Contents

A Reader's Primer on the Multipolar Commons

A companion to the research foundation for CC-TR-2026-005-C — expanded global edition

Cube Commons Technical Report CC-TR-2026-005-C-A (Rev. 2) *Barton Nicholls · April 2026*

How to use this primer

This is a primer about a position paper that argues civic infrastructure should not be owned by a small number of large American firms or by the Chinese state, but by the institutions it actually serves — hospitals, schools, town governments, housing authorities, building associations, libraries, hospitals, religious institutions, working organizations, and the rest of civic life.

The primer is organized in six tiers. The first three were in the previous edition: general reader, civic technologist, policymaker. The new three address the question we kept circling around: how does this read from somewhere other than the United States?

Tier 1 — General reader. What the concept is, in plain language, with an example from ordinary life.

Tier 2 — Civic technologist. How the concept maps onto infrastructure, software, and institutional design.

Tier 3 — Policymaker. Where it sits in law, political economy, and policy debate.

Tier 4 — Global South civic institutions. What this looks like from Lagos, São Paulo, Jakarta, Nairobi, Bogotá, Manila, Karachi, Cairo, Addis Ababa.

Tier 5 — European publics. What this looks like from a European public increasingly skeptical of both US extraterritoriality and Chinese state surveillance.

Tier 6 — Non-aligned, multipolar-curious readers anywhere. What this looks like from people who reject the bloc-choosing frame entirely.

A note on selectivity. The new tiers do not appear on every concept. Some concepts (Yuen Yuen Ang's directed improvisation, for example) read roughly the same in Boston, Berlin, and Lagos. Others (multipolarity itself, the Karp/Schmidt frame, Digital Silk Road) look radically different depending on where you stand. The new tiers appear where audience perspective genuinely changes the meaning of the concept. Where it doesn't, the original three tiers stand on their own and you should read them as you would in any other context. The primer flags this explicitly at each section.

A note on what this primer is not. It is not a defense of the Chinese government. It is not a critique of the Chinese government. It is not a defense of the United States or the European Union. It is a reader's aid for a paper whose central argument is that the choice between blocs is a false one, and that civic institutions everywhere have a third option that does not require choosing.

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1. Multipolarity

Tier 1

Multipolarity is the condition in which international affairs is shaped by several major powers rather than one (unipolarity) or two (bipolarity). The word comes from physics — a magnet has two poles, a battery has two poles — and was borrowed by international relations scholars to describe the distribution of power in the world.

For most of recent American history, the world has been bipolar (US versus Soviet Union, 1945–1991) or unipolar (US-dominant, 1991–roughly today). A multipolar world is one in which several countries or civilizational blocs — the United States,

China, the European Union, India, perhaps Russia, perhaps Brazil, perhaps a coordinated African Union — each have enough weight that none can dictate outcomes alone.

Why does this matter for a paper about civic technology? Because the infrastructure you use — the cloud services, the AI models, the payment rails, the social networks — is built inside a particular geopolitical arrangement. In a unipolar world, nearly all of it is American. In a multipolar world, there are genuine alternatives, and civic institutions can choose among them, or build their own, or combine several.

Tier 2

For civic technologists, the shift from unipolar to multipolar matters at the procurement layer. Five years ago, if you wanted cloud compute for a civic project, the practical choice was AWS, Azure, or Google Cloud — three American hyperscalers. Today the same project could reasonably run on Huawei Cloud in 34 regions across 101 availability zones, on a European sovereign cloud built under Gaia-X, on a domestic Indian provider, on a Brazilian one, on a South African one, or on a federated architecture that mixes several. The AI model layer has moved the same way: five years ago the choice was GPT or Claude; today Qwen, DeepSeek, GLM, Kimi, and MiniMax are open-weight and free to download, and most open-source AI startups in 2026 are building on Chinese base models rather than Meta's Llama.

This matters because hyperscaler consolidation is what Cube Commons exists to resist. A world with many poles is structurally better for commons-based civic infrastructure than a world with one, regardless of which pole is on top.

Tier 3

For policymakers, multipolarity is both a descriptive claim about how the world is and a normative claim about how it should be. The descriptive claim is broadly accepted: nearly every serious international-relations scholar now accepts that the post-1991 unipolar moment is over. The normative claim — that multipolarity is *better* than unipolarity — is contested.

The critics of multipolarity argue that it means ceding ground to authoritarian states and weakens democratic norms. The defenders — including the "restraint school" of American foreign policy (Stephen Walt, Barry Posen, Stephen Wertheim), the Quincy Institute, and China scholars like Jessica Chen Weiss — argue that unipolar dominance produces overreach, hollows out allied sovereignty, and ultimately collapses into exactly the great-power conflict it claims to prevent.

Cube Commons is not taking a position on grand strategy. It is observing that the civic institutions we serve do not benefit from being conscripted into either a unipolar or

a bipolar project. A multipolar world gives them more options, not fewer, and more options means better chances of actual institutional sovereignty.

Tier 4 — Global South civic institutions

For civic institutions in Lagos, São Paulo, Jakarta, or Nairobi, multipolarity is not a theoretical question. It is the lived condition. Your country has likely been hedging between blocs for years already — taking Chinese loans for infrastructure while running American-trained civil services, buying Russian oil while exporting to European markets, hosting US military advisors and Chinese tech investors in the same week.

What "multipolarity" means from this position is the recognition that the hedging is not a failure of commitment. It is the rational behavior of states that have learned, often the hard way, that putting all of one's institutional weight on a single foreign pole produces dependency and vulnerability. The 2022 sanctions regime against Russia, in which Western countries demonstrated that they could and would freeze foreign-exchange reserves of a major economy, was a wake-up call across much of the Global South. It showed that "rules-based international order" can mean "rules made by the rule-maker, applied to whomever the rule-maker chooses."

The hedging strategy that the United States now calls "geopolitical fragmentation" is, from this angle, a defensive crouch by states that watched what happened to others and decided not to be next. Cube Commons-style infrastructure — institution-owned, protocol-coordinated, portable across jurisdictions — is appealing here in exactly the way it is appealing in Massachusetts: not because it represents a third bloc but because it does not require enlistment in any bloc.

The risk to be honest about: small civic institutions in low-resource environments often lack the capacity to operate their own infrastructure, even with open-source tools. The honest answer is that Cube Commons cannot solve this alone; the broader work of civic-technology capacity-building (the kind organizations like Code for Africa, Tactical Tech, and various municipal-government training programs do) is part of the substrate that makes institutional sovereignty actually achievable. The tools are necessary but not sufficient.

Tier 6 — Non-aligned, multipolar-curious readers

For readers who reject the bloc-choosing frame entirely — a constituency that includes most of the Non-Aligned Movement's intellectual heirs, much of the European Green and pirate-party tradition, the platform-cooperativism movement, and substantial portions of the global indigenous-sovereignty movement — multipolarity is the necessary condition but not the sufficient one. A multipolar world dominated by a small set of competing concentrated states is not better than a unipolar one if your concern was concentration in the first place.

