

Google's Artificial Intelligence (AI) Center in China. Poaching Foreign Talent

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Artificial Intelligence (AI) is already fundamentally changing information technology and stands poised to permeate and transform technology both online and off ranging from manufacturing and transportation to medicine and military applications. The US, Russia and China have all noted that dominance in this field of technology will be an essential ingredient to holding global primacy in the near future.

What resembles a sort of arms race has emerged between prominent nations around the globe. Perhaps in an effort to provide the US with an edge, or perhaps in an effort to mitigate the impact of such an arms race, Google has opened an AI center in China.

CNN in its article, "[Google is opening an artificial intelligence center in China](#)," would announce:

Despite many of its services being blocked in China, Google has chosen Beijing as the location for its first artificial intelligence research center in Asia.

The purpose of the center, according to CNN, citing China's desire to become a global leader in AI technology, will be to:

...help China pursue its aim to become the global leader. The facility will employ a team of researchers who will be supported by engineers the company already has in China.

Considering Google's services being banned, blocked and otherwise unwelcomed in China, the question remains as to why exactly Google would seek to aid China in becoming a leader in AI technology Google itself seeks to position itself as a leader in.

This question may have been at least partially answered in [a recent AI summit](#) which included Eric Schmidt, executive chairman of Google's parent company, Alphabet Inc.

Poaching Foreign Talent

The Washington DC-based Center for a New American Security (CNAS), as part of its [Artificial Intelligence and Global Security Initiative](#), held its [Artificial intelligence and Global Security Summit \(video\)](#) in early November 2017. During Schmidt's question and answer session, he remarked that China would likely overcome America's lead in AI technology by 2025.

While Schmidt offered suggestions on how the US could keep its lead over China, particularly through establishing its own national laboratories for researching and developing AI technology within an enumerated national strategy regarding AI, it would be his comments on US immigration policy that hinted at why Google might open an AI center in China as part of maintaining America's lead.

Schmidt [would remark](#) (emphasis added):

Let's talk about immigration. Shockingly, some of the very best people are in countries that we won't let in to America. **Would you rather have them building AI somewhere else or having them build it here? I'll give you a specific example: Iran produces some of the smartest and top computer scientists in the world. I want them here!** And to be clear I want them working for Alphabet and Google. I'm very, very clear on this. It's crazy not to let these people in. So I could go on.

An alternative to having exceptional computer scientists brought into the United States would be poaching them at centers precisely like the one opened in China. The center not only allows Google, and by extension, the US access to Chinese computer scientists, it also creates a node within China's own research and development network, providing immense insight and intelligence regarding China's progress in this pivotal technological field.

Google's [own announcement](#) regarding the center's opening would offer additional insight, stating:

Focused on basic AI research, the Center will consist of a team of AI researchers in Beijing, supported by Google China's strong engineering teams. We've already hired some top experts, and will be working to build the team in the months ahead (check our jobs site for open roles!). Along with Dr. Jia Li, Head of Research and Development at Google Cloud AI, I'll be leading and coordinating the research. Besides publishing its own work, the Google AI China Center will also support the AI research community by funding and sponsoring AI conferences and workshops, and working closely with the vibrant Chinese AI research community.

In other words, Google's center is to serve as a window into China's AI research community, a window through which it can observe China's progress, but also a window it can reach through via funding and sponsoring to directly influence.

The Center Serves as a Window, Looked Through From Both Sides

But as with all forms of industrial, corporate and international espionage, the presence of Google's center poses risks for itself and US technological primacy, as much as it may provide opportunities.

Google, far from merely a technology company, has a long [and well-documented history of collusion with the United States government](#) and the powerful special interests that determine its foreign and domestic policy. It is this relationship Google has with Washington and its role in leveraging technology to attack and undermine political stability around the globe (particularly during the Arab Spring) that has many of its services banned in China in the first place.

It is unlikely that Beijing has not noticed the implications and potential threats of Google's AI center on its own soil.

Analysts will likely want to pay close attention to the projects and personalities attracted to this center in order to discern who the net benefactor will be of Google's most recent move.

Mutual Mitigation of Risk

There also remains the possibility that AI technology may be transparently developed in such a way as to mitigate the most destructive aspects of a what analysts are calling a possible "3rd offset" sought by America's military enabled by AI technology. This possibility could play a role in China's decision to host the center.

China may also expect a certain degree of access to America's AI research and development networks in return for hosting Google. This arrangement would be not unlike many of the Cold War deals struck between Washington and Moscow to prevent nuclear war and other possible conflicts owed solely on a lack of transparency or through misunderstandings.

Creating an equitable balance of power regarding the use of AI technology before any sort of disparity can emerge between nations resulting in a "Hiroshima-Nagasaki" style event would most certainly benefit either Washington or Beijing depending on who emerged at the winning and losing ends of such disparity. Since neither Washington nor Beijing can honestly say for sure who will end up on the winning and losing ends, they may both have calculated that preventing the scenario from ever unfolding in the first place may be the wisest course of action to take.

Ultimately, the old adage of keeping one's friends close, and one's enemies closer, may have contributed to both Google's desire to establish the center, and Beijing's acceptance to host it.

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