



# Clingendael

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## AI Diplomacy for a Multipolar World: Europe's Moment to Act on Trusted AI Partnerships

As the United States and China expand their influence through proprietary and state-linked AI systems, the European Union and its member states lag behind in their efforts to shape global artificial intelligence (AI) development and governance. European efforts are needed to ensure that human-centred approaches, practical AI applications, and ethical governance frameworks are available and internationally adopted. Trusted AI partnerships are a vehicle towards this goal. Depending on the needs of partner countries, such partnerships can combine six core elements: talent exchanges and capacity building; governance, regulation and auditing; sectoral AI applications; AI infrastructure; critical resources; and human-centred approaches. As a tech-advanced EU member state and long-time proponent of ethical AI, the Netherlands is well placed to help build trusted AI partnerships as part of its AI diplomacy agenda. This involves a dual track of leveraging its relations with tech-advanced countries to align on a shared vision, while offering developing partner countries its sectoral expertise and governance approaches. EU member states can accomplish this through mapping their technological niches, identifying strategic partner countries and needs, and continuously updating competitive tech offerings. Europe and the Netherlands should act swiftly to strengthen Europe's competitiveness, reduce undesirable dependencies, and create a more diversified and secure AI ecosystem.

### The need for trusted AI partnerships

As countries worldwide seek to benefit from rapid AI development, they face risks from over-reliance on American and Chinese AI technologies, which embody the values and political priorities of their creators. The United States (US) and China dominate the frontier of AI models, compute, and applications. Both seek global influence through technology and standards-setting. Their governance models – US market-driven pro-innovation and China's state-directed, ideological approach – are embedded in their technologies.

For example, China's generative AI regulations emphasise that content generated using generative AI must reflect 'socialist core values' championed by the governing Chinese Communist Party (CCP), including strengthening of the CCP ideology to combat Western influence. China is increasingly able to 'collect and leverage unprecedented types and volumes of data, from public and private sources and from within and beyond its borders, for social

control'.<sup>1</sup> This data is then used for surveillance and influence operations.

Foundation AI models<sup>2</sup> developed by American companies today pose a similar challenge for countries that use them. An executive order accompanying the US's July 2025 AI Action Plan seeks to ensure that the US federal government will not use 'woke' AI, including AI that generates output embracing the values of diversity, equity, and inclusion.<sup>3</sup> Other examples of 'woke' values that the US government is militating against includes opposing the usage of AI for surveillance and fully autonomous weapon systems.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the US is currently pursuing a widened agenda of bilateral diplomacy in which aid in the health domain is tied to long-term data-sharing agreements, sidelining multilateral institutions and undermining international cooperation in favour of pursuing its own national interests.<sup>5</sup>

To uphold the ability to shape their own future, countries worldwide must ensure that they can create, shape, or govern the generative AI models and applications used in their jurisdictions. This is especially important for closing the innovation, adaptation, and adoption gaps that exist between high and middle- and low-income countries – where approaches like open-source technologies are critical for democratising worldwide AI participation.<sup>6</sup>

As AI becomes central to social systems, economic competitiveness, and military power, alternatives to monopolistic proprietary models are critical. Trusted AI partnerships help partner countries avoid undesirable dependencies while promoting a fair, transparent, and interoperable digital ecosystem. This accelerates the need for Europe to offer credible alternatives rooted in democratic values and openness. As a proponent of ethical and open AI systems, and a tech-advanced country holding specific niches of AI applications, the Netherlands is well positioned to contribute to this. This Clingendael policy brief sets out a strategic vision, a framework for action, and discusses the specific sectoral strengths and countries with which the Netherlands can build international AI partnerships.

## The debate in the Netherlands

Aside from the benefits that trusted AI partnerships can offer to partner countries, they also contribute to the growth objectives of the Netherlands' industrial and technological strategies. The *Nationaal AI Delta Plan of November 2025* and the *EY-Parthenon Project Export.AI* report emphasise international partnerships as a pathway to expanding the Dutch tech offer and strengthening the industrial and competitive position of the Netherlands.<sup>7</sup> The *AI Delta Plan* also specifically highlights partnerships outside Europe as a key component of coherent AI foreign policy.<sup>8</sup> Other prominent reports published in 2025, notably Invest NL's *AI Deep Dive* and the Wennink report on the future economic capacity of the Netherlands, also recognise the importance of international demand in maintaining Dutch tech-industry niches.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, technological talent capture constitutes a major agenda item in the *AI Delta Plan* and the Wennink report, with

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1 Valentin Weber, [Data-Centric Authoritarianism: How China's Development of Frontier Technologies Could Globalize Repression](#), National Endowment for Democracy, 11 February 2025.