What this constituency is looking for, and what Cube Commons is trying to articulate, is multipolarity *plus polycentricity* — many poles at the international level *and* many centers within each. Both are needed. The first prevents domination by a single hegemon. The second prevents the poles themselves from absorbing all institutional autonomy within their borders.

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2. Civilization-state

Tier 1

A **civilization-state** is a country that thinks of itself as a civilization rather than as a nation. The distinction matters because modern international affairs was built around the idea of the "nation-state" — France is French, Germany is German, each nation has its own state and the borders of the state roughly match the borders of the nation.

A civilization-state is bigger than that. China does not think of itself as the "Chinese nation"; it thinks of itself as the bearer of a 3,000-year-old civilizational tradition. India makes a similar claim. So does Russia. So, increasingly, does the United States among certain American intellectual currents, which is why you now hear phrases like "Western civilization" or "Anglosphere" used in ways that would have sounded odd twenty years ago.

The concept has both descriptive and political uses. Descriptively, it captures something real: these polities do contain internal diversity bound by shared civilizational threads in ways that "nation" doesn't quite capture. Politically, it is often used to justify strong central authority — "the civilization needs protection, and only a strong state can protect it" — which is where the concept becomes contested.

Tier 2

For civic technologists, the civilization-state concept matters because it shapes how states think about digital sovereignty. A nation-state can perhaps accept the idea that its citizens use foreign software — most European nation-states have done so for decades. A civilization-state is more likely to treat its digital infrastructure as a civilizational matter: core to identity, not a commodity to be sourced from abroad.

This is part of what's going on when China invests in HarmonyOS as an alternative to Android, openEuler as an alternative to Red Hat, and its own AI models as alternatives to OpenAI. It is not only industrial policy. It is the state acting on the belief that civilizational continuity requires civilizational-scale digital infrastructure. India's Digital Public Infrastructure program (Aadhaar, UPI, DigiLocker) has similar roots.

Tier 3

For policymakers, the most important single source on civilization-states is Peter Katzenstein's *Civilizations in World Politics* (Routledge, 2010). Katzenstein argues two things that Cube Commons should carry forward. First, civilizations are *plural* — there isn't one "Western civilization" or one "Chinese civilization"; there are multiple overlapping civilizational formations within any of them. Second, civilizations are *pluralist* — they contain internal heterogeneity. A healthy civilization-state acknowledges both.

The popular version of the concept — in Zhang Weiwei's *The China Wave* (2011), Martin Jacques's *When China Rules the World* (2009), or Bruno Maçães's journalism — tends to treat the civilization-state as monolithic and to use it as warrant for strong central authority. That version is ideologically loaded. The Katzenstein version is analytical, and it is the version a serious multipolar position should use.

Cube Commons's position is that civilizational pluralism is real and valuable, but civilization-state rhetoric that immunizes state authority from sub-state and cross-border normative claims is incompatible with the commons tradition. A Catholic diocese, a university, a municipal government, a trade union — each carries civilizational threads. None of them is simply an organ of the state that happens to be located within its borders.

Tier 4 — Global South civic institutions

The civilization-state framework reads quite differently from a place that was, within recent memory, classified as "uncivilized" or "semi-civilized" by the imperial powers that drew its borders. Across much of Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia, "civilization" was the rhetorical instrument used to justify colonization. Reclaiming the concept — as Senghor did with *négritude*, as Latin American thinkers did with *Nuestra América*, as Indonesia did with *Pancasila*, as the African Union now does with the Agenda 2063 vision — has been a long intellectual project.

In this register, the civilization-state framework can do real work: it names the existence of cultural and intellectual resources that predate the nation-state and survive it, and it pushes back on the assumption that the only legitimate political form is the European post-Westphalian one. China's deployment of the framework is part of a longer pattern of non-European societies asserting that they have intellectual and political traditions worthy of equal standing.

The complication is that the framework can also be used internally to suppress diversity. A "civilization-state" rhetoric can be used by central authorities in any country — including in Africa or Latin America — to argue that ethnic, religious, or regional groups should subordinate their identities to a single civilizational frame. Whether

this is good or bad depends on the case. Cube Commons's institutional-sovereignty framework is compatible with civilizational pluralism but skeptical of any deployment of civilizational rhetoric that absorbs sub-state institutions into the state.

Tier 5 — European publics

For European publics, the civilization-state concept is uncomfortable in a specific way. On one hand, the European Union is itself, in some readings, a kind of civilizational project — the recovery and consolidation of a "European civilization" that survived the catastrophes of the twentieth century. On the other hand, the rise of "civilization-state" rhetoric in Russia (under Putin), Hungary (under Orbán), and increasingly in some American conservative circles has been a vehicle for explicit illiberalism. The concept now carries baggage in European political discourse that it doesn't carry in, say, Indian or African discourse.

The Katzenstein corrective is therefore especially important from a European reading position: civilizations are plural and pluralist. A European civilization-state framework that takes this seriously would be a federation of regional and civic identities — Catalan, Bavarian, Andalusian, Sicilian, Frisian, Sami, Walloon, Welsh — held together by shared institutions rather than by a single civilizational center. This is, more or less, what the European Union actually is at its best. It is also what Cube Commons-style institutional sovereignty looks like at the constitutional scale.

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3. Tianxia (天下)

Tier 1

Tianxia (pronounced roughly "tee-en sha," meaning "all under heaven") is an ancient Chinese political concept recently revived by the philosopher Zhao Tingyang at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. In its classical form, tianxia described the world as an ordered whole under the moral authority of a civilizational center — originally China itself, radiating outward through concentric circles of cultural influence.

Zhao's contemporary reinvention — in *The Tianxia System* (2005) and *All Under Heaven* (UC Press, 2021) — argues that the world now faces problems (climate, AI, pandemics) that are genuinely world-scale and therefore require political institutions that think at world-scale. The nation-state system, he argues, is too small. He proposes tianxia as the philosophical basis for a world-level political order that is genuinely inclusive — what he calls the "no-outside" (无外, *wu wai*) principle — rather than a world governed by the strongest state.

Whether or not you find Zhao persuasive, his argument is one of the most ambitious contemporary attempts to think beyond the nation-state, and it comes from a tradition

that is not European.

Tier 2

For civic technologists, Zhao's tianxia matters less as a program and more as a challenge. If you are working on infrastructure that crosses borders — the internet itself, AI models, payment rails, standards bodies — you are operating in a space the nation-state framework does not handle well. The IETF does not map onto any nation. Neither does Linux, or the W3C, or the Apache Software Foundation. These are, in a loose sense, tianxia-like institutions: world-scale governance bodies without a single sovereign.

The Ostromian position (that many of these institutions should be polycentric rather than centralized) and the Zhao position (that world-scale problems need world-scale institutions) are not the same, and in some ways they are in tension. But they share the recognition that the nation-state frame is not enough.

