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Odnos između veštačke inteligencije i nacionalne bezbednosti: geopolitičke dimenzije

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Apstrakt: Razvoj veštačke inteligencije (AI) predstavlja jedan od najznačajnijih fenomena 21. veka, koji duboko menja koncepte moći, suvereniteta i bezbednosti u savremenom međunarodnom sistemu. U dobu sveobuhvatne globalne digitalizacije i rastuće tehnološke povezanosti, države ubrzano prepoznaju AI kao suštinski stratešku resurs za održavanje i očuvanje vitalnih nacionalnih interesa, kao i za efikasno projekciju geopolitičkog uticaja na globalnoj sceni. Rad analizira odnos između AI i nacionalne bezbednosti kroz geopolitičku prizmu, sa posebnim naglaskom na ulogu Sjedinjenih Američkih Država i Kine u oblikovanju novog tehnološkog poretka. Autori ispituju kako AI transformiše koncept bezbednosti, kako se koristi u vojnim, obaveštajnim i sajber strukturama, i koje rizike i etičke izazove donosi. Cilj rada je da argumentuje tezu da konkurencija za tehnološko liderstvo u oblasti AI predstavlja centralnu arenu savremenog međunarodnog nadmetanja. Štaviše, konkurencija između velikih sila nije samo tehnološka trka, već ima implikacije za uspostavljanje novih globalnih standarda, pravila angažovanja i ekonomske dominacije, čime direktno oblikuje budućnost globalnog poretka i arhitekturu međunarodne bezbednosti.

Ključne reči: veštačka inteligencija, nacionalna bezbednost, geopolitika, digitalni suverenitet, globalni poredak.

The Relationship Between Artificial Intelligence and National Security: Geopolitical Dimensions

Abstract: The development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) represents one of the most significant phenomena of the 21st century, profoundly altering the concepts of power, sovereignty, and security in the contemporary international system. In the age of comprehensive global digitalisation and growing technological interconnectedness, states are increasingly recognising AI as an essential strategic resource for maintaining and preserving vital national interests and for effectively projecting geopolitical influence on the global stage. The paper analyses the relationship between AI and national security through a geopolitical lens, with particular emphasis on the role of the United States and China in shaping the new technological order. The authors examine how AI transforms the concept of security, how it is used across military, intelligence, and cyber structures, and the risks and ethical challenges it poses. The work aims to argue that competition for technological leadership in AI constitutes the central arena of contemporary international rivalry. Moreover, the competition between major powers is not merely a technological race; it also has implications for establishing new global standards, rules of engagement, and economic dominance, thereby directly shaping the future of the global order and the architecture of international security.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, national security, geopolitics, digital sovereignty, global order.

1. Introduction

The emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) marks the beginning of a new technological era in which information, data, and algorithms become the most valuable resources of the contemporary age. In the context of national security, AI is no longer merely an instrument of technological progress, but also a means of geopolitical competition. Contemporary states are entering a new form of an arms race, not centred on nuclear warheads but on advanced algorithms, data-processing infrastructure, and predictive analytics capabilities. For this reason, artificial intelligence is increasingly becoming a strategic factor that shapes the balance of power in international

politics. The United States and China lead in the development and deployment of machine-learning-based technologies. At the same time, the European Union seeks to build its own model grounded in ethical and legal principles of digital sovereignty. However, the question that arises is not only who will achieve technological leadership, but also how that superiority will be used—not only within the sphere of national security, but also in the arena of international security (Buchanan, 2020: 16–17).

It is increasingly evident that technology is no longer merely a tool in the service of power, but a source of power in its own right. Control over the development and application of AI is becoming a prerequisite for preserving state stability and decision-making autonomy. For this reason, states are investing more heavily in their own research centres, national AI strategies, and cyber-defence infrastructures. Digital sovereignty refers to a state's capacity to control, govern, and protect its digital resources—data, infrastructure, networks, and technological systems. In the age of artificial intelligence, this concept acquires geopolitical significance equal to that of traditional territorial sovereignty. States that possess the capacity to develop and deploy artificial intelligence not only protect their information systems, but also gain political power over those states that depend on foreign technologies (Bradford, 2022, pp. 12–15).