2 "Foundation models" refers to large AI models trained on vast datasets that can be used for a wide variety of purposes, such as text generation, image analysis, medical diagnostics or autonomous vehicles vision, among others.

3 White House, [Winning the Race: America's AI Action Plan](#), 23 July 2025.

4 POLITICO, [Trump orders all federal agencies to cease using Anthropic](#), 27 February 2026.

5 Kerry Cullinan, [US Ties Global Health Aid To Data Sharing. On Pathogens – Undermining WHO Talks](#), Health Policy Watch, 7 November 2025.

6 World Bank, [Digital Progress and Trends Report: Strengthening AI Foundations](#), 2025.

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7 [Nationaal AI Deltaplan | AI Plan NL](#), November 2025. See also EY-Parthenon, [Project Export.AI](#), p. 79, 22 January 2026.

8 [Nationaal AI Deltaplan | AI Plan NL](#).

9 [AI Deep Dive: Strategic Investing in the Age of Intelligence](#), Invest NL, November 2025; and [Rapport Wennink: De route naar toekomstige welvaart](#), December 2025.

both dedicating discrete recommendations for attracting foreign talent through international programmes and schemes.<sup>10</sup> On the political front, trusted AI partnerships support the Dutch Parliament's 2024 demand for an international strategy to mitigate disruptive autonomous systems, and reflects ex-Dutch Foreign Minister David van Weel's November 2025 call to integrate systematically an AI component into Dutch trade missions abroad.<sup>11</sup>

The importance of AI and digitalisation for Dutch competitiveness, as well as for security, is also acknowledged in the 2026-2030 Dutch coalition agreement.<sup>12</sup> This prioritisation is further showcased by the newly created ministerial post for digital economy and sovereignty at the Minister of Economic Affairs and Climate Policy – to which new Prime Minister Rob Jetten appointed Willemijn Aerdts in February 2026. If the government is successful in investing in and utilising AI infrastructure, creating a National Agency for Disruptive Innovation and a National Investment Agency, and positioning the Netherlands as a frontrunner in innovation and critical technologies, this will form the necessary foundation for trusted AI partnerships worldwide.

These reports all recognise, to varying degrees, the importance of the international and foreign policy dimensions for AI, yet they overwhelmingly focus on domestic policy and go into only limited detail when it comes to the specificities of how this international aspect would look. The added value of this policy brief stems from its direct engagement with the international aspect. It constitutes an exploratory piece for beginning to think concretely about what a new element of Dutch AI diplomacy and foreign policy could be.

## Strategic vision

The availability and use of a variety of AI models, including open-source models, is a way to mitigate long-term concerns about the dominance of Chinese and American companies. By investing in trusted AI partnerships with countries in the Global South, the European Union (EU) and its member states can promote a diversity of suppliers as well as approaches, encompassing both open and proprietary models. As it promotes European AI companies' competitiveness, the EU can also build rapport for its AI governance and auditing approaches, including the AI Act – the world's first comprehensive AI law.

The Netherlands, together with other EU states, should engage technologically ambitious countries in the Indo-Pacific, Africa, and Latin America – such as Indonesia, South Africa, India, and Brazil – through AI diplomacy. Like many in Europe, these countries also seek greater digital autonomy and could benefit from human-centred solutions, ethical governance practices, and sector-specific applications in key areas like cybersecurity, agriculture, or healthcare. This means providing them with access to adaptable AI tools and frameworks they can fine-tune according to their own needs and priorities, rather than relying on closed systems controlled by foreign entities – systems that often function as black boxes, offering little transparency and local control. Such engagement would support Europe's long-term interests in security, competitiveness, and values-based digital development. If the Netherlands positions itself as an early mover in EU AI diplomacy, it can serve as a proof of concept and contribute to the creation of a 'modular' EU tech-offer platform to which different member states contribute with their unique capabilities and niches.