Tier 3

For policymakers, the critical perspectives on tianxia are important. William Callahan (LSE), June Teufel Dreyer, Chenchen Zhang, Peter Zarrow, and Ge Zhaoguang have argued that Zhao's version of tianxia "privileges order over freedom, ethics over law, and elite governance over democracy" and risks becoming "a new hegemony where imperial China's hierarchical governance is updated for the twenty-first century." The "no-outside" principle, critics argue, can be read as civilizational inclusion or as the elimination of genuine pluralism.

Salvatore Babones (*American Tianxia*, 2017) turns the critique inside out: the actually-existing world order is already a tianxia, centered on the United States, operating through attraction rather than conquest. Whether one finds this persuasive, it is a useful thought experiment.

Cube Commons's position is that Zhao's diagnostic (some problems are world-scale) is correct, but his prescription (a world order under a single civilizational center) is neither desirable nor necessary. The commons tradition offers a different answer: world-scale problems can be addressed through nested, polycentric institutions that coordinate without requiring a single center.

Tier 4 — Global South civic institutions

The tianxia concept has had a curious reception in the Global South. On one hand, it has been read as a non-Western articulation of world order — useful symbolically, even if the substance is Chinese-centered. On the other hand, the historical reality of tianxia in East Asia was a tribute system in which states acknowledged Chinese

centrality through ritual deference. For a Vietnam, a Korea, or a Mongolia that lived under tributary arrangements for centuries, the revival of tianxia reads less like cosmopolitan inclusivity and more like nostalgia for hierarchy.

This is worth carrying into any discussion: a "non-Western world order" is not automatically liberatory, and it is worth asking each time who sits at the center of it. The genuinely useful thinking from the Chinese intellectual tradition for Global South readers is more likely to be found in Wang Hui's trans-systemic society concept (which acknowledges overlapping networks without a single center) than in tianxia (which presupposes one).

Tier 6 — Non-aligned, multipolar-curious readers

For non-aligned readers, the most useful version of the tianxia conversation is the recognition that several civilizational traditions are now articulating world-scale political concepts: tianxia from China, *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam* ("the world is one family") from Indian traditions, *Ubuntu* from southern African philosophy, *Buen Vivir* from Andean indigenous thought, the Catholic *common good* tradition, the Quaker *meeting* model, the Iroquois Great Law. Each of these is a different attempt to articulate world-scale or large-scale political community without reducing to either nation-state realism or imperial universalism.

Cube Commons's commitment is to remain in conversation with all of these, not to align with any one. The institutional-sovereignty framework is compatible with multiple metaphysics. That compatibility is part of its value.

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4. *He er bu tong* (和而不同) — harmony without uniformity

Tier 1

He er bu tong (pronounced roughly "huh er boo tong") is a Confucian phrase meaning "harmony, not uniformity." It comes from the *Analects* 13.23 and is illustrated in classical Chinese texts with the metaphor of soup: a good soup has many ingredients, each contributing its own flavor, forming a whole that is harmonious precisely because the ingredients remain distinct. Contrast this with water, which is uniform — all the same — but has no flavor at all.

The phrase is often used in contemporary Chinese diplomacy to describe the ideal of international relations: many civilizations coexisting, each retaining its character, none trying to impose uniformity on the others.

Tier 2

For civic technologists, the he-er-bu-tong concept has a natural resonance with protocol-based interoperability. The internet itself is built this way: many different operating systems, programming languages, and applications coexist because they share a small number of open protocols (TCP/IP, HTTP, DNS) that let them communicate while remaining themselves. The soup metaphor is apt.

Cube Commons's protocol-based architecture — the Cube Data Plane, the open agent-identity protocols being drafted at the IETF — is an attempt to apply this logic to civic AI infrastructure. Institutions remain themselves. They coordinate through shared protocols. They don't have to become uniform to work together.

Tier 3

For policymakers, the tension in contemporary Chinese deployment of he-er-bu-tong is that it is applied *between* states but not *within* them. Civilizational diversity across borders is celebrated; institutional diversity within China is more restricted. This is the precise inverse of the commons and subsidiarity traditions, which protect nested diversity within jurisdictions.

A civic-technology policy that takes he-er-bu-tong seriously would apply it consistently: diversity between states *and* diversity within them. This is closer to the European Union's actual operational principle — unity of the Union, diversity of the member states, diversity of the regions, diversity of the cities — than to any contemporary Chinese articulation.

Tiers 4–6

The concept reads largely as in Tier 1 across the global tiers. The metaphor is widely intelligible and the substantive point — coexistence rather than uniformity — is broadly compatible with non-aligned, Global South, and European-pluralist sensibilities. Where the concept becomes contested is in its inconsistent application by states, which is covered in Tier 3.

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5. Cyber sovereignty (网络主权) versus institutional sovereignty versus European digital sovereignty

Tier 1

All three phrases mean something different. **Cyber sovereignty** is the Chinese concept, articulated by Xi Jinping at the Wuzhen World Internet Conference in 2015: the state is the proper unit of digital authority, and just as a state has sovereignty over

its territorial land, sea, and air, it has sovereignty over its digital space. Under this framework, every state gets to decide what happens in its digital territory.

European digital sovereignty is a different concept, articulated by figures like Emmanuel Macron and Thierry Breton and embedded in laws like GDPR, the Data Governance Act, and the Digital Markets Act. It is more ambivalent than the Chinese version: it tries to protect European citizens and institutions from extraterritorial reach by the United States and from Chinese state access, while preserving democratic rule of law. The locus is somewhere between national governments and the Union itself.

Institutional sovereignty is the Cube Commons concept. It says neither the nation-state nor the supranational union is the right locus for most digital authority. The right locus is the civic institution — the hospital, the school, the municipality, the housing authority — because these are the bodies whose data and computation matter most for democratic life.

Tier 2

For civic technologists, the practical difference shows up in where data lives and who can reach it. Under cyber sovereignty, data about Chinese citizens lives on servers in China, accessible by the Chinese state under Chinese law. Under European digital sovereignty, data about European citizens is protected from extraterritorial reach (GDPR, Schrems II) but is generally held by either member-state governments or (more often) private firms. Under institutional sovereignty, data about a particular institution's members and operations lives under the control of that institution — which means its own cloud account, its own servers, its own governance.

The three frameworks share the rejection of United States extraterritorial reach (the CLOUD Act, Section 702 of FISA). That's substantial common ground and it's part of why Cube Commons expects to have genuine interlocutors in both Europe and China. But the positive constructions diverge radically, and the difference matters.

Tier 3

For policymakers, the legal and operational implications are concrete. A Massachusetts hospital could, in principle, be served by cloud services in any of these three framings. Under the current de facto US-hyperscaler arrangement, its data is in AWS or Azure and subject to CLOUD Act exposure. Under a hypothetical European framework, it might be in a Gaia-X-certified sovereign cloud. Under a hypothetical Chinese framework, it would be on servers under Chinese state oversight. Under the institutional-sovereignty framework Cube Commons is building, it is in the hospital's own cloud account — or on its own servers — with the hospital retaining full control.

The important empirical claim is that only one of these four options is primarily defended by a single profit-motivated firm with extraterritorial state access. That's the US hyperscaler arrangement that civic institutions currently use by default. Any of the other three is a substantial improvement on institutional autonomy. The commons position prefers the fourth (institutional) but can work with Europeans pursuing the second and Chinese pursuing the first, because all three share opposition to the extractive hyperscaler default.