Such dynamics have triggered an intense "artificial intelligence arms race" among the great powers, particularly between the United States and China, fundamentally redefining global power dynamics. The current trajectory of artificial intelligence is characterised by rapid advancement, emerging trends, and intensified global competition, which are reshaping both technological and geopolitical power dynamics. Understanding these elements is essential for grasping the broader impact of artificial intelligence. As a subset of artificial intelligence, machine learning focuses on enabling programs to adapt and improve when exposed to new information, without explicit reprogramming. Machine learning software can identify new, more efficient decision-making methods by training itself through data analysis. Its primary functions revolve around prediction and pattern recognition within data.

2. Artificial Intelligence as an Instrument of National Power

The development of artificial intelligence in the contemporary era represents one of the most significant civilizational shifts, increasingly reshaping the global balance of power. AI has become an instrument of strategic influence, operating simultaneously as a tool of hard power within military and security capabilities, and as a tool of soft power through cultural, technological, and informational influence over other states and societies. Within the concept of hard power, artificial intelligence is applied across a range of security and defence domains, including autonomous weapons systems, cyber defence, advanced surveillance systems, as well as intelligence algorithms for analysing large volumes of data (big data) to predict terrorist activities or enemy movements (Horowitz, 2018, pp. 5–8). The accelerated development of artificial intelligence (AI) in recent decades has opened a new chapter in geopolitical relations. States no longer compete solely on economic strength and military capabilities, but also on technological advancement, which carries with it soft power—the ability to influence others through attraction, ideas, and standards rather than coercion. It is well known that the concept of soft power was introduced by the political scientist Joseph Nye, defining it as a state's ability to shape the preferences of others by making them "want what it wants," in contrast to hard power, which is based on force and coercion (Kamarck, 2018).

Traditional sources of soft power include culture, political values, and foreign policy—that is, those societal attributes that generate admiration or consent among others (Shahla, 2025). The development of digital technologies has dramatically expanded the reach of soft power, as the internet and social media enable governments to engage global audiences in real time while bypassing traditional media channels (Shahla, 2025). Artificial intelligence represents the latest instrument in this progression—from advanced algorithms embedded in social media platforms to generative models such as contemporary chatbots. Through artificial intelligence, states can automate and personalise their media and cultural influence, shaping the narratives that circulate globally. In this way, power in the field of artificial intelligence has become a strategic resource, which is why competition between the United States and China for AI dominance is frequently emphasised. At the same time, Europe positions itself as a global regulator. Indeed, in 2024, researchers reported that institutions in the United States produced 40 significant AI models—far more than China (15 models) and the entirety of Europe (three models) (Stanford University, 2025, p. 3). This advantage in technological development grants the United States considerable influence; however, other actors are also striving to leverage artificial intelligence to project their cultural, informational, and technological standing.

However, in the digital era, the boundary between different forms of influence has become increasingly blurred. In addition to legitimate and open influence (soft power in its strictest sense), authoritarian regimes also employ covert or manipulative methods of information warfare, which some authors describe as "sharp power." Whereas

soft power is characterised by transparency, legality, and the absence of coercion, sharp power refers to concealed and harmful activities that "pierce or penetrate" the information environments of other countries to undermine institutions and societal trust. Examples of sharp power include coordinated disinformation campaigns, cyber operations aimed at interfering in elections, or algorithmic censorship targeting foreign public opinion—activities such as those documented in Russia's interference in the 2016 U.S. elections and China's covert campaigns within diaspora communities (Fu & Dirks, 2024).

