

A Precarious Normative Balance or the “Third Way”?

Sociotechnical Imaginaries in India’s AI Governance

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Abstract

India’s AI Governance Guidelines (AIGG) promise a balanced approach, offering an Indian “third way” (ITW) to transcend the perceived extremes of the US model of non-intervention and EU and China’s approach to precautionary prescriptions in national AI Governance frameworks. However, a critical reading of the document and the discourse on the ITW begs the question of whether this is an alternate normative framework or a patchwork policy paradigm. Drawing from the framework of sociotechnical imaginaries for critical discourse analysis, this paper argues that the imaginaries within AIGG reveal the proposed ITW is not an alternative policy paradigm. Identifying the interlocking imaginaries underpinning AIGG, we argue that these mutually reinforce each other to shape the normative elements of the governance framework and tip the scales towards innovation. While its motivating rationale represents a distinct vision of welfare, development and sovereignty, its governance structure centers around technocratic arrangements and deferred regulation. We conclude that the ITW discourse is not a genuine alternative due to the discontinuity between its motivating rationale and governance structure. It fails to outline the normative scaffolding or regulatory affordance that behaves a coherent framework that aspires to provide a ITW.

Introduction

In November 2025, India released its AI Governance Guidelines (AIGG). The AI summit event that followed in February hailed India as offering an ‘unique’ way of doing AI governance. One of the guiding features of the Indian way, it is argued, was that it neither stifled innovation, nor committed to stringent regulation. It promises a balanced approach, that is often regarded as the ‘Third Way’, grounded in the ethos of responsibility and transcending the perceived extremes of non-intervention and precautionary prescriptions in national AI governance frameworks. The discourse of the third way involves different connotations, but this paper situates it in the context of existing paradigms of market-driven approach endorsed by the United States, rights-based

regulatory approach specified by the European Union, and the state-controlled regulation practised by China.

It is said to provide a translatable framework to the global majority world to work out contextual solutions against being reduced to being importers of regulatory frameworks. The third way assumes significance as countries of the global south try to figure out their own AI strategies to present themselves as an investment worthy market (UN 2025) against threats of missing the technological bus (Vishno 2026). These countries seek to figure out contextual responses grounded in cultural values and to seek to balance it against competitiveness in the global technological market (Hongladarom and Bandasak 2023). Hence the third way not only reimagines India’s technological destiny, but tries to build and present a new framework rooted in the concerns of developing countries.

The AIGG is stated to articulate the contours of the third way (Mohanty 2025). However, teasing out the socio-technical imaginaries that underpin and shape the governance framework expose normative logics and cultural rationales at play that legitimise the pro-innovation stance as working for and requiring the trusting cooperation of individuals and the society. Furthermore, the operational mechanisms and institutional architecture are constructed to prioritise innovation, while explicitly outlining the rationale to forgo prescriptive measures. Hence, the main research question this article attempts to answer is: is the AIGG offering an alternative to the existing dominant imaginations of governance frameworks as a third way between non-interventionist innovation and prescriptive precaution?

This paper argues that examining the sociotechnical imaginaries within India’s AIGG, reveal that the proposed “third way” does not provide a genuine paradigmatic policy alternative. While its motivating rationale represents a distinct vision of public benefit, socio-economic development and

sovereignty, its governance structure centres around technocratic arrangements and deferred regulation. Hence, this only partly articulated third way, tilts towards a pro-innovation, non-interventionist approach. To make this argument, the paper employs the method of critical discourse analysis and scaffolding off the concept of sociotechnical imaginaries coined by Sheila Jasanoff and Sang Hun Kim (2015). Our analysis will proceed in three parts. First, we will identify four sociotechnical imaginaries underpinning and shaping AIGG, viz. Strategic Sovereignty, Technoscientific Development, Democratic Technocracy, and Technopaternalism. Second, we shall argue that these imaginaries mutually reinforce each other to significantly shape the normative elements of the governance framework and tip the scales towards innovation. Finally, we conclude by arguing that the third way discourse is not a genuine alternative due to the discontinuity between its motivating rationale and governance structure. It fails to outline the normative scaffolding or regulatory affordance that behoves a coherent framework that aspires to provide a “third way.”

