Cyberspace is a new frontier, largely untamed and uncontrolled.

It's governed by a patchwork of weak and competing rules, which are still being developed and contested.

One major issue is how free and open the internet should be, how freely data should flow across borders, and who should have access to it.

The United States and most of its friends and allies support the idea of a global and open internet—that data should move between and within countries and that everyone should be free to express themselves and associate with others online.

In 2011, the U.S. announced its international strategy for cyberspace, which explicitly advocates for free speech online and commits the U.S. to supporting activists, advocates, and journalists abroad, who often face censorship and intimidation.

In contrast, many countries argue that their borders apply in cyberspace and that each country has the right to govern where data resides and how the internet is used within its borders.

China is the strongest advocate for this concept of "cyber sovereignty."

While its government acknowledges the economic opportunities the internet provides, it believes that if too many people and organizations act and speak freely online, they can pose a political threat.

So China built its Great Firewall in the early 2000s, using legislation and technology that forbids content critical of the government and blocks and filters certain websites and information.

China also insists that foreign companies that do business in China must physically store some types of data on servers in the country.

While the government claims local data storage is important for national security, foreign critics say the rules make it easier for Chinese intelligence to conduct surveillance on those companies and on individuals.

Nevertheless, China promotes its vision of cyber sovereignty abroad, inviting world tech leaders to the annual World Internet Conference in Wuzhen and discussing the idea at the United Nations.

Russia is on board with China's view of the issue, and the two countries have signed a pact agreeing to support the principle of cyber sovereignty.

But critics contend that the widespread application of cyber sovereignty could lead to cyberspace breaking up into what they call the "splinternet," a scenario in which countries apply their own rules to the internet, where users' access to content is limited in different ways in different places.

This risks transforming a global tool into a hyperlocal, one isolating people from foreign ideas.

Now, though, as countries decide which approach to take, they affect how everyone—from companies to political movements to individuals—uses the internet all around the world.