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Farzaneh Badiei

INTRODUCTION

A global Internet that allows movement of people's information through communications in a borderless fashion and without regard to nationality, creed, and gender does not accord with the border system, physical movement and national security agendas. Over the years, states have been trying to align the Internet with their laws and regulations, which some refer to as asserting digital sovereignty while others call it "alignment."¹ Provision of some services globally on the Internet has faced so-called alignment issues. However, regulators and state actors are yet to come up with a visa system akin to that of the physical world, one that would allow only communication, interaction, and service reception between ordinary people across state borders through an online visa system.

The global Internet is in danger. Yet while the danger might not be imminent, it is being shown to be gradual. We are witnessing an unfortunate shift in narrative of how a global Internet is good for society in general. The global Internet used to be defended and supported by democratic countries.² But over the years, and especially more recently, the global Internet has been framed as bad for both national and global security, with various reasons invoked, foremost among them that the Internet remains in the hands of the private sector and in particular giant technology companies.³ However, these same scholars themselves acknowledge that it is very hard to even gauge the outcomes of cyber conflict in the world⁴—and, it should be added, on global security.

Despite the uncertainty about the impact of a global Internet on global security, over time analysts have arrived at the thesis that a global Internet and national security do not go together.⁵ Early Internet centralization and a determinism to attribute a whole political movement, for example the

Arab spring,⁶ contributed to this flawed understanding. We are now seeing another kind of Internet determinism: analysts claiming that the global Internet contributes negatively to global security.

As we have forgotten how the global Internet aided many aspects of global governance and even upholding security, this essay aims to help restart the discourse about the possible positive impacts of the global Internet on the world. The positive impact of the global Internet has already been discussed from the human rights angle by senior policy analysts in 2022.⁷ This piece begins with a brief analysis of the impact of a global Internet on global security, continues with a reminder of why the global Internet can still be good for global security, and concludes with a reassessment of the impact of the Internet on global security in a more balanced manner.

GLOBAL SECURITY AND GLOBAL INTERNET, DEFINED

Global security in the field of international relations is defined as the amalgamation of national security of different nation-states, which have upheld peace and refrained from and resolved internal and cross-border conflicts. Global security, however, is not just about combating terrorism, fighting wars, or eliminating violence. It is also a question of human security: “The pursuit of human security must have at its core the satisfaction of basic material needs of all humankind. At the most basic level, food, shelter, education and health care are essential for the survival of human beings.”⁸ Global security also focuses on other potential threats to peace, such as environmental degradation and nationalism.⁹

The global Internet is a network of networks that facilitates human communication and interaction and access to digital services, without considering attributes such as nationality, creed, religion, and gender, among others. Yet the state of the global Internet is deeply wounded. For example, the Internet has been hampered both by authoritarian regimes’ efforts to block citizen access to the global Internet as much as possible. Other states that try to align the Internet with domestic legal regimes and regulatory frameworks also use tools that often have an impact on a global Internet.¹⁰

It is also worth asking what makes a global Internet less “global.” The dominant narrative among scholars and practitioners in this space, as articulated at various Internet governance events such as the United Nations Internet Governance Forum, has been that the world is facing fragmentation of the Internet through various forces. These forces include exerting control over the Internet domestically or enacting policies internationally that can affect the global nature of the Internet. Certain countries, among them some authoritarian regimes, have been trying to territorialize the Internet. The international community’s efforts aiming to enforce “global security” can hamper the global nature of the Internet as well. For example, national and

regional laws to bring peace to the world, such economic sanctions and trade barriers, also have an impact. In fact, economic sanctions that are not necessarily designed to apply to the global Internet often still have an impact on the global Internet. Sanctions regimes can potentially reshape the Internet's global traffic and create regionalization.

HOW CAN A GLOBAL INTERNET HELP MAINTAIN GLOBAL SECURITY?

Historically, especially in the early 2000s, the Internet was perceived as a tool for bringing peace. It connected the diaspora with local people and managed to raise people's voices heard to an extent unimaginable before. Early studies indicated that the Internet could be used to help with maintaining the global security, for example in the case of brokering peace in Myanmar¹¹ and by mediating the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Internet facilitated critical conversations and dialogue among groups in conflict. As Michael Best, the founding director of the United Nations University Institute on Computing and Society, has proposed, "as long as you are talking, you can't be shooting."¹²

Gradually the narratives about the positive impact of the Internet changed, especially with the rise of social media, since 2007. The social media platforms that operate on the Internet underwent scrutiny as the rise of social, political, and security events in the 2010s were partly attributed to these multinational corporations. The contribution of the global Internet to security, however, was less studied. As the reach of these platforms was made possible through the global Internet, the narrative that social media platforms supported and enabled terrorism affected the global nature of the Internet as well.