India’s Third Way

The discourse around India’s “Third Way” (ITW) is at best expansive and at worst ambiguous. Observed to follow India’s recent approach to digital policy aspiring to go beyond US-China binary (Sinha 2026; Basu 2025), this alternative has been extended to digital sovereignty (Unnikrishnan 2025) and data governance (Matthan 2023). As these debates incorporated notions like democratic values, public participation, sovereignty, openness, Global South empowerment, and social upliftment, the discourse on AI governance follows a similar trajectory. The narrative of this “unique” Indian way gained momentum during the India hosted AI Impact Summit 2026 when individuals like Jakob Mökander of the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change (Jett and Perlo, 2026) and Mark Surman of the Mozilla Foundation (Moorthy and P, 2026) attested to India’s potential in charting the third way beyond US and China. Interestingly, while some commentaries have remained faithful to the US-China binary (AINow 2026; Pant 2026; Kak and Kapoor 2026), others have included the EU into the equation (Mohan 2026; Kalkar 2026; Bansal 2026).

The expansive narratives on ITW reflect the various aspirations and anxieties of India and its relationship to AI. The emphasis on the third way emerges as generalised anxiety of being left behind in the race to AI development. Indigenous AI models and use cases, substituting imports were demonstrated as proof of the emerging technological prowess. Constantly referring to the success of DPI, these narratives emphasise the potential of India’s technological capabilities and the possibility to democratise AI for use by everyone (Chaudhary 2026). The third way is also conceived to

demonstrate a ‘regulated openness’ that combines ‘regulation with credible safeguards’ (ibid.). It is also argued that this model provides a genuine developmental pathway that is compatible with ‘strategic interests’ and ‘institutional capacities’ of a given country. Additionally, the “third way” is anticipated to give a ‘voice to the global south,’ as stated by Abhishek Singh, the CEO of IndiaAI (Aryan 2026). To avoid the possibility of India ‘becoming an unregulated testing ground’ that can absorb ‘harms without shaping global standards,’ the ‘third way’ is pitched as a normative guiding force to navigate uncertainties of AI governance policy (Kalkar 2026). This unique alternative also aspires to conceive a framework that moves beyond the norms imported from the global north.

Discursively, we find that the “third way” has three connotations: governance, geopolitics and AI development/deployment. In terms of governance, the ITW represents effortless innovation through an agile, scalable, transparent, and trust-based regulatory ecosystem shouldered by technological measures, unlike the US market-driven approach or the EU and China’s preemptive regulatory posture. Even though regulations like the DPDP Act exist, there are no prescriptive regulations stifling innovation. For the geopolitical aspect, committing to multilateralism (Xavier 2026), India aims to move beyond the US-China binary. Balancing relationships and maintaining non-alignment, it partners with the Quad and emerging Technology Working Group, which includes the US but also maintains its relations with China through its BRICS membership (Basu 2026). To aid this multilateralism, the ITW presents technologies respectful of sovereignty and repudiating existing tendencies of global dominance by powerful countries, offering cooperation and partnership. The ITW dimension of AI development proposes the values of openness, affordability, interoperability, accessibility, and scalability; and AI is conceived as a public good in terms of deployment. These aspects are materialised in the form of DPI. The DPI ecosystem is also grounded in an anti-monopolistic narrative (Vipra 2024) where the public and private sectors build solutions for societal problems. This is different from the proprietary, profit-driven nature of BigTech solutions from the US and the centralised, state-controlled tech exports from China. In terms of the EU, although they promote the similar values of AI development/deployment, the ITW hopes to address the needs of Global South countries. Hence, we categorise this as a preliminary taxonomy of ITW, where the categories can overlap.

With the AIGG articulated as a textual exemplar for the ITW (Mohanty 2025), critically examining the document

can help us understand the second dimension¹ of this distinct alternative India promises. In an attempt to ground this discourse on paper, Amlan Mohanty, one of the committee members that formulated the AIGG explains the document to be a third way to AI governance. He writes that the guidelines reflect “a third way – marked by distinctive choices and features.” Contextualising national AI frameworks in terms of their governance strategies, he points out that while EU and China fall on one end of the spectrum in terms of their prescriptive and precautionary approach and US lies on the other end with its non-interventionist policies, India aims to strike a balance. In this paper, we shall rely on Mohanty’s interpretation of the guidelines reflecting the “third way,” that often seems to “slip away” (Sinha 2026).