In addition to the above, it is necessary to distinguish clearly between the two forms of influence. First, artificial intelligence can serve both benign diplomatic purposes and malicious, manipulative practices. Soft power in the domain of artificial intelligence entails the transparent use of AI to enhance a country's attractiveness and credibility. In contrast, its misuse—among other things for disinformation or surveillance—can generate resistance and produce counterproductive effects. In considering the use of artificial intelligence, it is evident that soft power has expanded into new dimensions, including cultural, informational, and technological influence. The cultural dimension is reflected in the fact that artificial intelligence enables the creation of new forms of content and communication (e.g., real-time language translation, personalised educational programs, virtual cultural events, and similar applications) that can contribute to the global promotion of a state's culture and values. The informational dimension encompasses artificial intelligence's capacity to shape the flow of information—for example, social media algorithms determine which news and narratives reach the broader public. In this way, algorithmic recommendations (such as those on platforms like YouTube, Facebook, or TikTok) become part of the struggle for "narrative power." States seek to increase the visibility of their perspectives, either through their own media outlets or by exerting influence over other platforms. The technological (normative) dimension of soft power in the context of artificial intelligence refers to the establishment of standards and rules governing AI itself. Those who take the lead in shaping ethical norms, technical standards, and regulatory frameworks related to artificial intelligence acquire a form of "normative power," serving as models to which others adapt. As researchers have observed, strategic influence in the sphere of artificial intelligence largely depends on who succeeds in setting the rules that others voluntarily adopt (Ariyoruk, 2025).

Generally speaking, if a state succeeds in embedding its values (such as transparency, privacy, human rights, and similar principles) into global standards for artificial intelligence, it has effectively transformed this technology into an instrument of soft power. Moreover, it should be emphasised that soft power is not exercised in a vacuum, but rather in competition among different narratives. The digital sphere has become a "battleground" where democratic and authoritarian models compete for dominant influence. For example, as social media platforms have become global channels of diplomacy, governments such as China's have developed their own alternative ecosystems (e.g., WeChat, Weibo) to promote their vision and control narratives, while simultaneously limiting Western influence (SAIS, 2025).

In addition to the above, artificial intelligence significantly enhances a state's capacity to exercise hard power by enabling new tools and methods across military, intelligence, and cyber operations. In the military sphere, AI is used to improve nearly all aspects of warfare. Autonomous combat systems are being developed, ranging from intelligent unmanned aerial vehicles and robotic ground vehicles to AI-enabled "drone swarms" capable of independently locating and engaging targets. Beyond weapons systems, AI enhances command and control through decision-support algorithms, enabling the processing of vast amounts of battlefield data in real time, the recognition of patterns, and the rapid suggestion of optimal tactical decisions that human operators could not achieve. In this way, AI has become a development priority for defence systems in many countries precisely because it allows for the automation of decision-making processes and increases the efficiency of military operations. For example, Israeli forces reportedly employed AI as a support tool to coordinate strikes and analyse intelligence data during operations against Iranian targets in 2025, thereby gaining a technological advantage over the adversary (Koppel & Parkhomchuk, 2025, pp. 2–4). Although the details of such operations remain classified, it is believed that algorithms processed reconnaissance imagery, identified key targets, and thus coordinated strikes, illustrating how AI can enhance a state's strike capability.

In the domain of intelligence operations, artificial intelligence is revolutionising data collection and analysis. Machine learning tools are already being used for intelligence analytics—from the automated recognition of objects in satellite imagery and video footage (for example, Project Maven, launched by the U.S. Department of Defence in 2017 to analyse drone imagery using the TensorFlow AI system) to predictive modelling that can indicate potential threats (Gibbs, 2018).

AI systems can sift through vast datasets (such as intercepted communications or publicly available social media posts) and identify patterns or anomalies that point to security risks—something that would be impossible for human analysts to accomplish in real time. For example, AI algorithms are used to detect terrorist plots in advance

and to predict potential conflict hotspots by processing diverse data sources far more rapidly than humans can. At the same time, advances in natural language processing enable the automated analysis of textual sources used by intelligence services. In short, AI enables intelligence communities to "see" more deeply and faster within vast seas of data, thereby providing decision-makers with richer, more timely information (Koppel & Parkhomchuk, 2025, pp. 5–8).

