

India's desire to be in AI vanguard gets reality check at global summit

Nation held back by lack of infrastructure as its call for technology to be shared is rebuffed by the US



KRISHN KAUSHIK — NEW DELHI

India's ambition to widen access to AI and play a crucial role in the fast-developing technology has fallen short, as the country continues to struggle to find its place in an industry dominated by the US and China.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government used the country's hosting of this year's Global AI Summit to push top AI groups, including OpenAI and Google, to open-source models for specific social ends, such as healthcare, education and agriculture.

"Some countries and companies believe that AI is a strategic asset and should therefore be developed confidentially," Modi said in his address. He added that the technology would "only benefit the world when it is shared".

The call comes as India has struggled to become a significant player in the AI arms race. Despite its huge tech talent pool and being home to global IT groups such as Infosys and Tata Consultancy Services, it is not a leader in developing large language models or creating products from the technology's rollout.

The world's most populous country wants to make sure that AI decision-making is not restricted to the US and China, as countries of the global south recognise the technology's transformative power and seek faster adoption.

But India's push to widen access and introduce a framework for global AI governance was largely dismissed by Washington and the country's leading tech companies.

Michael Kratsios, White House chief of science and technology policy, on Friday told attendees that the US

government "totally" rejected global governance of AI. "We believe AI adoption cannot lead to a brighter future if it is subject to bureaucracies and centralised control," he added.

Instead India managed to secure a voluntary commitment for AI companies to share their data on how the technology is being used and the effectiveness of multilingual models.

The Global AI summit, held last week,

Robotics was in focus at last week's Global AI Summit in India. Narendra Modi and France's Emmanuel Macron met at the event — Pallava Bagla/Getty Images; Seshadri Sukumar/Zuma



was also a roadshow for India, as it tries to minimise AI's threat for its largest white-collar employer, the \$300bn IT services sector. The event saw it secure investment pledges worth \$227bn, most involving the build-out of data centres.

But the summit was marred by dysfunction, with gridlocked streets and attendees waiting in long queues to enter the venue. It was also hit by several high-profile speakers pulling out, including Nvidia chief Jensen Huang and Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates.

Despite big data centre projects being announced, experts warned that India did not yet have the large-scale computing infrastructure needed to become a big player in AI.

Alphabet's senior vice-president James Manyika told the FT that the wider access India wanted was limited because of the lack of infrastructure, especially in the global south.

"The world has not got enough capacity... the scale of the capacity of the investments, I think, is something that is going to have to happen everywhere. It's particularly acute in the global south, so I think there's work... to do."

The fractured geopolitical environment also worked against India's push for a strong regulatory framework, according to AI experts.

J Trevor Hughes, chief executive of US-based not-for-profit IAPP, said the summit was conducted at an "odd moment" because "geopolitics is changing around the world".

"There is a broad deregulatory mood in the air. So the idea of imposing AI regulation creates an allergic reaction right now in many, and yet, risk management in AI is still a critical thing," he added.

'The idea of imposing AI [rules] creates an allergic reaction right now in many'

American companies are 'feeling absolutely no need to even agree to a baseline'

A person who was part of discussions between India and some of the US tech giants noted that as there was no pressure from the US government for global AI regulation, American companies were "feeling absolutely no need to even agree to a baseline".

The summit showed there were signs that India was making some headway in AI.

Sarvam AI, one of India's leading AI start-ups, used the summit to launch its new LLM. The Bengaluru-based group's model is focused on solving day-to-day concerns, rather than harder problems such as advanced maths and complex philosophical questions.

Meanwhile, India's IT services sector has belatedly decided to embrace the technology. TCS and Infosys both announced partnerships with OpenAI and Anthropic, respectively, to help their clients adopt and integrate the technology.

The importance of the Indian market to the leading AI groups was also made clear. OpenAI's Sam Altman said the country was the company's fastest-growing market for Codex, its coding agent that works alongside developers to build software.

But one of the most talked-about moments at the summit came on Thursday, when a group photo of industry and government leaders neatly showed the friction at the heart of the AI industry.

While everyone in the line followed Modi's encouragement to clasp their neighbours' hand in celebration above their heads, two of the industry's fiercest rivals, Altman and Anthropic's Dario Amodei, who were next to each other, could not bring themselves to do so.