Tier 4 — Global South civic institutions

The cyber sovereignty / digital sovereignty / institutional sovereignty trichotomy looks different again from a country whose data has historically lived nowhere but in the cloud accounts of foreign firms. For a Kenyan municipal hospital, a Filipino school district, a Bolivian housing authority, the question is not which sovereignty framework to choose. The question is: do we have any sovereignty at all?

In practice, "sovereignty" in this context has often meant whichever kind of sovereignty is available cheaply enough. Many African and South Asian governments have ended up using Chinese infrastructure not because they preferred Chinese state access to American state access but because the Chinese option came with financing terms the Americans wouldn't match. Sovereignty by default rather than by preference.

The Cube Commons institutional-sovereignty model is appealing in this register because it side-steps the trichotomy. It does not require enlistment in either the Chinese or the European framework. The data lives at the institution. The institution chooses its hosting provider — which can be a regional African cloud, a domestic Brazilian one, a federated cooperative, or self-hosted on premises. Civic-technology capacity-building organizations across the Global South — the Code for Africa network, the Sinar Project in Malaysia, MariaLab in Brazil, Mzalendo in Kenya — have been articulating versions of this for years. Cube Commons is building the technical substrate that makes their political articulations operational.

Tier 5 — European publics

European publics have been having the digital-sovereignty conversation more publicly than anyone. The Schrems II ruling (CJEU 2020), the Snowden disclosures (2013) before that, the recurring debate over Microsoft and AWS in German public administration, the French *cloud de confiance* program, the German government's complicated relationship with Microsoft, Italy's intermittent push for sovereign cloud: this has been a live policy debate for over a decade.

What's distinctive about the European version is that it has produced real legal instruments (GDPR, Data Governance Act, Data Act, AI Act) but limited operational results.

Most European citizens' data still lives in American hyperscaler clouds. Most European governments still depend on American software for their most critical functions. The instruments have outpaced the infrastructure.

Cube Commons's institutional-sovereignty framework reads, from a European perspective, as the operational layer the legal instruments need. GDPR says data subjects have rights. Cube Commons says: here is the architecture that makes those rights mechanically enforceable, because the data physically resides under institutional control rather than corporate custody. The two are complements, not alternatives. A European civic technologist building in 2026 should expect to be using GDPR-grade privacy protections layered on top of Cube Commons-grade institutional architecture.

Tier 6 — Non-aligned, multipolar-curious readers

For non-aligned readers, the most useful framing is that all three sovereignty concepts (cyber, digital, institutional) are responses to the same underlying problem: the post-1990s era in which a small number of American firms acquired effective sovereignty over most of the world's civic data without anyone having voted on it. The three frameworks differ in where they relocate the authority. They agree that it cannot stay where it is.

Institutional sovereignty is the framework most compatible with non-alignment, because it does not require the institution to enlist in any state's sovereignty framework. A diocese in São Paulo, a university in Ankara, a hospital in Lagos, a municipal council in Wellington can each operate institution-sovereign infrastructure without first declaring fealty to a bloc.

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6. Directed improvisation

Tiers 1–3

(Reads as in the original primer; the audience perspective does not significantly change the substance.)

Tier 1. *Directed improvisation* is a concept from the political scientist Yuen Yuen Ang. The idea: China's growth since 1978 was not purely top-down (Beijing commanding everything) and not purely bottom-up (local actors doing whatever they wanted). It was top-down direction combined with bottom-up improvisation, organized through three kinds of instructions. *Black commands* are mandatory. *Red commands* are prohibited. *Grey commands* are permitted but vague — zones of local experimentation. Much of the Chinese growth miracle happened in the grey zone.

Tier 2. Useful conceptual tool for multi-agent coordination: a pure hierarchy scales badly, a pure market produces chaos. What works is a framework that sets parameters and allows exploration within them. This mirrors the Ostromian commons logic.

Tier 3. Best available corrective to the caricature of China as purely top-down. But Ang has emphasized that the Xi era has narrowed the grey zone. The concept remains useful as analytical tool even as its empirical referent changes.

Tiers 4–6

The concept is useful across all three new tiers but does not change shape with audience. Read as Tier 1.

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7. Digital China and East Data, West Computing

Tiers 1–3

(Reads as in the original primer.)

Tier 1. *Digital China* is the master plan the Chinese government issued in February 2023. *East Data, West Computing* is a national resource-allocation project routing computation from data-rich eastern coast to energy-rich western provinces. Eight national computing hubs, ten data-center clusters, target ~300 EFLOPS by end of 2025.

Tier 2. Worth studying because it answers a question US infrastructure has barely asked: where should computation physically happen given its energy footprint?

Tier 3. The Digital China plan is more internally coherent than any comparable US document. The critique from the Cube Commons perspective is that it places the state at the center of every arrow, with civic institutions subordinate.

Tier 4 — Global South civic institutions

Worth flagging because Digital China has an explicit external dimension that maps directly onto the Belt and Road and the Digital Silk Road (covered separately below). For Global South countries, "Digital China" is not only an internal Chinese plan; it is the upstream from which a substantial portion of digital infrastructure investment in their own countries flows. Understanding the plan is part of understanding what's actually being offered.

Tier 5 — European publics

The internal coherence of the Digital China plan is, from a European perspective, both impressive and unsettling. The European Union has been trying to build something comparable — under various names: Digital Decade, EuroStack, European Data Strategy — but the result has been substantially less coherent because European federalism distributes authority across the Union, member states, and subnational governments. This is, depending on one's view, either a bug or a feature. Cube Commons's view is that polycentric distribution is a feature, and that the European result, however slow, is structurally healthier than a more centralized one would be.

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8. The National Data Bureau and data element markets

Tiers 1–3

(Reads as in the original primer.)

Tier 1. China has a National Data Bureau (October 2023) coordinating data as a public resource, and forty-plus data element markets where data is bought, sold, and licensed under a "data available but invisible" principle. China is the first country to put data on corporate balance sheets (January 2024).

Tier 2. "Data available but invisible" — federation, secure multi-party computation, homomorphic encryption — is the same technical substrate Cube Commons uses for cross-institutional coordination without data egress.

Tier 3. Data element markets are a live experiment in making data function as a factor of production without collapsing into purely private or purely public property. The "three rights" framework is genuinely original.

Tier 4 — Global South civic institutions

Several Global South countries — most notably Indonesia, Brazil, Nigeria, and India — have been experimenting with their own variations on data marketplaces and data trusts. India's Account Aggregator framework (2021+) is structurally close to the Chinese "data available but invisible" principle but with consent at the individual level. Brazil's Open Finance program shares the substrate. Indonesia's Satu Data Indonesia is a different model.

The relevance for civic technologists across the Global South is that the technical substrate (federation, privacy-preserving computation) is the same regardless of whether the regulatory framing is Chinese, Indian, Brazilian, or Cube Commons-style institutional. Once an institution can compute on data without extracting it, the regulatory

question becomes which institutions get to participate and on what terms — which is a political question with multiple defensible answers.

