to autonomously handle queries and run an operational national network. China's intention to increase its control over the internet also extends to the DNS. With "New IP", a Chinese company (Huawei) is also launching an initiative within ITU to renew the internet protocol suite, which – it is feared – could create opportunities for state control at the very heart of the internet.

The physical infrastructure is at risk of being defined by the strategic rivalry between the United States and China. US warnings about the Peace cable linking China with Europe via Pakistan show that this also directly affects Europe's connectivity. In general, this is an area where there is a high level of dependence on operators from outside the EU and exposure to foreign governments' influence over them. Already in 2018, Amazon, Facebook, Google, and Microsoft alone owned or leased more than half of the world's undersea bandwidth. Non-European companies are similarly dominant when it comes to the rise in connectivity using low earth orbit (LEO) satellites.

RECOMMENDATION
Priorities for German Foreign Policy in Relation to the Internet

The German government should underline the foreign policy importance of the internet's infrastructure. The links between the challenges of and on the internet should be made tangible and reflected in the work of the federal ministries (especially the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action, the Federal Foreign Office, and the Federal Ministry of the Interior and for Community).

To support the multi-stakeholder model, the Bundestag should press for the Internet Governance Forum (IGF) to be strengthened as a central forum for political dialogue, for example by upgrading the parliamentary track. Further guidance is offered by a Bundestag resolution adopted to mark the IGF 2019, which took place in Germany, and by an options paper drawn up by Germany and the United Arab Emirates proposing an IGF "Plus".

To eliminate open flanks that could allow political objectives to be embedded, Germany should support the technical development of the internet, including by the tech community. The internet's performance, resilience, and security, for example in relation to the DNS (e.g. DNSSEC), routing (e.g. BGPsec), and the physical network, should be advanced with interoperability being the aim at all times. The BELLA cable is an exemplary EU initiative.

In the medium term, it is crucial for there to be a broad consensus in support of an open and global internet. Dialogue with partners remains key, for example within the EU, in the framework of the EU-US Trade and Technology Council, and during the German G7 presidency in 2022. In addition, the German government should underline the development opportunities offered by an open internet and prioritize countries in the Global South that are "digital deciders". The bilateral cyber and digital dialogues run by the Federal Foreign Office and the Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Climate Action (e.g. with Brazil and India) are an important tool in this context, as is the development cooperation with Africa pursued by the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development.