In the field of cybersecurity, AI operates dually, simultaneously strengthening defences and creating new offensive capabilities. From a defensive perspective, AI tools are used for intrusion detection and anomaly identification within information systems, as they can learn normal traffic patterns and instantly flag suspicious activities. Advanced AI models can predict cyber threats based on previous attacks and intrusion attempts, thereby enabling proactive action by security teams (Koppel & Parkhomchuk, 2025, pp. 8–9).

From an offensive perspective, the same technologies enable the development of new attack types through the automated discovery of vulnerabilities in adversarial software, the generation of highly convincing phishing messages, and even the use of so-called "deepfake" content (fabricated video and audio recordings generated by AI) in targeted deception campaigns. It is particularly concerning that AI can accelerate and scale cyberattacks to a level that exceeds human defensive capacities. According to some analyses, there are already cases in which AI assists attacks on critical infrastructure, as certain simulations indicate that coordinated AI-driven attacks could disrupt power grids or communication systems far more effectively than traditional cyberattacks (NSCA, 2021).

On the other hand, methods for applying AI to cyber deterrence are also being explored, including systems that automatically identify attack sources and respond with counterattacks or by deceiving the adversary. Beyond military and security applications, AI also enhances the economic instruments of hard power. States use advanced algorithms to analyse financial markets and energy price movements to optimise the application of economic sanctions and trade pressure measures. AI can predict the effects of sanctions on the targeted state's economy, detect complex schemes of sanctions evasion and money laundering, and automate the monitoring of financial flows to prevent the financing of undesirable activities. In this way, by combining rapid market data analysis with the autonomous enforcement of measures (such as the automatic freezing of suspicious transactions), states can use AI to employ economic coercion more effectively as an instrument of foreign policy.

In conclusion, AI expands the scope of hard power by elevating the speed, precision, and scale of state instruments of coercion to unprecedented levels. Naturally, the use of AI in these domains also raises new ethical and legal questions—from determining responsibility for decisions made by autonomous systems to preventing the escalation of conflict driven by the rapid operation of AI systems beyond human control. Artificial intelligence challenges traditional categories of power analysis because it does not fit neatly into the classical division among military, economic, and political power. It permeates all three domains, yet relates to them in a manner that transcends their conventional boundaries. In this sense, AI becomes a form of meta-power, enabling the optimisation and accumulation of all other forms of power. The United States and China recognised at a very early stage that a relationship of direct proportionality exists between technological advancement in AI and their position within the international order. The more successful a state is in developing AI, the more it strengthens its strategic autonomy and reduces its dependence on external actors.

3. Artificial Intelligence and the U.S.–China Rivalry

The final decades of the twenty-first century are marked by an accelerated transformation in international relations, in which technological innovations—particularly artificial intelligence—are emerging not only as sources of economic or military superiority but also as instruments for the deeper shaping of the global order. Artificial intelligence today does not function merely as a technical tool, nor as just another resource in the long history of innovation, but rather as a new axis of structural power that permeates all levels of social functioning from the production of economic value, through symbolic dominance in the information space, to the reorganization of states' military and intelligence capabilities (Kania, 2017, pp. 22–29).

The rivalry between the United States and China does not take the form of a classical geopolitical conflict in the sense of Cold War–style bipolar dynamics (Campbell & Ratner, 2018, pp. 60–63), nor can it be reduced to economic competition between the world's two largest economies. At its core, it manifests as a struggle for control over the future (Rolland, 2020, pp. 47–48), that is, for the ability to use technological means to shape the form of political institutions, market structures, data-governance models, and normative standards that will determine the position of states and individuals in the decades to come.

