

US walks out of World Conference on Information Technology

Global split over telecom treaty

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28 December 2012

The 2012 World Conference on Information Technology (WCIT-12) in Dubai collapsed on Friday, December 14 after the United States delegation walked out and refused to sign the new International Telecommunications Union (ITU) treaty. Western allies including the UK, France, Germany, Australia and Canada joined the US.

In all, 55 countries refused to sign the agreement, while another 89 nations endorsed it. The breakdown of talks at the WCIT-12 summit signals intensified national conflicts in an increasingly interdependent world.

The Dubai conference was called by the ITU, a special agency of the United Nations for information and communications technologies (ICTs), to adopt new rules of cooperation between countries known as International Telecommunications Regulations (ITRs). The 12-day conference drew 1,950 delegates from 160 nations and was in preparation for two decades.

The last set of ITRs was adopted at a 1988 conference in Melbourne, Australia when the Internet was in its infancy, the first fiber optic cable had just been laid across the Atlantic Ocean and first generation mobile phones were used by a tiny fraction of the population in the most advanced countries.

The ITU has a membership of 193 countries and over 700 private corporations and academic institutions. Originally founded as the International Telegraph Union in 1865, the ITU adopted its present name in 1932 and was affiliated with the United Nations in 1947, with headquarters in Geneva. Historically, the ITU has been responsible for the global distribution of the radio spectrum, cooperation in assigning satellite orbits, the improvement of telecommunication infrastructure in the developing world and establishing and maintaining worldwide technical standards.

The new treaty—scheduled to take effect January 2015—was doomed early on when intractable differences emerged over draft treaty language. Of particular interest was a clause submitted by Russia—and supported by China, Saudi Arabia, Algeria and Sudan—for equal rights among nations to coordinate the “internet numbering, naming, addressing and identification resources.” A related dispute arose over a proposal for a policy on bulk email distribution.

Vowing to veto any discussion of the Internet or its content,

US Ambassador and Obama administration representative Terry Kramer denounced the Russian submission: “Fundamentally, the conference—to us—should not be dealing with the Internet sector.” He added, “Keeping to the pure focus of this conference, advancing broadband in a telecom arena, is the right approach.”

The US delegates insisted that the scope of the treaty should be restricted to the functions of traditional telecom service providers, i.e., the companies and organizations responsible for the “pipes” of global communications. With the assistance of allies, the US blocked any discussion of the convergence of the previous generation of technology with the Internet as the new and dominant communications medium.

Furthermore, US opposition was couched in hypocritical language about the need to defend a free and open flow of information. US delegates argued that any suggestion of putting the Internet’s administrative functions under regulation or establishing guidelines for content distribution would be a threat to democracy and open the door to censorship.

In the end, the US prevented the Internet from being included in the 10-page treaty. Under threat of failure, the Russian delegation agreed to withdraw its proposal and have it moved to a mildly worded addendum resolution. Treaty editors inserted language into the first paragraph specifically excluding “content-related aspects of telecommunications.” They also inserted a reference in the preamble to the “human rights obligations” of the signatories. These changes, however, were not enough to save the treaty, as Kramer’s team denounced the final text and led a US walkout of the conference anyway.

An analysis of the conference published in *The Economist* science and technology blog—writing approvingly of US policy—provided a glimpse of the reasons for US obstruction of treaty negotiations: “[N]o 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.”

The origin of administrative control of the Internet by the US is complex but important. Academic institutions under US government commission created the original structure of the

Internet in the 1960s. Throughout the 1970s and 80s, standards and protocols—such as TCP/IP—were established for research purposes, most of it funded by the US military. During this time, domain name allocation was contracted by the US Department of Defense with the Network Information Center (later known as InterNIC) run by the Stanford Research Institute (SRI). After commercial Internet service providers went online—the first dial-up access came in 1989—the US government passed a law that allowed non-research and education use of the network.

In 1991, as the World Wide Web was being created, the Defense Information Systems Agency awarded the functions previously managed by InterNIC to a private company called Government Systems, Inc., who in turn subcontracted to Network Solutions, Inc. Since 1998, the administration of the Internet—funded by the US Department of Commerce—has been managed by the private non-profit Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) located in Marina del Rey, California.

Through its operation of a sub-group called the Internet Assigned Numbers Authority (IANA), ICANN manages the unique domain name and Internet Protocol (IP) addresses that are critical to the functioning of the Internet. ICANN manages the top-level domain name spaces (also known as the DNS root zone) that include the operation of root name servers. This means that a US government contracted “gatekeeper” approves every address lookup on the Internet and has the authority to render them inoperable at any moment. Through ICANN, the US wields power over the Internet and can disable or manipulate entire country’s top-level domains. *The Economist* blogger’s reference to “eavesdropping” is also significant. US pronouncements about democratic rights are exposed as a fraud by ongoing illegal surveillance by the Obama administration’s National Security Agency. Behind the backs of the American people, the NSA is intercepting, deciphering, analyzing and storing the world’s communications running over international, foreign and US networks.

According to a report in *Wired* magazine, covert NSA intelligence operations are scanning everyone’s online activity and storing “all forms of communication, including the complete contents of private emails, cell phone calls, and Google searches, as well as all sorts of personal data trails—parking receipts, travel itineraries, bookstore purchases, and other digital ‘pocket litter.’”

There is no doubt that the Russian and Chinese governments, among others, are engaged in similar surveillance programs for international espionage and domestic spying purposes. They are also exploring methods for establishing a “shut-off switch” to terminate Internet communications in the event of social or political crisis. As long as the US maintains the upper hand in Internet naming and numbering, all other governments have a distinct disadvantage in planning and executing such programs. It is from this standpoint that US rivals are advocating a more

equitable Internet administration system.

There are legitimate concerns among engineers, technology specialists, Internet pioneers and users about the future of online freedom and “neutrality.” However, it is dangerously false to place confidence in the US government or any of its contracted agencies as protectors of privacy and democratic rights. Meanwhile, Internet corporations such as Google and telecom providers such as Verizon and AT&T—having generated enormous profits from the information technologies business over the past two decades—have demonstrated that they have no qualms about collaborating with illegal US government spying on foreigners and US citizens.

By any objective measure, the WCIT-12 represented a breakdown of international cooperation and a failure of global telecom integration in the age of the Internet. Far from paving the way to a more equitable distribution of technology, the collapse of the talks—in which the developed nations emerged in a standoff against developing nations—can only bring a further divergence between rich and poor countries.

Understood in historical context, the collapse of the conference means the end of the post-World War II era of UN-mediated communications cooperation. Even at the height of the cold war, differences were resolved and the ITU successfully brokered multilateral telecommunications treaties.

In contrast to the role of the US in the twentieth century, there has been a rapid shift in the center of gravity in telecom development and adoption from west to east over the past 25 years. The ITU reports, for example, that China is the first country in the world to achieve 1 billion cellular subscribers, is now the world’s largest smartphone market and accounts for 25 percent of the world’s Internet users.

The rapid adoption of cellular and broadband devices by billions of people throughout the world demonstrates society’s need for a democratic and centrally organized international authority to coordinate the communication of all with each. Meanwhile, it shows that the sharing of telecom advancements equally among every region and country as a lever against poverty, hunger, illiteracy and backwardness throughout the globe is within reach. These are problems that can only be solved by the international working class and the world socialist revolution.



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