

IDENTITY CONFIRMED

Gregory Magnasco wonders if the idea of a global digital passport is utopia or imminent reality?

The idea of a universal digital passport, accessible to all citizens worldwide, regularly resurfaces in discussions about international mobility and technological innovation. In a world where borders are both more connected and more closely monitored, such a passport could revolutionise the way we travel, work and even perceive citizenship. But given the technical, legal and cultural challenges involved, is this concept truly feasible?

For a global digital passport to become a reality, significant progress is needed, particularly in data security. Storing and protecting biometric and personal data on a global scale is a daunting challenge, as the risk of cyber attacks and data breaches is ever present. According to a report by Cybersecurity Ventures, the global cost of cyber crime is expected to reach \$10.5-trillion annually by 2025, an alarming figure that highlights the immense risks such a system would face.

India's Aadhaar digital identification system, which holds the biometric data of over a billion citizens, has already suffered major security breaches exposing the personal information of millions. This case underscores the risks associated with a global digital passport relying on a centralised biometric database. Meanwhile, the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) is working to standardise travel documents, proving that the concept of a digital passport is already moving beyond mere theory.

Although still in their early stages, some initiatives are exploring the use of digital identities for border control. Singapore's Changi Airport, for example, is experimenting with blockchain technology to enhance identity security.

A passport is more than just a travel document; it represents a country's authority over its citizens and its control over access to its territory. The idea of a standardised global digital passport therefore raises fundamental questions about national sovereignty. China's centralised surveillance system illustrates the complexities of sovereignty in this context, while the United States remains wary of centralised databases. In Europe, the EU is working on an 'e-ID' that would allow citizens to access various services across multiple countries. However, several member states fear that such a system could undermine their national authority, highlighting broader concerns about a globally shared document.

Data protection laws also vary significantly across regions. The European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) enforces strict privacy rules, whereas other countries have different approaches. Globally, more than 120 countries have implemented data protection laws, each with its own requirements.



This diversity makes the prospect of a harmonised global digital passport even more complex. To make such a system work, regulations would need to be aligned and common standards established – a monumental task that many countries may resist in favour of prioritising national data sovereignty and security. Moreover, digital inequalities remain a major issue, particularly in developing nations where large segments of the population lack stable internet access or adequate digital infrastructure.

Beyond the technical and political considerations, the physical passport holds strong cultural and emotional significance. It is a symbol of belonging, identity and security. For many, carrying a paper passport – stamped with visas and entry seals – is an integral part of the travel experience and a tangible link to one's home country.

In times of instability, the value of this physical security becomes even more apparent. Unlike a digital passport, where biometric data would be stored in the cloud, a traditional passport embeds this information directly into the document itself. This makes it impervious to cyber attacks and inaccessible remotely. A paper passport offers a level of privacy protection that a universal digital passport simply cannot guarantee.

Ultimately, the concept of a global digital passport seems more aligned with a futuristic technological vision than with the practical needs of citizens and governments. The physical passport, with its deep-rooted symbolism, history, and reliability, remains a reassuring and pragmatic choice in a world where stability is far from guaranteed.

That said, a hybrid model – where a digital passport complements rather than replaces physical passports – could be a viable solution. This approach would preserve the security and sovereignty benefits of traditional passports while leveraging the advantages of modern technology ●

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