## Framework for action

Trusted AI partnerships can build on the 'tech business offer' put forward in the EU's International Digital Strategy of June 2025. EU tech business offers are designed to support partner countries in their deployment of

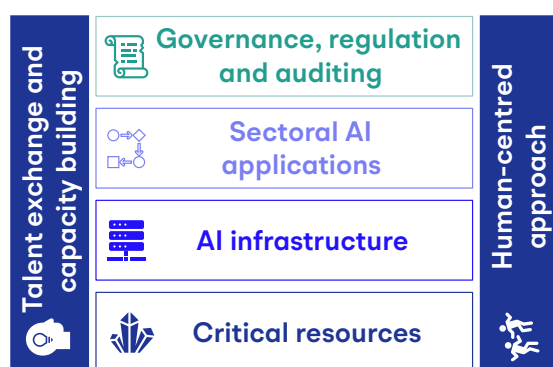
10 [Nationaal AI Deltaplan | AI Plan NL](#); and [Rapport Wennink: De route naar toekomstige welvaart](#).

11 Algemeen Nederlands Persbureau (ANP), '[Kabinet komt met internationale AI-lobby voor regelgeving](#)', BNR Nieuwsradio, 13 November 2025.

12 Kabinetsformatie, [Aan de slag - Coalitieakkoord 2026-2030](#) (in Dutch), 30 January 2026.

secure and trusted digital solutions by linking them to EU tech companies and innovators. They encompass various layers of the digital technology stack,<sup>13</sup> ranging from hard infrastructure to applications. Building on the technology stack format of the EU tech business offers,<sup>14</sup> Figure 1 shows the six key components of trusted AI partnerships.

**Figure 1. Key components of trusted AI partnerships**



Source: authors' compilation.

The six components of **trusted AI partnerships** may be characterised as follows:



**Talent exchange and capacity building:**

supporting AI training, capacity building, research, talent exchange, and visa pathways for students, engineers, and entrepreneurs.



**Governance, regulation, and auditing:**

sharing European expertise in ethical, trustworthy AI regulation, algorithm registries, human rights assessments, and international multilateral forums (for example, UNESCO and the Council of Europe).



**Sectoral AI applications:** tailoring AI solutions for cybersecurity, agriculture, healthcare, and education.



**AI infrastructure:** helping countries secure compute, data centres, chips, cloud resources, and energy through investment and trade facilitation for Dutch and European companies that invest in these sectors in strategic partner countries.



**Critical resources:** investing in bilateral and multilateral critical resource partnerships to diversify European supply chains for raw materials crucial to digital and AI technologies, while helping partner countries to modernise their extraction industries.



**Human-centred approach:** spreading human-centred principles like transparency, user autonomy, and interoperability to tailor to local needs and prevent vendor lock-ins that make customers dependent on a single vendor's product or service. Promoting open-source and European AI-models such as Mistral's LeChat and supporting a diverse global ecosystem of open platforms.

The EU's Global Gateway – Europe's flagship strategy for global infrastructure and digital investment – offers a ready-made platform to build trusted AI partnerships worldwide. If used more strategically, it can effectively help coordinating and delivering on each of these six components.<sup>15</sup> While the digital pillar of Global Gateway has so far not incorporated AI propositions – focusing instead on hard infrastructure – individual EU member states can build on this, offering opportunities in sought-after (sectoral) applications that contribute to an open, inclusive, and secure digital domain.<sup>16</sup> A better understanding of the combined AI strengths of EU member states should inform a comprehensive 'menu' of what they together can offer to developing partner countries.