The United States was among the first to recognise the strategic importance of autonomous systems and algorithmic command-and-control platforms (Gentile et al., 2021, pp. 14–17), including the integration of AI into

intelligence analysis, predictive analytics, and surveillance. As early as the beginning of the 2010s, the Pentagon initiated a doctrinal shift positioning artificial intelligence as the core of the U.S. military's future capabilities. China, by contrast, is developing its own model of intelligent warfare. Chinese doctrine emphasises the integration of AI across all levels of military operations—from autonomous combat platforms to logistics, electronic warfare, and cyber offensives. China views AI as a means of achieving long-term strategic parity with the United States, a perspective reflected in massive investments in civil–military fusion, a strategic practice that enables scientific advances from the civilian sector to be directly transferred into the military apparatus (Rolland, 2020, pp. 49–51).

Semiconductors represent the most critical resource of the digital age (Statista, 2025). Without them, it is impossible to develop AI models, process large volumes of data, or produce modern weapons systems. The United States dominates chip design, while Taiwan (TSMC) and South Korea (Samsung) control the most advanced manufacturing processes. China, which depends on imports of technologically advanced chips, has identified semiconductors as its greatest strategic vulnerability. This has led to a series of U.S. sanctions in 2022–2023 that have denied Beijing access to cutting-edge equipment and lithography machines. At the same time, China has increased investment in domestic semiconductor production through programs totalling more than USD 40 billion. All of this clearly indicates that the world is moving toward deep technological bipolarization (China Daily, 2024).

As the United States and China compete for control over materials critical to artificial intelligence, export restrictions have become a central instrument of geopolitical leverage. In August 2023, China introduced licensing requirements and quantitative limits on the export of gallium and germanium, leading to price increases of more than 70 per cent, in response to U.S.-led export controls on chips implemented in 2022 and 2023 (MOFCOM, 2023).

By the end of 2024, the United States further expanded these controls, restricting semiconductor manufacturing equipment and sanctioning 140 Chinese companies (U.S. BIS, 2024), which prompted Beijing to halt exports of critical minerals to the United States. A short-lived truce in mid-2025 briefly restored some of these exports, but the agreement was subsequently breached as U.S. companies continued to suffer shortages of rare-earth elements.

In parallel with these measures, Washington exerted pressure on its allies to follow suit by restricting the export of materials and technologies relevant to artificial intelligence to China. The United States, the European Union, and allied countries, including Australia, Canada, and Japan, established the Minerals Security Partnership to reduce dependence on minerals under Chinese control (U.S. Department of State, 2025). Although African, Latin American, and Eastern European countries are not members of this Partnership, it seeks partnerships and engagement with selected countries that possess minerals and rare elements of strategic interest, including those critical to the development of artificial intelligence. Partnerships with African countries are particularly at odds with China's "Digital Silk Road" initiative and its broader "Belt and Road" Initiative, thereby making the development of artificial intelligence a new dimension of geopolitical competition in Africa.

As these tensions intensify, parallel strategies for minerals critical to artificial intelligence may divide the world into new technology-driven political and economic blocs. Divergent supply chains could give rise to distinct AI ecosystems, in which countries align with either Chinese- or Western-centred networks. Such fragmentation risks undermining international cooperation on emerging technologies and complicating interoperability, standardisation, and the scalability of artificial intelligence infrastructure across different geopolitical spheres. China represents a paradigmatic example of such an approach, particularly through the implementation of the "Belt and Road" Initiative, within which digital infrastructure and surveillance tools—such as facial recognition systems and smart city technologies—are exported to numerous developing countries. This process has resulted in the emergence of a phenomenon increasingly described in the academic literature as "algorithmic dependence," a form of technological dependency that enables Beijing, through control over critical digital infrastructure, to exert political influence over the national policies of recipient states, especially in Southeast Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and parts of Latin America. Such a strategy allows China to shape technological norms and security protocols in these regions, thereby further consolidating its position within the global geopolitical order.