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9. Social credit — what it actually is

Tiers 1–3

(Reads as in the original primer.)

Tier 1. The Western caricature is mostly fiction. The actual systems: a financial credit bureau, a corporate regulatory compliance database, a court-enforcement defaulter blacklist, and a few municipal pilots. No unified national score. No automatic AI sanctions.

Tier 2. A case study in how *not* to build integrated data systems. The technology (federation, integration across agencies) is unobjectionable. The governance (politicized regulatory authority, lack of judicial independence) is what makes the system what it is.

Tier 3. The scholarly consensus contradicts the popular image. Best sources: Jeremy Daum, Rogier Creemers, Shazeda Ahmed, Kendra Schaefer, Vincent Brussee.

Tier 4 — Global South civic institutions

This concept needs particular care from a Global South perspective because the *fiction* of Chinese social credit has been used as rhetorical justification for blocking Chinese-origin technology in countries that, in many cases, have weaker domestic data protections than China itself. A Nairobi or Manila civic technologist who declines to use Chinese tools because of social-credit fears, while running their actual operations on American hyperscalers under terms-of-service that authorize routine corporate surveillance, has chosen one form of surveillance over another without noticing.

The Cube Commons position holds across all of these: the right answer is not Chinese tools versus American tools but institution-controlled infrastructure regardless of which firm's technology is underneath. The choice of substrate matters less than the choice of who governs it.

Tier 6 — Non-aligned, multipolar-curious readers

For non-aligned readers, the social-credit caricature is one of the clearer cases of a discourse being shaped by geopolitical positioning rather than by the substance of what's being described. The same readers who can recognize the caricature for what it is should also be willing to engage seriously with the genuine concerns the actual

systems raise — politicization of regulatory authority, lack of judicial independence, the breadth of state access. Both moves are necessary. Refusing the caricature does not require apologizing for the system.

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10. The three Chinese data laws

Tiers 1–3

(Reads as in the original primer.)

Tier 1. Cybersecurity Law (2017), Data Security Law (2021), Personal Information Protection Law / PIPL (2021). Three-tier classification (general, important, core data). March 2024 substantial relaxation of cross-border transfer rules.

Tier 2. PIPL is structurally similar to GDPR. Compliance burden is real but no harder than GDPR. March 2024 reforms created meaningful exemptions for low-risk transfers.

Tier 3. China will not receive GDPR adequacy because of state-access provisions in the 2017 National Intelligence Law. This is a structural limit on cross-jurisdictional integration, and one of several reasons that genuinely multipolar systems require federation, local-first architecture, and privacy-preserving computation rather than depending on cross-jurisdictional trust.

Tier 4 — Global South civic institutions

Most Global South countries have followed either GDPR (Brazil's LGPD, Kenya's DPA, South Africa's POPIA, Thailand's PDPA) or are moving in that direction. China's PIPL is structurally similar enough that compliance work largely transfers. The harder question is data localization, where Chinese practice (sectoral, not blanket) is closer to the emerging Global South norm than the European or American practices.

Tier 5 — European publics

GDPR's interaction with PIPL and with US law is one of the live policy fronts for European data governance. The Schrems sequence of cases (Schrems I 2015, Schrems II 2020, the post-EU-US Data Privacy Framework litigation that will produce Schrems III at some point) is the central example of how cross-jurisdictional data flows actually get regulated. European readers should understand that the Cube Commons institutional-sovereignty model is *more* compatible with GDPR than the existing hyperscaler arrangement, because data physically residing under institutional control is much easier to bring into compliance than data routinely transmitted to American servers under contractual fictions.

11. OpenAtom Foundation and Chinese open-source

Tiers 1–3

(Reads as in the original primer.)

Tier 1. OpenAtom Foundation (Beijing, 2020) is the closest Chinese equivalent to the Linux Foundation. Hosts OpenHarmony, openEuler, openGauss, MindSpore. Not structurally equivalent to Linux Foundation: charter explicitly includes enhancing global discourse power for Chinese enterprises in open-source governance, MIIT supervision.

Tier 2. Three kinds of Chinese open-source projects coexist. Genuine commons (Apache TLPs, CNCF graduated, RISC-V): vendor-neutral governance, fully commons-compatible. State-stewarded (OpenAtom): useful technology, permissive licenses, but single-vendor governance under state supervision. Open-weight AI models (DeepSeek, Qwen, GLM, Kimi): permissively licensed but not "open-source" in FSF sense.

Tier 3. Huawei is among the top contributors to the Linux kernel. Chinese engineers are deeply involved in genuinely global open-source commons. The substrate cannot be decoupled without breaking the substrate. Policy question is not whether to decouple but how to keep commons governance vendor-neutral and politically independent.

Tier 4 — Global South civic institutions

Open-source software is, for many Global South civic institutions, the only economically viable substrate. Proprietary licensing fees from American firms are out of reach. This has produced two patterns. First, deep adoption of genuinely-commons projects (Linux distributions, Apache projects, Postgres, etc.) — where Global South contributions are now substantial, particularly from Brazilian, Indian, Nigerian, and Indonesian developers. Second, increasing experimentation with Chinese-origin open-source (HarmonyOS, openEuler, the Chinese open-weight AI models) where the technology is competitive and the licensing is permissive.

For Cube Commons, the relevant fact is that the global open-source commons is *not* an American or Western artifact. It is a genuinely planetary endeavor with substantial contributions from every major region. Building on that substrate is not "Western" in any meaningful sense; it is global commons work.

Tier 5 — European publics

Europe has its own complicated relationship with open-source. On one hand, much of the foundational open-source work was European (Linus Torvalds is Finnish, MySQL was Swedish, the Apache HTTPD project has had heavy European involvement, the Mozilla Foundation has European roots). On the other hand, European industrial policy has been slow to recognize open-source as strategic infrastructure, and most European governments have continued to procure proprietary American software by default.

The OpenForum Europe think tank, the Sovereign Tech Fund (Germany, founded 2022), and the increasing interest in EuroStack as an integrated European technology layer represent a shift. The Cube Commons institutional-sovereignty framework is a natural complement to these developments — open-source as substrate, institutional governance as application layer.

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12. Chinese intellectual traditions worth knowing

Tiers 1–3

(Reads as in the original primer.)

Wang Hui, Xiang Biao, Yuen Yuen Ang as three contemporary Chinese thinkers worth knowing for civic technologists. Wang on trans-systemic society. Xiang on "the nearby" and logistical power. Ang on directed improvisation. Each provides something useful without being reducible to state doctrine.

Tier 4 — Global South civic institutions

Worth pairing these with parallel intellectual traditions in the Global South. Wang Hui's trans-systemic society resonates with Latin American dependency theory (Cardoso, Furtado, Prebisch) and with African post-colonial political theory (Mamdani, Mbembe). Xiang Biao's "the nearby" resonates with Boaventura de Sousa Santos's *epistemologies of the South*. Yuen Yuen Ang's directed improvisation resonates with the developmental-state literature on East Asian newly industrialized economies (Chalmers Johnson, Robert Wade, Alice Amsden, Ha-Joon Chang).