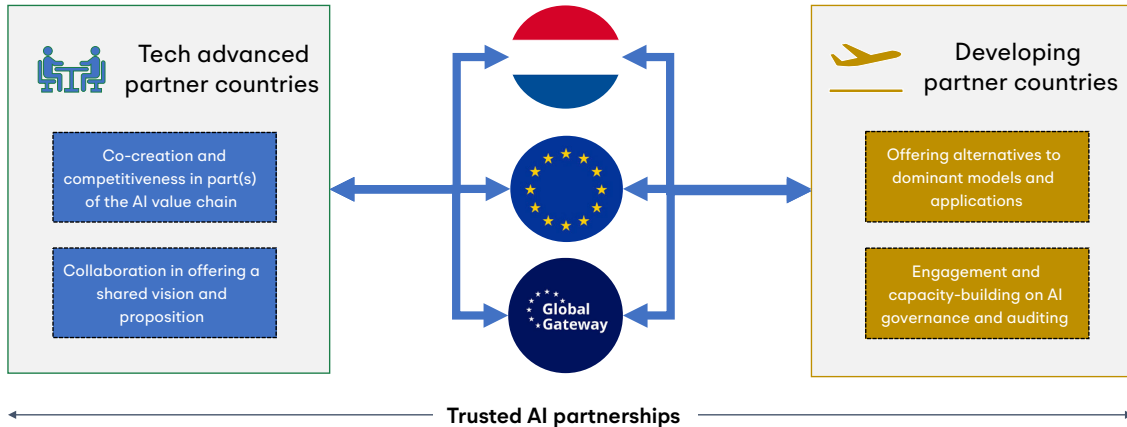
13 For details about the digital technology stack – and Europe's position in the various layers – see, for example, [EuroStack, Building Europe's Digital Future](#); and Maaik Okano-Heijmans and Alexandre Gomes, [Strengthening Digital Economic Security](#), Clingendael Report, October 2023, esp. pp. 39–41.

14 For more on the EU tech business offer, see [European Commission](#) (2025).

15 European Commission, [Global Gateway](#).

16 Alexandre Gomes and Maaik Okano-Heijmans, [Connecting the Dots: Linking Digital Global Gateway to Local Sector-Specific Needs](#), Clingendael Policy Brief, April 2025.

**Figure 2. Two pillars of trusted AI partnerships**

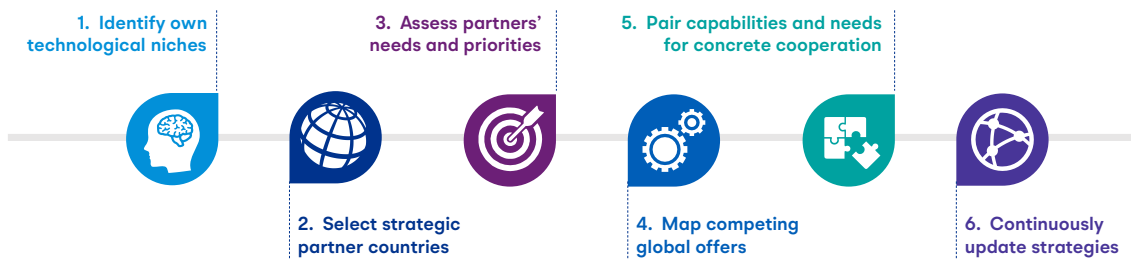


Source: authors' compilation.

Through Global Gateway’s digital pillar and the EU’s 2025 international digital strategy, the EU and its member states can engage both tech-advanced and developing partner countries (see Figure 2). In the relationship with tech-advanced partner countries, this means: (1) investing in (co-)creation and competitiveness – and, ideally, indispensability – in part(s) of the AI value chain; and (2) collaborating in offering a shared vision and proposition for AI governance at both the national and international levels. In the relationship with tech-developing partner countries, this means ensuring the availability of alternatives to the dominant, proprietary foundational AI models and applications; and engagement and capacity-building on AI governance and auditing. Acting on these intentions, the EU and its member states, with tech-advanced partners, need to develop concrete propositions of what they have to offer.

To get from strategy to action with trusted AI partnerships, the EU and its member states should take six steps, drawing on their experience with digital Global Gateway at large.<sup>17</sup> As summarized in Figure 3, identifying Dutch and European technological niches is a prerequisite for developing a cohesive European offering preceding the selection of strategic partner countries and understanding their needs and priorities. These steps inform the core objective: pairing Dutch and EU capabilities with the needs of partner countries. This matchmaking process must also consider the competing offerings of other countries, especially China and the United States. Finally, trusted AI partnerships – like digital Global Gateway offerings more broadly – must be continuously monitored and refined in an iterative process of continuous improvement.

**Figure 3. Six steps towards trusted AI partnerships**



Source: authors' compilation.