By contrast, the United States positions itself as a defender of a liberal and democratic technological order, insisting on transparency, privacy, and the ethical use of AI. In line with this approach, the United States seeks to limit Chinese technological influence in strategic sectors such as telecommunications (particularly 5G networks), defence artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and semiconductor manufacturing. At the same time, the U.S. strategy includes economic instruments, such as sanctions and restrictions on the export of high-technology goods (especially advanced chips and the equipment required for their production), as well as the formation of technological alliances and partnerships with like-minded states. These measures are aimed at preserving Western technological superiority and limiting the spread of authoritarian technological models based on mass surveillance and state control of data. The competition between the United States and China in the field of artificial intelligence

is not exclusively technological in nature, but rather represents a profound clash between two normative models. The American model is grounded in liberal values of transparency, data privacy, and individual rights. In contrast, the Chinese model is based on the concept of digital sovereignty, in which the state exercises control over data infrastructure and algorithmic systems (Creemers, 2018, pp. 1–7).

China promotes AI as a tool for political stability and social governance; this is most clearly reflected in its social credit system. The United States, by contrast, seeks to establish global standards for ethical AI through OECD documents (OECD, 2025), the National AI Strategy, and cooperation with technology corporations. However, because these corporations possess enormous power, the American model contains internal tensions between democratic oversight and corporate interests. China uses the Digital Silk Road to export its algorithmic and infrastructural standards to Asia, Africa, and Eastern Europe, thereby gradually constructing a parallel digital order. This process generates a competition of legitimacy: which civilizational vision of the future will come to dominate the Global South (Hillman, 2021, pp. 3–9). The rivalry between the two technological superpowers is leading to the formation of digital blocs. While the United States is building a coalition of technological democracies, China is creating a network of states that adopt an authoritarian techno-model (Scharre, 2023, pp. 1–2). The consequence is the weakening of the universality of the international order and the emergence of what may be described as "algorithmic geopolitics." The conflict also has significant economic repercussions. While the United States seeks to restrict China's access to advanced chips, China is striving to achieve full technological self-sufficiency. This dynamic disrupts supply chains, raises production costs, and deepens the technological divide between competing blocs. The risks of escalation are significant, ranging from cyberattacks and technological arms races to the possibility that autonomous systems could lead to unintended military confrontation. Without the establishment of global governance mechanisms for high-risk technologies, this conflict may become a destabilising factor of the twenty-first century (Wu, 2020, pp. 101–114).

4. Consequences of Global Rivalry and Artificial Intelligence

The geopolitical competition between the United States and China in the domain of artificial intelligence increasingly demonstrates that its consequences extend far beyond bilateral relations between the two powers and are evolving into a global transformation of the international order. Every historical epoch has had its dominant source of power (Lee, 2018, pp. 1–5).

In one period, this resource was the control of territory, in another, industrial production, and in the twentieth century, nuclear technology. Today, it is the control of information and algorithms, as well as states' ability to translate technology into political, economic, and military advantage. In this sense, the rivalry between the United States and China is not merely a competition between two technological models, but a struggle over the shape of the future world order. The first global consequence of this rivalry is reflected in a security transformation unfolding across multiple levels. Whereas during the Cold War, strategic stability was based on the predictability of nuclear capabilities, today the world is entering an era in which autonomous systems, algorithms for anticipating adversary behaviour, and automated platforms for cyber offence and defence become central sources of insecurity. While the nuclear arms race could not be widely proliferated due to its high costs and technical complexity, the race in artificial intelligence can be pursued with far lower barriers to entry, meaning that the number of actors capable of threatening global stability is greater than ever before (Scharre, 2018, pp. 18–22).

As the United States and China develop their military AI systems, they enter a dynamic that generates a classic security dilemma: each advance by one side is interpreted as a threat by the other, thereby fueling further escalation. However, in the era of autonomous technologies, the consequences of such a dilemma may unfold far more rapidly and with less control, as defensive and offensive systems increasingly rely on algorithms whose decisions are not always transparent or fully understood, even by their creators (Scharre, 2018, pp. 112–119). This opens space for a new type of conflict—"high-speed conflict"—in which decisions about escalation could be partially delegated to machines rather than humans (Horowitz et al., 2018, pp. 14–18).