The broader point: serious intellectual work on alternative political economies and alternative development models is happening across the Global South. Cube Commons-style civic infrastructure is compatible with much of it. The conversation worth having is not American versus Chinese but rather: how do contemporary Chinese, Latin American, African, and South Asian intellectual traditions converge on alternatives

to Anglo-American liberal capitalism, and what would civic technology look like that took those convergences seriously?

Tier 5 — European publics

European readers will recognize that Wang Hui's critique of "depoliticized politics" parallels the critiques of post-political technocracy from Chantal Mouffe, Jacques Rancière, and Slavoj Žižek. Xiang Biao's "the nearby" resonates with European communitarian thought and with the various European debates about *Heimat*, place, and rootedness. Yuen Yuen Ang's directed improvisation parallels Mariana Mazzucato's mission-oriented state. These are not coincidences. Contemporary intellectual life is more globally interconnected than its national framings suggest, and serious work in any tradition tends to converge with serious work in the others.

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13. Chinese liberal critics — the voices the state has chosen to silence

Tiers 1–3

(Reads as in the original primer.)

Xu Zhangrun, Xu Zhiyong, Qin Hui as Chinese voices critical of the contemporary state. Citing them is not Sinophobia — it is honoring the work of people who have taken real risks. The August 2022 UN OHCHR Xinjiang assessment is a UN document, not an American invention.

Tier 4 — Global South civic institutions

This is where the Global South tier requires the most careful articulation. Many Global South readers have legitimate skepticism of Western human-rights discourse, having watched it be selectively applied — turned on China, Russia, Iran, Venezuela; turned off for Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the Philippines under Duterte, India under Modi, Israel-Palestine. The selective application is real, and the resulting credibility deficit is earned.

The Cube Commons position is that the credibility deficit of Western human-rights discourse does not invalidate human rights; it invalidates the selectivity. The right response is more rigorous and consistent application, not abandonment. Citing Xu Zhangrun and Xu Zhiyong is part of that work. Citing the West Bank human rights documentation is part of that work. Citing the Sahrawi refugees, the Rohingya, the Uyghurs, the Tibetans, the Yemenis, the Palestinians, the Sudanese, the Tigrayans, the Kurds, the Acehnese, the West Papuans is part of that work. The list is depressingly long. None of the entries on it should be erased to protect any state's legitimacy.

Tier 6 — Non-aligned, multipolar-curious readers

For non-aligned readers, the most rigorous formulation: human rights are not a Western project; they are a planetary project that has been *captured* by Western diplomacy at various points and *abandoned* by it at others. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) was drafted by a committee chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt that included Charles Malik (Lebanon), P.C. Chang (China), Hansa Mehta (India), and the negotiating contributions of Latin American jurists, Soviet diplomats, and African delegates. It is not the property of any bloc. Reclaiming it from any single bloc's instrumentalization is part of the work of a multipolar age.

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14. Competitive coexistence and managed multipolarity

Tiers 1–3

(Reads as in the original primer.)

Competitive coexistence (Jessica Chen Weiss). Managed multipolarity (Charles Kupchan). Restraint school (Walt, Posen, Wertheim). All share the view that multipolarity is coming whether or not anyone chooses it, and the right question is how to manage it.

Tier 4 — Global South civic institutions

For most Global South countries, the goal of foreign policy is *neither* dominance *nor* alignment but rather *strategic autonomy* — the ability to maintain working relationships with multiple poles without subordinating to any. Indonesia, India, Brazil, South Africa, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Mexico, Turkey, Vietnam have all explicitly articulated versions of this in recent years. The Non-Aligned Movement (founded 1961) is the historical antecedent, and its 2024 Kampala summit (the largest in decades) signals the renewed relevance of the framework.

Cube Commons-style institutional infrastructure is well-aligned with strategic autonomy as a foreign-policy posture, because it is itself trans-scalar — it does not require the host country to enlist in any bloc to function. A Brazilian municipal government running Cube Commons infrastructure has not aligned with the United States, with China, or with the European Union; it has aligned with itself.

Tier 5 — European publics

The European version of strategic autonomy has been articulated under various names: Macron's *autonomie stratégique européenne*, Borrell's "strategic autonomy" doctrine, the broader EuroStack debate, the Draghi Report (September 2024). The

political question for Europe is whether strategic autonomy is achievable within current institutional arrangements or requires deeper federation. The technical question — what infrastructure is required to make strategic autonomy operational — is largely the same as the Cube Commons question, scaled up to the continental level.

Tier 6 — Non-aligned, multipolar-curious readers

For non-aligned readers, the most useful single concept is Amitav Acharya's *multiplex world order* (*The End of American World Order*, 2014). Acharya describes a world with multiple plots, multiple directors, multiple actors, all under the same roof — interdependence higher than 19th-century multipolarity, normative pluralism higher than Cold War bipolarity, no single hegemon. This is, more or less, what the world has actually become. The remaining work is institutional: building the protocols, treaties, and infrastructure that let the multiplex order function without collapsing into either chaos or great-power conflict.

Cube Commons is a small piece of that institutional work — at the civic-infrastructure layer. Larger pieces (multilateral trade, climate cooperation, AI governance, financial architecture) are happening simultaneously at other layers. The point is that all the pieces share the same logic: federation rather than hierarchy, protocol rather than platform, institutional sovereignty rather than bloc subordination.

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15. The Digital Silk Road and Belt and Road

Tier 1 (new section)

The **Belt and Road Initiative** is China's name for its global infrastructure investment program, launched in 2013. It includes ports, railways, highways, pipelines, power plants, and increasingly fiber-optic cables and data centers. The infrastructure piece focused on telecommunications, satellites, smart cities, AI, and other digital systems is sometimes called the **Digital Silk Road**, though the term is used inconsistently.

By 2025, more than 150 countries have signed Belt and Road agreements with China. The investment totals run into the trillions of US dollars, though the exact figures are debated. The Digital Silk Road component includes Huawei and ZTE 5G deployments across Africa and Southeast Asia, the PEACE submarine cable connecting Pakistan, East Africa, and Europe, smart-city projects in dozens of cities, and expanding cloud regions across the Global South.

Tier 2

For civic technologists, the Digital Silk Road is the upstream from which a substantial portion of the world's actually-deployed civic infrastructure flows. If you are working in a country where the 5G network is Huawei, where the municipal smart-city contract was awarded to a Chinese vendor, where the national fiber backbone was financed by China Development Bank — that is the substrate you are working on. Pretending otherwise is bad engineering.

The Cube Commons position is not anti-Chinese-substrate. It is institution-sovereign on whatever substrate exists. A municipal government in Lusaka or Karachi running on Huawei 5G can still operate its own civic infrastructure under its own governance — the Cube Commons architecture works regardless of who manufactured the underlying hardware. What matters is that the institution retains custody of its data and computation.