<sup>17</sup> This roadmap draws on the Digital Global Gateway miniseries of five Clingendael Policy Briefs published by the Clingendael Institute between [October 2023](#) and [April 2025](#). These policy briefs go into detail on what steps 1-3 and 5 may look like in practice.

To build a globally competitive and synergistic EU tech ecosystem, Europe must first recognize the strategic importance of specialization among member states. Rather than duplicating efforts across all sectors, a coordinated approach – where each country leverages its comparative strengths – best bolsters the bloc’s technological leadership and collective profile. If every EU member state seeks to push their own industry and solutions for every sectoral application, it is unlikely that the aggregate quality of the European offering will be globally competitive compared to the US and China. It is only through an ecosystem-based approach – that efficiently allocates resources in parallel development – that Europe’s offering can take real, competitive shape. In the early stages of mapping the offering, the Netherlands can pursue a joint agenda with countries like Denmark for AI governance; Germany for AI-driven robotics and optimisation in manufacturing and automotive; Estonia for AI-enhanced digital public services and healthcare; Sweden for innovation; and with EU-wide initiatives such as the France-led European Digital Infrastructure Consortium (EDIC) for open-source solutions for digital infrastructure.

Taken together, these steps would ensure that trusted AI partnerships focus on synergising the strengths of tech-advanced countries with the needs of partner countries in the Global South. The EU would do well to put forward this





framework for action with tech-advanced as well as developing partner countries, and key stakeholders at home – including AI businesses and financiers – to offer much-needed clarity regarding the long-term benefits of trusted AI partnerships and how to realise them.

### Exploring the Dutch offering and partners

This section outlines Dutch technological niches or ‘tech business offers’ in AI and provides a cursory overview of potential partner countries. In doing so, this policy brief provides an initial exploration of what steps 1, 2, 3, and 5 in getting from strategy to action with trusted AI partnerships would look like for the Netherlands. Findings are summarised in Figure 4.

The Netherlands holds a prominent position when it comes to governance and norm-setting, which can serve as a ‘soft’ offer component of trusted AI partnerships. Examples of Dutch initiatives in this domain include the Impact Assessment for Human Rights and Algorithms (IAMA), a toolbox for ethically responsible innovation; the Algorithm Register, which publishes information about algorithms used by Dutch government organisations; the UNESCO–EC–Netherlands AI Supervision Collaboration, which designs institutional frameworks for the ethical governance of AI; and the Global Commission on Responsible Artificial Intelligence in the

Figure 4. Overview of Dutch solutions for key components of trusted AI partnerships

| Key components of Trusted AI Partnerships |  | Examples of practical offerings from the Netherlands                                     |
|---|--|--|
| Talent exchange and capacity building     |  <b>Governance, regulation and auditing</b> | IAMA, the Algorithm Register, the UNESCO-EC-Netherlands AI Supervision, GC REAIM         |
|   |  <b>Sectoral AI applications</b>            | Cybersecurity, agritech, healthtech, edtech, fintech, high-tech manufacturing, logistics |
|   |  <b>AI infrastructure</b>                   | Data centres, AI compute, networking, cables   |
|   |  <b>Critical resources</b>                  | NL/EU tech transfer and investments  |
|   | Human-centred approach   |  |

Source: authors’ compilation.

Military Domain (GC REAIM), which promotes the responsible development, deployment, and use of AI in military contexts. Additionally, the Netherlands is a strong proponent of open-source software development, including for AI, as demonstrated by its government-wide ‘open-unless’ (in Dutch: open-tenzij) approach. This approach underscores the country’s commitment to transparency and accountability in technology, though its implementation has been slow.

