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PM Modi calls for expanding 'ethical' AI: A look at the shift in Indian govt's stance on AI regulation

Just in April, the Ministry of Electronics and IT had said that it is not considering any law to regulate the AI sector, with Union IT minister Ashwini Vaishnaw admitting that though AI "had ethical concerns and associated risks", it had proven to be an enabler of the digital and innovation ecosystem.

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With the G20 Summit to be held in New Delhi less than two weeks from now, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's **call for a global framework on the expansion of "ethical" artificial intelligence (AI)** tools aims at taking a leadership position on the evolving debate over the need for convergence amongst all countries on regulating sectors such as AI and cryptocurrencies.

In a way, it also puts a stamp of approval at the highest level on the pronounced shift in New Delhi's own position — from not considering any legal intervention on regulating AI in the country to now a move in the direction of actively formulating regulations based on a "risk-based, user-harm" approach.

Part of this shift was reflected in a **new consultation paper floated by the apex telecommunications regulator** Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) in July, which said that the Centre should set up a domestic statutory authority to regulate AI in India through the lens of a "risk-based framework", while also calling for collaborations with international agencies and governments of other countries for forming a global agency for the "responsible use" of AI.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed the B20 Summit India 2023, in New Delhi, Sunday. (PTI Photo)

There is a strong likelihood that this proposal for a global agency with regulatory oversight on what is segmented as "responsible" or "ethical" AI use cases could be a

key facet of India's official submission at the upcoming leader's summit early next month.

This also comes amid indications that Centre is looking to draw a clear distinction between different types of online intermediaries, including AI-based platforms, and issue-specific regulations for each of these intermediaries in a fresh legislation called the Digital India Bill that is expected to replace the Information Technology Act, 2000.

Just in April, the Ministry of Electronics and IT had said that it is not considering any law to regulate the AI sector, with Union IT minister Ashwini Vaishnaw admitting that though AI "had ethical concerns and associated risks", it had proven to be an enabler of the digital and innovation ecosystem.

"The NITI Aayog has published a series of papers on the subject of Responsible AI for All. However, the government is not considering bringing a law or regulating the growth of artificial intelligence in the country," Vaishnaw had said in a written response in the Lok Sabha this Budget Session.

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Incidentally, tech major Microsoft, which has a stake in OpenAI, had floated a blueprint for AI governance in India earlier this month. Titled "Governing AI: A Blueprint for India", the paper proposed regulations prescribing safety and security requirements, then chart out deployment for permitted uses in a licensed Al data centre with post-deployment safety and security monitoring and protection.

"India is experiencing a significant technological transformation that presents a tremendous opportunity to leverage innovation for economic growth. This paper offers some of our ideas and suggestions as a company, placed in the Indian context," said Brad Smith, Vice Chair and President of Microsoft in the foreword to the paper released August 24. Microsoft has offered to share its "specialised knowledge" about advanced AI models to help the government define the regulatory threshold.

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==These developments come as policymakers across jurisdictions have stepped up regulatory scrutiny of generative AI tools, prompted by ChatGPT's explosive launch. The concerns being flagged fall into three broad heads: privacy, system bias and violation of intellectual property right==s.

The policy response has been different too, across jurisdictions, with the European Union having taken a predictably tougher stance by proposing to bring in a new AI Act that segregates artificial intelligence as per use case scenarios, based broadly on the degree of invasiveness and risk; the UK is on the other end of the spectrum, with a decidedly 'light-touch' approach that aims to foster, and not stifle, innovation in this nascent field.

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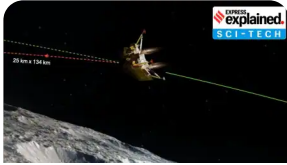
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The US approach falls somewhere in between, with Washington now setting the stage for defining an AI regulation rulebook by kicking off public consultations earlier this year on how to regulate artificial intelligence tools. This ostensibly builds on a move by the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy in October last year to unveil a Blueprint for an AI Bill of Rights. China too has released its own set of measures to regulate AI.

This also comes in the wake of calls by tech leaders Elon Musk, Steve Wozniak (Apple co-founder) and over 15,000 others for a six-month pause in AI development in April this year, saying labs are in an "out-of-control race" to develop systems that no one can fully control.

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They also said labs and independent experts should work together to implement a set of shared safety protocols.

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