

Internet freedom showdown looming, diplomat says

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Two Chinese men use their laptop computers at a cafe in Beijing on November 2, 2012. A number of countries are aggressively trying to control the Internet, a top US diplomat cautioned Thursday, insisting Washington would give no ground when it comes to curbing freedoms on the Web.

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"Many Middle Eastern countries, Russia, China and others are I believe going to take an increasingly aggressive stand to try to control the Internet," Alec Ross, the State Department's outgoing senior [adviser](#) on innovation, told reporters in Geneva.

The fact that many countries appeared to be investing heavily, "billions and billions of dollars", in next generation surveillance technologies was an indication of their intentions to clamp down on Internet freedoms, Ross warned.

The clamp-down was coming amid a clear shift of power all over the world from governments and other state [hierarchies](#) towards citizens and networks of citizens, he said during his last press conference before leaving his government position.

"Anyone who understands power understands that power is not given up willingly," he said, adding that the rush to buy [surveillance technology](#) appeared to have really taken off after the Iranian election protests in 2009.

The fear of losing power and control was evident at a UN gathering in Dubai last December, where 89 countries signed a controversial new [global treaty](#) on telecom regulations, Ross said, insisting that the US refusal to sign that treaty should be seen as its "refusal to give any ground on Internet freedom."

He said he was "pessimistic" about the chances of the world's nations quickly reaching agreement on what they want the Web to look like going forward.

"When there is a completely different vision for how the Internet should be governed, I believe it will be very difficult to get to the point of resolution on some of these issues," Ross said.

The question, he said, is whether the Web is "going to be one [global network](#), or is it going to be a patchwork of national interests?"

The US, he said, was aggressively working to help ensure [Internet freedom](#) around the world and had invested over \$100 million over the past four years in projects aimed at helping counter crack-down measures from oppressive regimes.

Among the projects was one aimed at creating new networks when regimes try to strangle bandwidth and shut down mobile networks when they face protests, as was the case in Iran and in Egypt during the Arab Spring uprisings.

Another project, Ross said, was aimed at helping activists who fear arrest and torture to quickly wipe clean their mobile phones and transfer their data and contact lists to secure locations in a cloud to ensure their phones aren't used to track other activists.

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