When it comes to sectoral AI applications, the Dutch niches that stand out are agricultural technology (agritech), logistics, high-tech manufacturing, (sustainable) energy, life science/healthtech (healthcare technology), data centres, cybersecurity, fintech (financial technology), and edtech (educational technology).<sup>18</sup> While not all of these sectors have seen widespread AI adoption, Dutch firms stand at the forefront of these industries, positioning them to become early practical adopters, and subsequently exporters, of AI solutions within these sectors.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, certain sectors such as research, high-tech manufacturing, and data centres constitute key components in the AI value chain where the Dutch offering is already strong and ready to be capitalised upon.<sup>20</sup>

According to a report commissioned by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Dutch AI stack is defined by a clear focus on software infrastructure through companies such as Nebius, Rappit, and Hadrian, and horizontal solutions through companies such as ORTEC, CM.com, and Cradle.<sup>21</sup> This indicates that the Dutch AI stack contains both the backbone for building and scaling AI systems and expertise in applying AI solutions across industries. Trusted AI partnerships can also play a role in diversifying the supply of critical resources that

are needed to build and power the pan-European AI ecosystem. The EU recognized this several years ago when it started to invest in strategic partnerships with countries like the DRC and Zambia, linking the EU’s objective of securing critical raw materials with African countries’ ambitions of resource-based industrialisation.<sup>22</sup> To bring these goals to fruition, the Netherlands can contribute with financial investments and business involvement to support the EU in signing processing agreements with partner countries.<sup>23</sup> Best practices may be drawn from Japan’s technological support to Malaysia in rare-earth minerals announced in March 2026, marking the first use of Japanese official development assistance for rare-earth mining and refining.<sup>24</sup>

To sustain these ambitions, talent development is critical. To this end, the Netherlands can leverage its strong position in research and its participation in pan-European initiatives like ELLIS (European Laboratory for Learning and Intelligent Systems), with units in Delft and Amsterdam already driving research and talent development in AI.<sup>25</sup> Meanwhile, France has taken a proactive approach to AI capacity development in Africa, with initiatives such as the African Centres of Excellence Program, which the Netherlands could emulate or partner with.<sup>26</sup> The Netherlands can also benefit from the diplomatic academy at the Clingendael Institute, which has trusted partnerships for skills and capacity building from all around the globe.

When it comes to potential partner countries, the Netherlands can offer concrete solutions that meet demands in Indonesia, South Africa, India, Kenya, Egypt, and Vietnam – key partner

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18 Invest NL, [AI Deep Dive](#); Gomes and Okano-Heijmans, [Connecting the Dots](#); and EY-Parthenon, [Project Export. AI](#), p. 22.

19 Invest NL, [AI Deep Dive](#), pp. 6–7.

20 Invest NL, [The Netherlands Must Focus on Next-Gen and Energy-Efficient AI](#), 27 November 2025.

21 EY-Parthenon, [Project Export. AI](#), p. 21.

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22 European Commission, [Critical Raw Materials Act](#).

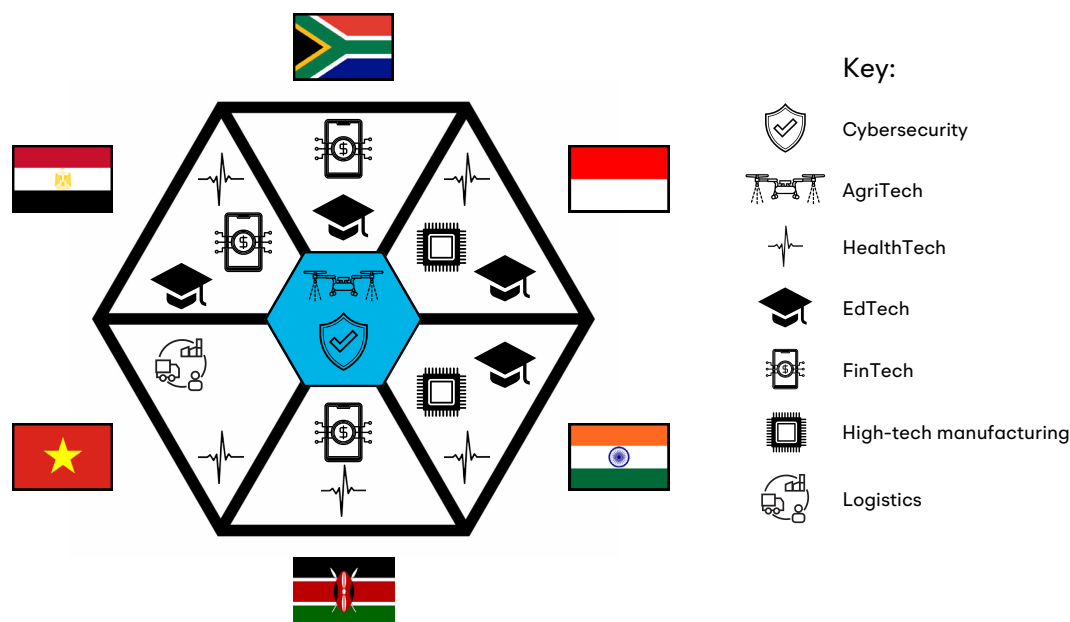
23 ECDPM, [The EU’s partnerships around critical raw materials: Do its ambitions match reality?](#), 26 March 2025.