As per Mohanty’s framing, the AI governance approaches could be placed on a spectrum. One extreme would represent the non-interventionist approach of the US AI governance ecosystem, which gives primacy to innovation acceleration across investments and agendas while uncertainty remains in the enforcement of AI regulations. The US AI governance ecosystem is market-driven where the government is actively rejecting regulations emerging from different states to promote an ‘Innovation First’ policy, for achieving global dominance. On the other extreme is the EU with its comprehensive AI regulatory ecosystem where different transparency and accountability requirements of ‘trustworthy AI’, like risk classification, evaluations, reporting, penalties, licensing etc., are established for effective regional implementation. These requirements, along with other regulations like GDPR, DSA, and CRA, creates an ecosystem where every aspect of AI development is being monitored and regulated. China’s approach, a mix of mechanisms aimed at transparency and accountability, promoting innovation through State-led investments and geopolitical dominance can also be included on this end because of the emerging stringent regulations. Even though enforcement remains uneven in areas like deepfake labelling, the government is moving swiftly to approve dedicated AI governance mechanisms and penalties for security and data protection violations.

India’s AI governance approach, as stated in the AIGG, is to balance the goals of encouraging innovation and adoption with mitigating risks to society, which is supposed to offer a unique dynamic, thereby invoking the narrative of a third way. In what follows we read the ITW as an instance of a sociotechnical imaginary. An imaginary, we will demonstrate, enables us to capture the difference between aspirations and material realisability of India’s AI policy.

¹ Due to practical constraints, this paper limits its inquiry to the second dimension. Further research on ITW could explore DPI as

Dimensions	India’s Third Way (ITW)
AI Development/Deployment	Open, affordable, accessible, scalable, public goods + anti-monopolistic
Governance	Agile, trust-based + techno-legal measures
Geopolitics	Respecting sovereignty, cooperation and partnership, replicability and interoperability of tech, global public goods

Table 1:Dimensions of ITW

Theoretical Framework

Sociotechnical imaginaries (SI), as conceptualised by Jasanoff and Kim (2015) are “collectively imagined forms of social life and social order reflected in the design and fulfillment of nation-specific scientific and/or technological projects” (p. 120). These imaginaries bridge social and technical elements, constructing collective narratives about technology’s contingency and role in shaping society. Due to their temporal dimension (Richter et al, 2023), they can describe and prescribe technological futures to realise or avoid. Fundamentally political, as sites of plurality and contestation, different actors conjure varying imaginaries (Cave and Dihal 2023). However, states occupy privileged positions with their capacity to combine discursive framing with material intervention. Through “active exercises of state power, such as the selection of development priorities, the allocation of funds, the investment in material infrastructures” (Jasanoff 2015, p. 123), state actors can have or acquire the (legitimate) means to map out future societal pathways while forming institutions surrounding novel technologies. An important site to locate such imaginaries are the policies, strategies and guidelines issued by the government. And with countries all around the world prescribing policies, white papers, and strategies on AI, this framework becomes crucial in thinking about the implications of the documents.

We resort to this framework while engaging in critical discourse analysis. Sociotechnical imaginaries can serve as an epistemic tool to help detect the normative orientations of the documents and policies. This orientation makes an

a materialisation of the first dimension and Middle Power cooperation alongside Global South partnerships as aspirations of the third dimension

imaginary superior to any critical policy analysis. A substantive policy analysis of the AIGG would evaluate its objectives, mechanisms, and provisions to check for consistency and identify gaps. And while this can result in important observations, it is limited when considering it within the discourse of the third way. Although a policy analysis can reveal inconsistencies or insufficiencies in guidelines, it can still accept the framing of a “balanced approach.” It does not, necessarily, interrogate the operation of the framing about whether “balance” is a neutral aspiration or a rhetorical construction that naturalises a particular arrangement (Paltiel 2023) and distribution of power between those mentioned in the guidelines. Additionally, policy analysis is an evaluation of the present capability of policy to achieve outcomes in the process completely sidestepping any temporal analysis of the past or the future. Policy analysis is agnostic to concerns of future imaginaries or past continuities or disruptions. Sociotechnical imaginaries, on the other hand, help us go beyond the aspirational framework and incorporate historical texture alongside forward-looking possibilities. Governance models, when looked through the lens of sociotechnical imaginaries, become political choices about the authority to shape public processes or value prioritisation in deploying resources.

