

Corporate, global leaders peer into a future expected to be reshaped by AI, for better or worse

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Open AI CEO Sam Altman participates in a discussion entitled "Charting the Path Forward: The Future of Artificial Intelligence" during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) CEO Summit, Thursday, Nov. 16, 2023, in San Francisco. Credit: AP Photo/Eric Risberg

President Joe Biden and other global leaders have spent the past few days melding minds with Silicon Valley titans in San Francisco, their discussions frequently focusing on artificial intelligence, a technology expected to reshape the world, for better or worse.

For all the collective brainpower on hand for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation conference, there were no concrete answers to a pivotal question: Will AI turn be the springboard that catapults humanity to new heights, or the dystopian nightmare that culminates in its demise?

"The world is at an inflection point—this is not a hyperbole," Biden said Thursday at a CEO summit held in conjunction with APEC. "The decisions we make today are going to shape the direction of the world for decades to come."

Not surprisingly, most of the technology CEOs who appeared at the summit were generally upbeat about AI's potential to unleash breakthroughs that will make workers more productive and eventually improve standards of living.

None were more bullish than Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella, whose [software company](#) has invested more than \$10 billion in OpenAI, the startup behind the AI chatbot ChatGPT.

Like many of his peers, Nadella says he believes AI will turn out to be as transformative as the advent of personal computers were during the 1980s, the internet's rise during the 1990s and the introduction of smartphones during the 2000s.



Sundar Pichai, CEO of Google and Alphabet, takes part in a discussion entitled "Innovation That Empowers" during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) CEO Summit Thursday, Nov. 16, 2023, in San Francisco. Credit: AP Photo/Eric Risberg

"We finally have a way to interact with computing using natural language. That is, we finally have a technology that understands us, not the other way around," Nadella said at the CEO summit. "As our interactions with technology become more and more natural, computers will increasingly be able to see and interpret our intent and make sense of the world around us."

Google CEO Sundar Pichai, whose internet company is increasingly infusing its influential search engine with AI, is similarly optimistic

about humanity's ability to control the technology in ways that will make the world a better place.

"I think we have to work hard to harness it," Pichai said. "But that is true of every other technological advance we've had before. It was true for the industrial revolution. I think we can learn from those things."

The enthusiasm exuded by Nadella and Pichai has been mirrored by investors who have been betting AI will pay off for Microsoft and Google. The accelerating advances in AI are the main reasons why the [stock prices](#) of both Microsoft and Google's corporate parent, Alphabet Inc., have both soared by more than 50% so far this year. Those gains have combined to produce an additional \$1.6 trillion in shareholder wealth.



From left; moderator Laurene Powell-Jobs, Founder and Chair, Emerson Collective, Chris Cox, CPO, Meta, James Manyika, SVP of Research, Technology & Society, Google, and Sam Altman, CEO, OpenAI, participate in a discussion entitled "Charting the Path Forward: The Future of Artificial Intelligence" during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) CEO Summit Thursday, Nov. 16, 2023, in San Francisco. Credit: AP Photo/Eric Risberg

But the perspective from outside the [tech industry](#) is more circumspect.

"Everyone has learned to spell AI, they don't really know what quite to do about it," said former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who is now director of the Hoover Institution at Stanford University. "They have enormous benefit written all over them. They also have a lot of cautionary tales about how technology can be misused."

Robert Moritz, global chairman of the consulting firm PricewaterhouseCoopers, said there are legitimate concerns about the "Doomsday discussions" centered on the effects of AI, potentially about the likelihood of supplanting the need for people to perform a wide range of jobs.

Companies have found ways to train people who lose their jobs in past waves of technological upheaval, Moritz said, and that will have to happen again or "we will have a mismatch, which will bring more unrest, which we cannot afford to have."



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San Francisco, APEC's host city, is counting on the multibillion-dollar investments in AI and the expansion of payrolls among startups such as OpenAI and Anthropic to revive the fortunes of a city that's still struggling to adjust to a pandemic-driven shift that has led to more people working from home.

"We are in the spring of yet another innovative boom," San Francisco Mayor London Breed said, while boasting that eight of the biggest AI-centric companies are based in the city.



Sundar Pichai, CEO of Google and Alphabet, right, talks to moderator Emily Chang, of Bloomberg, during a discussion entitled "Innovation That Empowers" during the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) CEO Summit Thursday, Nov. 16, 2023, in San Francisco. Credit: AP Photo/Eric Risberg

The existential threat to humanity posed by AI is one of the reasons that led tech mogul Elon Musk to spend some of his estimated fortune of \$240 billion to launch a startup called xAI during the summer. Musk had been scheduled to discuss his hopes and fears surrounding AI during the CEO summit with Salesforce CEO Marc Benioff, but canceled Thursday because of an undisclosed conflict.

OpenAI CEO Sam Altman predicted AI will prove to be "the greatest

leap forward of any of the big technological revolutions we've had so far." But he also acknowledged the need for guardrails to protect humanity from the [existential threat](#) posed by the quantum leaps being taking by computers.

"I really think the world is going to rise to the occasion and everybody wants to do the right thing," Altman said.

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