

# GRENOBLE ECOLE DE MANAGEMENT

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#### **A digital cold war?**

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The internet seems to be an even more divisive than cold-war ideology. The World Conference on International Telecommunications (WCIT) in Dubai, where the ITU met to renegotiate the ITR, ended in failure in the early hours of November 14th. After a majority of countries approved the new treaty, Terry Kramer, the head of the American delegation, announced that his country is “not able to sign the document in its current form.” Shortly thereafter, at least a dozen countries—including Britain, Sweden and Egypt—signalled that they would not support the new treaty either.

The main issue was to what extent the internet should feature in the treaty. America and its allies wanted to keep it from being so much as mentioned—mainly out of fear that any reference to it whatsoever would embolden governments to censor the internet and meddle with its infrastructure. For some time a compromise among the more than 600 delegates seemed possible: the binding ITR would indeed hardly make any mention of the internet, but China, Russia and many Arab countries would get a non-binding resolution on the internet (with the awkward title “To foster an enabling environment for the greater growth of the Internet”).

America’s willingness to stand up for the internet should be welcomed. But it has to be said that in doing so it is also defended its interests: no other country benefits as much from the status quo in the online world. Since much of the internet’s infrastructure is based in America and most of its traffic zips through it, America is in a unique position to eavesdrop, should it be so inclined. America’s internet firms also capture most of the profit pool of the online industry.

Only the host country had a larger delegation than America, which sent more than 120 people to Dubai. The American representatives included officials from the department of defence as well as from internet firms like Facebook and Google. It was not just for fear that it might have a chilling effect on freedom of expression that America did not want the word “security” included in the treaty—it also has a stake in keeping other countries from catching up in such matters. And America’s negotiators were not just worried about a digital divide when they pushed back hard against any attempts by European telecoms operators to introduce language about internet charges. The proposed changes could have helped the European firms in their efforts to get big internet firms to pay them for passing on their traffic.

The immediate impact of the WCIT’s failure will be minor. Despite the opposition from America and its allies, the ITU will have the remaining countries sign the new treaty on Friday—in the hope that the other member states will come around eventually. What is more, the treaty may be binding, but a new version will have to be ratified by the ITU’s member states, which can take a couple of years. And it is not clear how it can be enforced.

In the medium term, however, the outcome of the conference in Dubai will weaken the ITU—which may not be such a good thing. Among all the controversy it was forgotten that the

organisation actually does very useful work, for instance in managing the international radio-frequency spectrum and developing technical standards. And some of the good ideas about which the delegations could agree may now fail to come to fruition. The WCIT reached consensus on a resolution to create a worldwide emergency number (although this would take years to implement). It also agreed on wording to make it easier for landlocked countries and certain island states to get into international fibre-optical networks.

The most important result of the conference has been to demonstrate that the world now splits into two camps when it comes to the internet: one is comprised of more authoritarian countries, which would like to turn back the clock and regain sovereignty over their own national bits of the internet; the other wants to keep the internet and its governance as it is (bearing in mind that some of its members' motives may not always be as pure as they pretend).

This sounds much like a digital version of the cold war. The funny thing is that the leading countries in the two camps are the same two that were at loggerheads until the iron curtain parted. One must hope that the failure of the WCIT is not a first step towards raising a digital one.