As the Internet evolved, it went beyond facilitating just communications and interactions, as other services were offered in a more sophisticated manner. Analysts have fallen short of understanding how this evolution, coupled with the global nature of the Internet, has positively contributed to maintaining global security. In this section, I briefly mention two elements of global security and how they are facilitated by the Internet: humanitarian aid and counter-terrorism.

Humanitarian Support

A global Internet can facilitate humanitarian aid during natural disaster response and refugee crises. Better information concerning disasters globally has helped to create a global interconnected community of disaster reporting and control that brings needed attention to many events otherwise go unnoticed by decision-makers.¹³ This was an early argument around humanitarian aid and how its constituent parts could communicate better

through the Internet. With the evolution of the Internet and the services offered—and by drawing on its global reach—humanitarian needs can be identified better and delivery of aid can be strategized in a more effective manner.

For example, Mercy Corps is collaborating with the private sector to address connectivity issues in displacement settings, in recognition that not only is Internet access a fundamental human right that even those in migration contexts should have access to, but it also promotes general well-being which in turn reinforces security in the physical world. In the longer term, country-level investments in Internet infrastructure—including updates to networks such as the introduction of 5G capabilities—will ensure more sustainable access to the Internet for populations on the move or in longer-term displacement contexts as well.¹⁴

Counter-terrorism

Scholars of global politics perceive a global Internet as a tool to be abused by terrorists. To some extent, these assertions are supported by some evidence, and scholarly research from early in the days of a global Internet studied these effects.¹⁵


In 2006, the United Nations acknowledged the issue and stated that it would provide support for states to combat terrorism, especially when terrorism operations draw upon the Internet: “The Internet can be used for the glorification of terrorist acts, incitement to commit acts of terrorism, radicalization and recruitment of terrorists, dissemination of illegal content, facilitating communication between terrorist actors and the training of potential recruits.”¹⁶ Additionally, then-UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said, “The Internet is a prime example of how terrorists can behave in a truly transnational way; in response, states need to think and function in an equally transnational manner.” And yet, states can only think and function in an equally transnational manner through using the same global Internet. They can facilitate counter-terrorism efforts, from providing counter-narratives to raising awareness about potential terrorist events, as well as limiting the ability to cooperate with actors across borders. Early reports on countering terrorism on the Internet also attest to this fact: “A significant amount of knowledge about the functioning, activities and sometimes the targets of terrorist organizations is derived from websites, chat rooms and other Internet communications.”¹⁷

Today, techniques go beyond just simple monitoring. Moreover, the scholarly field has advanced as well, as new theories can also be applied in the study of borderless spaces, including the theory of “noise”¹⁸ and other “prosocial” theories that help with the prevention of terrorism and provide opportunities for reform. There is an argument to be made that given the

advancement of technology enabled by the Internet, counter-terrorism activities and prevention of radicalization can be done in a much more scalable fashion to prevent casualties. However, a cursory review of the literature shows that more research is needed on how precisely new technologies enabled by the Internet can actually be used for counter-terrorism efforts and contribute to global security.

A PATH FORWARD

Some states have put forward solutions to keep the Internet global and interoperable by creating alliances with like-minded peers. The idea is not new. The Council on Foreign Relations recommended such an initiative as far back as 2013. Then, in 2021, an initiative called “A Declaration of the Future of the Internet,”¹⁹ spearheaded by the US, was convened to address this problem. However, we should carefully consider whether such alliances with really help achieve the purpose of keeping the Internet global. Such alliances could, instead, lead to unintended consequences, such as deepening the fragmentation of the Internet even further, negatively affecting nationals of non-allied countries, and even creating a similar visa system as the physical world for the Internet.

But if solutions such as allying like-minded states together do not contribute to global security and stability, then what does? This article proposes that the very concept of “global” Internet is what is good for global security. Free flows of communication and smart regulatory frameworks to limit extremes and radicalization enable the Internet to remain truly global while contributing to global security. Further research should be conducted to this end. Ultimately, focusing on the “Internet of Peace” or “Internet of War” does not provide us with a comprehensive toolkit of what we can do for global security with a global Internet. Instead, policymakers should view the Internet for what it is: a tool for good sometimes co-opted for bad that nevertheless is and should remain a global Internet in service to global security. 

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