Tier 3

For policymakers, the Belt and Road / Digital Silk Road has been the subject of substantial Western policy attention, much of which has badly mischaracterized what the program actually is. The "debt trap diplomacy" narrative (popularized around 2017–2018) has been substantially revised by subsequent academic work — debt restructuring patterns are roughly comparable to those of Western lenders, the Hambantota Port case was unusual rather than exemplary, and most Belt and Road financing has been individual projects rather than coordinated geopolitical strategy.

This does not mean the program is benign. Its environmental track record is mixed. Its labor practices are mixed. Its governance impacts are mixed. The point is that it has been simpler and more transactional than the geopolitical-conspiracy framing suggested. Many Belt and Road projects have been driven by ordinary commercial logic on both sides — Chinese firms looking for export markets, recipient countries looking for infrastructure financing on terms unavailable elsewhere.

The genuine policy concerns include surveillance technology export, environmental impact, labor practices, and the broader concern that recipient countries become dependent on Chinese technical expertise for maintenance and upgrades. These concerns have parallels in Western infrastructure programs (USAID, the World Bank, the European Investment Bank's various lending) and should be evaluated symmetrically.

Tier 4 — Global South civic institutions

This is the section the Global South tier is most distinctive on. The dominant Western framing of the Belt and Road as predatory is not how it is generally experienced from the recipient side. Most Global South governments engaging with the Belt and

Road do so because (a) the infrastructure is needed, (b) the financing is available, (c) the alternatives (Western development banks, private capital markets) are either unavailable, unwilling, or attached to political conditionalities the recipient declines to accept.

This does not make every Belt and Road project a good project. Some are corrupt. Some are environmentally destructive. Some are economically unviable. The same is true of Western-financed infrastructure projects in the same countries. The honest framing is that infrastructure investment is hard, the marginal projects are often the worst, and the recipient governments are not children needing to be protected from making contracts.

For civic technologists specifically: the technology underlying many Belt and Road digital projects is competitive on quality, often superior on cost, and frequently the only available option in low-margin markets where Western firms decline to compete. This is not because the technology is mysteriously better — it is because Chinese firms have lower margins, more aggressive financing, and fewer political restrictions on where they will deploy. Working on this substrate is not a political endorsement of any particular project. It is engineering reality.

The Cube Commons position is that civic institutions in Belt and Road recipient countries should approach the substrate the same way they would approach any substrate: use what works, govern what they can, retain custody of their data and computation, build institutional sovereignty layer by layer regardless of who manufactured the hardware below.

Tier 5 — European publics

The European reading of the Belt and Road has been dominated by the "systemic rival" framing of the EU's 2019 Strategic Outlook. Several European countries have imposed restrictions on Huawei 5G; the Italian government withdrew from the Belt and Road in late 2023; the EU's Global Gateway initiative is positioned as a counter-offer.

The harder question for European publics is whether the Global Gateway is competitive on the actual factors that drive Belt and Road decisions — financing speed, willingness to deploy in low-margin markets, indifference to certain forms of conditionality. If Europe is going to compete with the Belt and Road on infrastructure provision, it needs to actually compete on infrastructure provision, not on rhetorical positioning. Cube Commons's view is that the institutional-sovereignty framework is one piece of what a credible European offer would need: not "use European infrastructure instead of Chinese infrastructure" but "use commons-governed infrastructure regardless of substrate."

Tier 6 — Non-aligned, multipolar-curious readers

For non-aligned readers, the most useful framing of the Belt and Road / Digital Silk Road is that it represents the largest single contemporary attempt to provide alternative infrastructure financing to Global South countries on terms different from those of the Bretton Woods institutions. Whether the alternative is good or bad depends on the specific case. Whether having an alternative at all is good or bad is a different question — and the non-aligned position is generally that *having alternatives is good*, regardless of which alternative one chooses in a particular case.

The same logic applies to digital substrate. Having Chinese open-weight AI models alongside American closed ones is good for the world even if any particular institution prefers one or the other. Having Huawei 5G alongside Ericsson and Nokia is good for the world even if particular countries make different choices. The Cube Commons commitment to operating across substrates is part of the same logic: institutional sovereignty does not require everyone to use the same hardware, only the same governance principles.

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16. The Karp / Schmidt / SCSP frame

Tier 1 (new section)

In late 2024 and early 2025, two books and one institutional ecosystem coalesced around a common argument: that the United States is in a civilizational competition with China that requires fusing Silicon Valley with the Pentagon, building AI on a Manhattan-Project model, and treating any softening of this stance as defeatism.

The two books are Alexander Karp and Nicholas Zamiska's *The Technological Republic* (Crown Currency, February 2025) and Dario Amodei's *Machines of Loving Grace* essay (October 2024). The institutional ecosystem includes Eric Schmidt's Special Competitive Studies Project (SCSP, founded 2021), the various successor bodies to the National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence, and a network of think tanks and venture capital firms organized around what's often called "American Dynamism" or "the new defense tech."

This frame now substantially shapes US AI policy. President Trump's January 2025 executive orders revoking the Biden AI executive order and announcing the "America's AI Action Plan" in July 2025 were both consistent with this frame. The "Axis of AI Autocracies" or "CRINK" framing (China, Russia, Iran, North Korea as a coordinated AI bloc) is its diplomatic articulation.

The Cube Commons position is that this frame is the more immediate threat to the kind of work Cube Commons does than anything originating in Beijing. Concentration

in a small number of US firms, justified by a permanent emergency narrative about Chinese threat, structures civic institutions out of meaningful agency over their own infrastructure.

Tier 2

For civic technologists, the practical effect of the Karp/Schmidt frame is consolidation. Frontier AI is concentrating in 4–5 US labs plus Nvidia plus Microsoft/Google/Amazon plus Palantir. Civic institutions — the Cube Commons constituency — find their procurement options narrowing rather than expanding. The "AI for Government" market is increasingly dominated by Palantir-style platforms with deep Pentagon integration. The argument that this concentration is necessary for national security has the operational effect of making civic-scale alternatives politically illegible.

Tier 3

For policymakers, the Karp/Schmidt frame represents one of two main strands of contemporary US AI policy thinking. The other strand — represented by the FTC under Lina Khan (2021–2025), parts of the Justice Department's antitrust division, the open-source AI advocacy of figures like Yann LeCun and Clément Delangue, and the restraint-school foreign policy thinkers — argues that AI concentration is itself the threat, and that the right response is interoperability, open weights, and antitrust enforcement rather than national-security-justified consolidation.

The two strands are now locked in genuine policy conflict. The Cube Commons position aligns with the second strand on the substantive policy questions — open weights, interoperability, federation, anti-concentration — while maintaining institutional independence from any particular political faction.

Tier 4 — Global South civic institutions

The Karp/Schmidt/SCSP frame is, from a Global South perspective, frankly absurd. The framing of China as a uniquely threatening "AI autocracy" while continuing to sell sophisticated surveillance technology to allied authoritarians (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, India under Modi, Israel) is incoherent. The framing of "the West" as a coherent democratic bloc when "the West" has spent the last decade hardening borders, building surveillance infrastructure, and conducting various kinds of intervention in the Global South is similarly incoherent.