24 Nikkei Asia, [Japan to provide rare-earth refining tech to Malaysia](#), 9 March 2026.

25 TU Delft, [ELLIS Delft Unit verlengd met vijf jaar!](#) (in Dutch), 17 February 2026.

26 Agence Française de Développement (AFD), [Ten years on, the higher education and research program making a lasting impact in Africa](#), 6 May 2025.

Figure 5. Overview of Dutch tech-partner country needs (not exhaustive)



Source: authors' compilation, adapted from [Connecting the Dots: Linking Digital Global Gateway to Local Sector-Specific Needs](#); and [Digital Global Gateway Matchmaking: A Dutch Case Study to Bolster European Action](#), Clingendael. Countries (from the top going clockwise); South Africa, Indonesia, India, Kenya, Vietnam, and Egypt.

countries in the Dutch 'trade and aid' agenda.<sup>27</sup> Figure 5 illustrates the findings of earlier Clingendael research that performed steps 1-5 of digital Global Gateway matchmaking for this particular group of countries, which can inspire trusted AI partnerships too.<sup>28</sup> Across all six of these potential partners, two components in the Dutch tech offering stand out by virtue of being in unanimous demand: agritech and cybersecurity.<sup>29</sup> These are followed closely by healthtech and edtech.<sup>30</sup> It is important to note that this is far from an exhaustive list of countries for Dutch trusted AI partnerships; further research can help to identify other potential

candidates for cooperation through Global Gateway, whether on an EU or bilateral level.<sup>31</sup>

As for tech-developed partners, countries such as Japan, India, Singapore, South Korea, Canada, and Brazil stand out. The EU and its member states would do well to consider coordinated AI and tech partnerships with these countries, which stand out as strong candidates because of their status as regional tech frontrunners, their mutual interest in joint technological governance, and existing cooperation with the EU through its international digital strategy.

## Call to action

US and Chinese AI models are rapidly spreading, and as are their embedded normative biases; whether it be socialist messaging promoting ideals of the Chinese communist party or Trumpian and authoritarian 'anti-woke'

27 For the Dutch 'trade and aid' agenda that is steering the Netherlands' action, see: Government of the Netherlands, [Policy document for foreign trade and development cooperation: do what we do best](#), October 2022.

28 Gomes and Okano-Heijmans, [Connecting the Dots](#); and Okano-Heijmans and Gomes, [Digital Global Gateway Matchmaking: A Dutch Case Study to Bolster European Action](#), Clingendael Policy Brief, 30 November 2023.

29 Gomes and Okano-Heijmans, [Connecting the Dots](#), pp. 6-8; and Okano-Heijmans and Gomes, [Digital Global Gateway Matchmaking](#), pp. 4-6.

30 Ibid.

31 European Commission, [Joint Communication on an International Digital Strategy for the EU](#), p. 3.

sentiments. Europe must act now to safeguard global AI diversity, openness, and democratic governance. The Netherlands, as a tech-advanced EU Member State and a long-time proponent of ethical AI, is well placed to help build trusted AI partnerships as part of its AI diplomacy agenda. This supports Dutch industrial and technological strategies and reflects parliamentary and ministerial directives. By offering sectoral applications, human-centred solutions, ethical AI frameworks, and talent collaboration, the EU can in due time provide meaningful alternatives to US and Chinese AI dominance – enabling more countries to make autonomous strategic choices.

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Clingendael – the Netherlands Institute of International Relations – is a leading think tank and academy on international affairs. Through our analyses, training and public debate we aim to inspire and equip governments, businesses, and civil society in order to contribute to a secure, sustainable and just world.

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