Existing scholarship uses different methods to explore socio-technical imaginaries of AI in the US, EU and China, the models of governance to which ITW is contrasted. Analysis of national AI strategies reveals both striking uniformity in narrative construction and significant divergence in substantive imaginaries. For instance, Chinese state imaginaries emphasize comprehensive social ordering through “intelligentisation” while American state imaginaries framed AI as a vehicle for “empowering the American worker” and maintaining global dominance (Bareis and Katzenbach, 2021). On the other hand, European imaginaries, particularly France and Germany, foreground ethical frameworks and human-centric approaches. Another study examines stakeholder perceptions on AI through the lens of socio-technical imaginaries. This revealed that actors from the US, China and Germany share a dominant imaginary around the AI race, though the specificities of this imaginary differ based on their global positioning (Richter et al. 2023). Wang et al. (2023), conducted a cross-national media analysis to track how imaginaries vary across cultural contexts to find India and China focus on economic benefits presented by AI. These divergences in socio-technical imaginaries reflect distinct political economies, regulatory traditions, and cultural values and can reveal the technological futures being charted out.

India’s Governance Guidelines (2025)

In India’s AIGG, AI is introduced as a general-purpose technology and characterised as “dual-use,” brimming with potential yet harbouring risks. And to manage these aspects of the technology, the guidelines contain four parts: principles, recommendations, action plan and practical guidelines. The

outcomes pursued are inclusive development, global competitiveness, and risk assessment. Hence, this document offers the current snapshot of imaginaries being conjured by the Indian state through, for and by technologies like AI.

Strategic Sovereignty

Positioning “digital sovereignty” as essential to autonomy, the framework (AIGG 2025) endorses allotting resources for improving domestic AI capacity (AIGG 2025:09). This involves investing in infrastructure, whether that be sourcing computational resources up to 38000+ GPUs or onboarding 1500 datasets or developing sovereign foundation models (AIGG 2025:14). This imaginary constructs the nation as one that controls its own technological destiny, subscribing to the geopolitical competitive urgency around AI technologies, while offering “balanced” (AIGG 2025:04) alternatives and examples to other Global South nations.

The guidelines flag resource concentration in the hands of a global few players as “critical”, legitimising the heavy investment on infrastructural aspects of AI like GPUs (AIGG 2025). Such imaginings of participating in the (perpetual) AI race is further amplified by the possibility of contributing to the global good (AIGG 2025:1), as the document (AIGG 2025) ambitiously frames its balanced approach as a model for the Global South itself (AIGG 2025:23). With long term goals to achieve “international credibility in AI governance leadership” (39), the guideline explicitly mentions and orients itself towards achieving “global competitiveness” (AIGG 2025: 5-13), with the drafting committee also ensuring this as the guiding principle of the document (AIGG 2025).

This sociotechnical imaginary also emerges with the cultural indigenisation of the principles to be titled as “sutras,” which refer to aphoristic styles of writing in ancient and medieval Buddhist, Jain and Hindu texts (Winternitz 2009). Repackaging principles originating in the Global North in Sanskrit terminology invokes a distinctive cultural approach, rooted in civilisational wisdom and local epistemes. This strengthens the imaginary of a postcolonial technological aspirational imaginary (Siddiqi 2015) of cultural distinctiveness that conjures up sovereignty.

Technoscientific Development

Another imaginary at play in the AIGG (2025) is that of technology being the vehicle of development. In the list of 7 principles, the most decisive principle is the third one that claims “Innovation over restraint.” The framing that India must “leverage AI for economic growth, inclusive development, resilience and global competitiveness” (AIGG 2025: 09) constructs technological development as response to objective necessities rather than politically contestable direction. This imaginary hinges on the commonly-shared intuitions about how technology and modernity influence each other and bring about development on a global and local scale. (Brey 2002)

In the guidelines, AI is labelled as a “force multiplier,” and a solution for complex problems in healthcare access, education quality, and agricultural productivity (AIGG 2025:1) that will leap-frog the country to the status of the developed. This is evident in sections that enlist a few guidelines or acknowledge risks yet discourage compliance heavy requirements and endorse voluntary measures (AIGG 2025: 42-43). AI is seen as a crucial pathway that will contribute to economic growth, social development, ushering in the common good and eventually lead to “Viksit Bharat [Developed India] by 2047,” (Bareis and Katzenbach 2021). Hence, bolstering innovation with minimal regulations and light accountable mechanisms becomes an imperative for a “developed” future of the country.