What the frame *does* do, from the Global South side, is structure US export policy in ways that make the United States increasingly unreliable as a technology partner. The Biden-era AI Diffusion Rule (which would have made allies into second-class AI citizens) was rescinded in May 2025 not because it was abandoned in principle but

because the Trump administration replaced it with a different consolidation framework. Either way, the Global South gets second-tier access. Either way, the Chinese open-weight ecosystem becomes more attractive by comparison.

Tier 5 — European publics

European reception of the Karp/Schmidt frame has been mixed. *The Times of London* described *The Technological Republic* as "the AI manifesto inspiring Keir Starmer's government," and Starmer's February 2025 Washington trip included a meeting with Karp. On the other hand, the broader European policy establishment has been wary of the "Manhattan Project for AI" framing, which clashes with the European preference for regulatory rather than militarized AI policy.

The structural problem for European publics is that the Karp/Schmidt frame, if it becomes US policy default, makes European AI sovereignty harder rather than easier. Concentration in US national champions means European civic institutions become more dependent on US infrastructure, not less. The institutional-sovereignty framework Cube Commons is articulating is a natural ally of European sovereignty efforts on this question.

Tier 6 — Non-aligned, multipolar-curious readers

For non-aligned readers, the most useful single observation is that the Karp/Schmidt/SCSP frame is the frame Cube Commons is principally pushing back against. Not Chinese state-sovereignty, not European supranational sovereignty, not any specific regional articulation. The principal opposition is to the frame that says civic institutions everywhere should subordinate themselves to American national-champion firms in the name of an emergency that has been declared permanent.

A multipolar civic-infrastructure ecosystem is, structurally, what the Karp/Schmidt frame is most opposed to. Building it is therefore a small contribution to the larger work of preventing the consolidation that frame would require.

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17. Putting it all together: the trans-scalar thesis

The forthcoming position paper argues three things. First, multipolarity in digital infrastructure is not a threat to democratic civic life; it is a condition for it. Second, China is one of those poles, with substantial real infrastructure, a sophisticated regulatory framework, a growing open-weight AI ecosystem, and a deep set of intellectual resources worth engaging on their own terms. Third, the proper Cube Commons posture is neither pro-China nor anti-China but **trans-scalar** — building civic

infrastructure that works across blocs, partnering with commons-compatible institutions wherever they are, declining to enlist in either the state-firm fusion push of the Karp/Schmidt/SCSP camp or the state-sovereignty framework of the Chinese system.

From a Boston perspective, the trans-scalar thesis is the answer to *The Technological Republic*. From a São Paulo or Lagos or Jakarta perspective, it is the operational expression of strategic autonomy. From a European perspective, it is the technical substrate for digital sovereignty. From a non-aligned perspective, it is the civic-infrastructure layer of the multiplex world order. The four readings are saying the same thing in different vocabularies.

Cube Commons's job is to build the infrastructure. The job of the institutions Cube Commons works with is to govern it. The job of this primer is to make the language available so that institutions in many different places can recognize the work as theirs.

Further reading

For readers who want to go deeper, the following are the most useful single sources on each major thread.

On multipolarity and international order: Amitav Acharya, *The End of American World Order* (Polity, 2014); Charles Kupchan, *No One's World* (Oxford, 2012); Jessica Chen Weiss, "The China Trap," *Foreign Affairs* (September/October 2022); Peter Katzenstein (ed.), *Civilizations in World Politics* (Routledge, 2010).

On strategic autonomy and non-alignment: Sarang Shidore's writing at the Quincy Institute; Rajan Menon's *The Conceit of Humanitarian Intervention* (Oxford, 2016) for the genealogy of selective application of international norms; the Non-Aligned Movement's 2024 Kampala Declaration.

On tianxia: Zhao Tingyang, *All Under Heaven*, trans. Joseph Harroff (UC Press, 2021); William Callahan, "Chinese Visions of World Order" (*International Studies Review*, 2008); Salvatore Babones, *American Tianxia* (Policy Press, 2017).

On contemporary Chinese political economy and governance: Yuen Yuen Ang, *How China Escaped the Poverty Trap* (Cornell, 2016); Sebastian Heilmann, *Red Swan* (Chinese University Press, 2018); Susan Shirk, *Overreach* (Oxford, 2023).

On Chinese digital infrastructure: Kendra Schaefer's reporting at Trivium China; Rogier Creemers at Leiden; MERICS research on Digital China.

On the Belt and Road and Digital Silk Road: Deborah Brautigam's Johns Hopkins SAIS work (especially on the debt-trap framing); Eric Olander and Cobus van Staden's China-Global South Project podcast and writing; Yuen Yuen Ang's articles on Belt and Road in *Foreign Affairs* and *Foreign Policy*.

On Chinese AI and open-source: Jeffrey Ding's ChinAI Newsletter; Concordia AI's reports on Chinese AI governance; Hugging Face's Chinese model documentation; Artificial Analysis's quarterly Intelligence Index updates.

On social credit, demystified: Jeremy Daum's writing at China Law Translate; Vincent Brussee, *Social Credit* (Hurst, 2023); Shazeda Ahmed's academic papers; Kendra Schaefer's USCC reports.

On Chinese thinkers worth engaging directly: Wang Hui, *China's New Order* (Harvard, 2003) and *The Politics of Imagining Asia* (Harvard, 2011); Xiang Biao with David Ownby, *Self as Method* (Palgrave, 2023); Yuen Yuen Ang, as above.

On Chinese liberal critics and human rights: Xu Zhangrun, *Viral Alarm: When Fury Overcomes Fear*, trans. Geremie Barmé (ChinaFile, 2020); UN OHCHR, *Assessment of Human Rights Concerns in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region* (August 31, 2022); Darren Byler, *In the Camps* (Columbia Global Reports, 2021).

On parallel intellectual traditions in the Global South: Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South* (Paradigm Publishers, 2014); Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason* (Duke, 2017); Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity* (Duke, 2011); Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed* (Columbia, 2004); Boaventura de Sousa Santos and Maria Paula Meneses (eds.), *Knowledges Born in the Struggle* (Routledge, 2020).

On European digital sovereignty: the OpenForum Europe think tank publications; Cristina Caffarra's writing on competition policy and digital sovereignty; the EuroStack initiative documents; Mario Draghi's *The Future of European Competitiveness* (September 2024).

On the Karp/Schmidt/SCSP frame: Alexander C. Karp and Nicholas W. Zamiska, *The Technological Republic* (Crown Currency, 2025); Jason Furman's review, "Broken Glass" (*Harvard Business Review*, March 2025); Tech Transparency Project's reports on Eric Schmidt's Chinese business ties (2024); Project Censored's reporting on SCSP.

On restraint and alternative US foreign-policy frames: Stephen Wertheim, *Tomorrow, the World* (Harvard, 2020); Barry Posen, *Restraint* (Cornell, 2014); Van Jackson and Michael Brenes, *The Rivalry Peril* (forthcoming, 2025); Quincy Institute publications.

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