In the AIGG, imaginaries to foreground technological successes of the past are also evident. The document traces India’s innovative legacy to a relatively recent technology, viz. Digital Public Infrastructure (DPI) where the India Stack laid down its foundations in 2009 with the introduction of Aadhar, its digital identity system (Sánchez-Cacicedo 2024). The guideline hails its “globally replicable model” (AIGG 2025: 2) that placed India on the map for developing indigenous technologies, providing evidence that the listed aspirations can be achieved (Beckert 2016). This natural progression of innovation to be adopted by societies is an optimistic reimagining of the modernist linear narrative of technoscientific progress. In this timeline, AI is a technology that ruptures, yet can “fundamentally redefine human productivity, scientific discovery and global prosperity” (AIGG 2025:2). And as the world stands “at the cusp of the [...] revolution”, it becomes a narrative that further cements its necessity.

Democratic Technocracy²

AI is also imagined as the “engine to power the next generation of public goods” (AIGG 2025:1). Geared towards the rhetoric of innovation driven “socioeconomic development” (04) that is “inclusive” (AIGG 2025:1, 4, 13, 17), the AIGG (2025) stresses the fact that AI can be harnessed for the benefit of societies at scale, leading to the democratisation of AI’s benefits (AIGG 2025:2). Nonetheless, the challenges of implementing such technologies are acknowledged through a risk taxonomy, ranging from malicious use and bias to loss of control (AIGG 2025:25). It is this portrayal of AI as a dual-technology that engenders uncertainty, and requires leadership as well as certain forms of regulatory

measures. Hence, it authorises the formation of AI committees and institutes, policy frameworks that are balanced yet prioritise innovation, voluntary self-regulation as well as risk mitigation mechanisms like techno-legal design choices (AIGG 2025).

The AIGG (2025) constructs a political imaginary where expertise is the determining factor in governance, despite the rhetorical commitment to the common good, democratisation of benefits and human-centric values. Hence, it reimagines the sociotechnical space to be following norms of democratic technocracy, that privileges technical knowledge and treats citizens as passive recipients. This is tempered by provisions on human-centric design, human oversight and human-in-the-loop and principles like “Trust as foundational” plus “People First” also appear democratically oriented.

While citizens are invited to monitor through transparency reports, file grievances about harms, provide feedback on published drafts and during public consultation periods, the guideline has no mechanisms to ensure this feedback shapes outcomes rather than legitimate predetermined directions. Hence, the implicit imaginary is that of AI governance being a technical problem, depoliticising the complex factors at play. Despite narratives of the common good, the imaginaries recommend governance mechanisms, ranging from voluntary compliance to risk frameworks, to operate through largely technocratic processes minimising opportunities for democratic contestation of values, purposes and the necessity of and for the technology itself.

However, the proposed institutional architecture prioritises technical expertise over democratic participation. With the committee narrowing their focus on expertise in “research and development in frontier technologies,” “Engineering, machine learning, data science,” “law and public policy with focus on emerging technologies,” and “national security, including law enforcement experts,” (AIGG 2025: 35) the authority rests with the experts, sidelining democratic mandates, lived experience, or representation of affected communities. For instance, the AI Governance Group comprises government agencies, regulators and advisory bodies with no provision for civil society representation, community organisation participation, or mechanism enabling broader public deliberation.

Technopaternalism³

Reconstructing roles of and relations between technology, citizen, state, and market, the document conjures the position of (soft) technopaternalism between the state and the

² By this, we mean a governance structure that imagines technological progress through technocratic measures and mechanisms while endorsing the democratic rights of citizens in a limited capacity. Where democratising AI could mean participating in development and deployment or amplifying its access or benefits,

such an imaginary only appeals to one aspect – which in this is amplifying the benefits of AI.

³ While the concept of paternalism has been used variedly in terms of the state interfering with the freedom of citizens or nudges for

citizen. That is a posture of deciding for the citizens, positing AI to contribute to the common good without providing them avenues for contestation or an active role in development or deployment. And in terms of governance, it re-frames regulation in terms of technical design without political deliberation. Tempered through rights language, mechanisms for grievance reporting or consent management, and participatory rhetoric, this form is not coercive or authoritarian. A softer kind of technopaternalism, it is still embedded in systems with rules, infrastructure, standards and architecture primarily designed by states to enable industry and deliver services to citizens. Reimagining relations between state and citizen, the guidelines portray citizens as individuals that need to be upskilled.

Citizens are also simultaneously imagined as data principals and data donors. With data sharing portrayed as a voluntary act that requires explicit consent instead of being mandatory, citizens are positioned as rights-bearing individuals. With references to the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, permission-based data sharing through DEPA, and data portability rights, citizens are framed as actors capable of AI training or data sharing. However, with the document's repeated emphasis on AI development and national innovation through "high-quality and representative datasets" by increasing "data availability, sharing, and usability for AI development" (AIGG 2025:16 - 17) to enable metrics like fairness or even model performance implies the importance of data. Despite being reimagined as data sources to be aggregated, this is reframed through the imaginary of contributing to inclusive development, sovereign models or AI for all. Citizens thus become collaborative entities, the source and the site of data, eventually turning them into data subjects whose contribution makes models possible.

The guidelines imagine the state to be as the central architect of the citizen's technological future, coordinating AI adoption and the mechanisms around it through institutions and databases. Interestingly, the document also delegates responsibility for safety and innovation to private actors through voluntary mechanisms rather than public regulation. The relationship that emerges between the two is that of state-enabled market governance, where the market innovates but the state steers, collaborating on various aspects including that of technologies. With public-private partnerships, the state would provide infrastructure, incentives, standards and coordination and the industry would provide innovation, deployment, technical expertise and scalability.

individuals to make the best rational choice (Dworkin 2020), in this paper by technopaternalism, we want to sketch the relationship between the state and citizen to suggest that the state is deeming development and deployment of AI as the best choice for the citizens as individuals. And with this rationale, citizens are expected to be recipients. Even if citizens have the choice to opt-out, proposed integrations of AI by the state will cause the individual to lose out on benefits – hence, nudging towards AI adoption. Additionally,

However, this can lead to key tensions between the role of the state and industry where while the state is supposed to protect citizens, coordinate governance and ensure accountability. The market aims to innovate rapidly, self-regulate and maximise competitiveness.

And the document attempts to reconcile these differences between the responsibility of the state and industry interests through public certifications or "techno-legal" framework. By integrating legal instruments and regulatory oversight, such as transparency or privacy, directly into technology design, these technolegal architectures aim to automate enforcement and compliance. This conjures a form of cybernetic governance (Baeris and Katzenbach 2021), where complex political aspects of governance are reduced to problems of efficiency, ultimately outsourcing it to the technology in question itself. Techno-legal measures add to the imaginary of technocratic governance by giving the power to design regulatory devices to the makers of the technology. It signals techno-solutionism with imagining AI risks and harms as technical or design concerns, while rejecting democratic deliberation from the policy formulation process.

Interlocking Imaginaries of the ITW

The four imaginaries that emerge from the guidelines interlock to reproduce a framework. For instance, imaginaries of strategic sovereignty recast capacity building as investing in protecting India's autonomy sidelining critiques of industry subsidies. This is further legitimised by the technoscientific development imaginary, to construct it as a precondition for inclusive development. And to this end, speaking the language of human-centric norms and inclusive governance, imaginaries of democratic technocracy provide institutional architecture that coordinates the private-public partnership alignment for development, while structurally excluding affected communities from meaningful participation. In a similar vein, technopaternalistic imaginaries construct the citizen as a beneficiary and (data) contributor to the impacts promised by technoscientific development imaginaries. Yet they are neither thought of as political agents who can challenge the framework or as critical epistemic agents whose feedback and understanding can shape the nature of technology. The techno-legal nature of the document constrains citizen participation to the forms of engagement dictated by the guidelines. Furthermore, techno-legal frameworks also

when endorsing untested techno-legal measures, the state takes technical solutions as the best governance measure where the citizen is expected to adhere to it, like safety-belts (a noted mechanism for paternalism), which can be neglect certain populations as highlighted by feminist design principles where only the seat belt is considered adequate rather than rethinking the design of the entire car (Criado-Perez 2019)

encode protective measures, where governance becomes a technical affair, its uniqueness strengthening the strategic sovereignty imaginaries, its technical means strengthening the democratic technocracy and its automated ethical futurism, aspiring towards the Technoscientific Development imaginary. Forming a loop, the interlocking imaginaries of the guidelines that are said to represent the ITW do not necessarily take a balanced approach but rather represent a tilted vision.

Continued reliance on the narrow and underspecified framing of such policies (Mohanty 2025), hint that the policy imaginaries of the ITW do not completely collapse into the US model of AI governance centred on market driven-approach. In the US, the revocation of Executive Order (EO) 14110 represented a hands-off approach, changing security and reporting measures and diminishing bias, fairness and DEI considerations. On a federal level, regulations like One Big Beautiful Act (OBBA) and EO 14365 challenges state-level AI regulations focusing on deep fakes, algorithmic bias, transparency etc. Even though limited AI safety regulations like the TAKE IT DOWN ACT are being adopted, the majority of the governance approach is focusing on infrastructure investment, capital flows, and leveraging AI value chain to restrict adversary progress on advanced AI. This points to a market-driven governance ecosystem where the government is actively rejecting regulations emerging from different states to promote an 'Innovation First' policy, for achieving global dominance. This reflects the imaginaries within the US approach which reflects a zero-sum logic of global dominance (Richter et al 2025) where regulation is positioned as "hindrance to American supremacy" (Oldenburg and Papsyshev 2025). This would require minimal friction to innovation, aligning with both corporate interests and nationalist imaginaries. AI is posed to be a key technology for the future with limited anxieties about public safety as seen by the minimal regulations. Rather the form of anxiety that exists is the pace of adversaries' progress towards advanced AI. However, the policy imaginaries that emerge from AIGG, are oriented towards socio-economic development and Global South partnerships, also differ from the policy imaginaries of the EU and China. Furthermore, AIGG's infrastructural coordination and institutional architectures require the state to intervene on some level. Moreover, the vocabulary of rights is crucial in the document, rather aligning with EU policy imaginary. Hence, the motivating rationale of the interlocking imaginaries of the ITW as anchored in the AIGG are distinct from the imaginaries emerging from the policy ecosystem of the US, EU or China.

Nonetheless, a tilt can be observed when considering the governance structure that accompanies the policy imaginary of the ITW embedded AIGG. In particular, the governance structure is partial towards private interests with mecha-

nisms of voluntary compliance, industry self-regulation, deferred regulation and citizens as a consumer/beneficiary. This is different from the EU, which promotes comprehensive AI regulation prioritizing transparency and accountability requirements like risk classification, evaluations, reporting, licensing etc through the GDPR and the AI Act. Hence, the imaginary that arises is that of anticipatory risk management and rights-based social protection (Bakiner 2023). China also has binding regulations targeting specific AI applications like the Provisions on the Administration of Deep Synthesis Internet Information Services, 2022. This can lead to imaginaries of state-led and state-controlled innovation with robust accountability mechanisms addressing industry players (Richter et. al 2023).

So, AIGG tilts towards non-intervention for accelerating innovation, as its imaginaries are forward looking with the state deferring accountability of industry players. As mentioned above, the motivating rationale of the imaginaries of the AIGG hinges on notions of development as a postcolonial Lower or Middle Income Countries (LMICs) with limited resources to advance the public good and independence from geopolitical arrangements largely determined by historically powerful players. However, the institutional design, enforcement logic and the citizen-state relationship introduce a tilt towards a non-interventionist vision, similar to the US.

And while the imaginaries conjure this aspiration and motivating rationale they reveal the deficit in the structural aspects required to make the ITW an alternative policy paradigm. Strategic sovereignty's civilisation-washing with the sutra repacking and Global South leadership aspiration, can make it appear that India's approach when rooted in local epistemes are distinct from other policies, although it may produce a governance logic that is structurally similar. Aspirations about compute sovereignty alongside indigenous foundation models, follows the BigTech logic of large models with billions of parameters despite the local, contextual needs the ITW emphasises. Additionally, imaginaries of technoscientific development with aspirations of rapid capacity building can cater to market interests as a temporary necessity due to the nascent ecosystem where robust governance will follow in time. This can be seen in India's courting relationship with BigTech, who also offer sovereignty-as-a-service (Kak and Kapoor 2026). Hence, these imaginaries reveal the discontinuity between the motivating rationale and governance structure that simulate the notion of the third way. Imaginaries of democratic technocracy reveal that institutions are built to coordinate rather than constrain and privilege industry-adjacent expertise, making the governance architecture prioritize the innovation imperative over restraints that could safeguard citizen welfare. And the citizens who could motivate such actions are imagined as beneficiaries rather than political agents to be governed by technology itself through the technolegal mechanisms.

Hence, there is a pro-innovation tilt catering to market-interests, specifically the governance structures laid out in the AIGG.

Many other instances emerging from the policy imaginary substantiate this claim. The risk taxonomy that orients itself to India-specific harms demonstrates the third way to not necessarily tilt towards extremes of pro-innovation that forgoes any risk management. However, due to the developmental imaginary, risk is reframed as a design problem to be managed through technical measures like techno-legal frameworks rather than being constrained through mandatory obligation. AIGG fails to adequately respond to well-known risks that have been documented within the EU framework which require stringent regulations. The failure to account for known risks appears to be strategic rather than an oversight. The allusion to the adequacy of existing legal protections without sufficient demonstrations of their efficacy risks laying a red carpet for innovation at the cost of rights. Given that both formal and AI literacy is low, democratic technocracy results in governance bodies with citizen feedback loops that merely signal seriousness and inclusion but their lack of enforcement authority can preserve industry freedom. Technical design handles governance objectives through technopaternalism, where the political is converted to the technical. Such depoliticisation is accompanied by regulatory deferral to construct the order of capacity first, regulation later.

Conclusion

The AIGG provides a fractured alternative in the form of the ITW to the dominant governance frameworks. Through an imaginary analysis, we gauge a discontinuity between its motivating rationale and its governance structure. While the former is concerned with development, sovereignty, people-centricity and public benefit, the latter organises the governance structure around technocratic advisory boards, industry self-regulation and postponed accountability mechanisms. The imaginaries within the AIGG reveal that at this juncture, the ITW becomes discursive aspiration more than a scalable policy paradigm. Hence, the AIGG does not constitute a *genuine* third way despite having the motivating rationale. It falls short in terms of institutional and infrastructural back up.

Policy paradigms as imaginaries must exhibit both aspirational and normative elements. As aspirations they pave the pathway to a future, as a norm lay down the boundary and the conditions under which they can be evaluated for their effectiveness. Imaginaries are tested for their collective imagined socialities combined with their material allocation and performance. In the absence of proper pathways that set conditions of realisability of those same imaginaries then turn into vacuous rhetorical promises that shine in their immanence but diminish with time. Which trajectory India's

tryst with the 'third way' would take remains to be seen. But the distinctiveness of the "third way" *prima facie* seems to lie in the approaches it negates than those it affirms. That is, India's AI Governance is not like the US, as the document invokes public good, inclusivity, and the interests of the Global South. The guidelines go beyond EU's frameworks that are compliance heavy and unsuitable for India's developmental aspirations. Unlike China, it preserves market openness and also stands firm in its citizen rights. However, to formulate an alternative third way, the document framework needs to also provide an account of how values and trade-offs are to be ordered and resolved. Hence, the third way and its embedding in the AIGG, fails to offer a coherent normative scaffolding or regulatory affordance on an institutional or structural level. It also needs to provide concrete policy pathways and structures that will realise the imaginary. And for the ITW to be a genuine alternative to AI governance, it needs to have institutions and structures in place to achieve its very own aspirational ideal.

A limitation of this paper is the demonstrated lack of detailed engagement with US, China, and EU models of AI governance as well as its imaginaries, referring to it only in comparison to the AIGG and only through textual interpretation. We limit our analysis for three reasons: First, we have structured our paper to emphasise how the ITW is imagined and grounded in the AIGG. While analysing these policy-imaginaries would result in a rich theoretical exploration, a deep dive was beyond the scope of our paper as they have only been assessed according to the framing within the Indian discourse and not how those policies actually stand. Second, we only limit our investigation to the AIGG as it is the only Indian AI Governance document that has been explicitly connected to the ITW (Mohanty 2025) rather than paying attention to the entire digital governance ecosystem. Future research could examine the complete AI governance ecosystem of India (including laws like the DPDP, IT Acts with Deepfake amendments) if they are interpreted as part of the third way. Such future analyses could reveal some additional imaginaries. Additionally, this is only a textual interpretation of AIGG and could be enriched through empirical insights into the actual decision making through interviews with policy makers or governmental officials. But considering the nascent nature of India's AI governance ecosystem (AIGG was released in November 2025) practices and implementation based on this document are still evolving leaving us with less data to form a nuanced understanding of implementation.

Acknowledgments

This work was supported by the Infosys Centre for Artificial Intelligence, IIITD and the Indian Council of Social Scientific Research for the project titled *Political Theory of AI*:

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