The second major consequence is the economic recomposition of the world. Artificial intelligence creates new forms of dependency and new global hierarchies. Countries that control big-data infrastructure, semiconductors, supercomputing capabilities, and the talent needed for AI development have the potential to become new economic superpowers (Cohen, 2019, pp. 1–5). The United States and China, as the two states leading in most of these areas, set a framework that compels third countries to align with one of the two technological systems (Farrell & Newman, 2019, pp. 55–61). This process is gradually pushing the world toward a bipolar digital structure, in which the United States leads a bloc based on liberal markets, multinational corporations, and interoperable technological architectures, while China is building a bloc grounded in state interventionism, vertically integrated technological systems, and political control of the digital space (Segal, 2018, pp. 8–16). This

division is neither formal nor institutionalised, unlike the Cold War division. Still, it is technologically far deeper, extending beyond the military and ideological spheres to encompass the very structure of digital life itself (Zuboff, 2019, pp. 107–112).

The third global consequence concerns the emergence of new forms of alliances. Instead of traditional security pacts, states today are building digital alliances that involve access to cloud infrastructure, data sharing, common standards for AI development, and the harmonisation of regulations on technological risks (Farrell & Newman, 2020, pp. 112–120). The United States is actively building coalitions within the G7, the OECD, and NATO aimed at defining democratic standards for the safe use of artificial intelligence, while China, through initiatives such as the "Digital Silk Road" and BRICS technological cooperation, is creating its own zone of digital influence (Segal, 2022, pp. 153–154). In this way, global politics is gradually shifting from the traditional diplomatic arena to a technological one, in which standards and protocols become new instruments of international power (Kissinger, Schmidt, & Huttenlocher, 2021, pp. 207–213).

The fourth consequence is the international order's increased vulnerability. Whereas in the Cold War model a conflict between two superpowers was governed by clear mechanisms of deterrence, today there is no consensus on the rules that should regulate the use of artificial intelligence for military or intelligence purposes (UN, 2019, pp. 4–9). On the other hand, international law lags behind technological change, and institutions such as the United Nations lack effective mechanisms to control the development of autonomous weapons or transnational surveillance systems (Scharre & Horowitz, 2015, pp. 2–4). In addition, tensions surrounding Taiwan—the centre of global production of the most advanced microchips—represent a potential flashpoint for a global crisis that could paralyse the entire world economy.

The fifth consequence—perhaps the most profound—concerns the transformation of the nature of power in the twenty-first century. Artificial intelligence is reshaping the very essence of what it means to be a great power. States no longer need to control territory to possess power; it suffices to control data flows, algorithmic infrastructures, and technological standards (Nye, 2011, pp. 115–121). In this context, a state that succeeds in institutionalising its own technological model at the global level gains not only economic and military advantages, but also a form of civilizational superiority. It is precisely for this reason that the U.S.–China rivalry is increasingly transforming into a struggle for normative leadership, since the power that establishes AI standards determines the rules by which the future world will operate. These consequences demonstrate that the rivalry between the United States and China is far more than a technological race. It is becoming a contest over the kind of world we wish to create: a world dominated by a liberal, market-based paradigm in which technology serves individual freedom, or a world in which technology serves state power and collective security as the foundation of stability and a hierarchical order (Farrell & Newman, 2019, pp. 42–79).

The changes brought about by the development of artificial intelligence leave little room for maintaining the existing international order in its current form. Just as the Industrial Revolution reshaped the structure of power in the nineteenth century and nuclear weapons did so in the twentieth, AI in the twenty-first century is a driver of broad systemic transformation that may lead to an entirely new architecture of global relations. This transformation is not merely a technological shift but a profound political reorganisation of the world, as AI affects the very foundations of international power: the nature of sovereignty, security, the economy, and global cooperation. Given that the rivalry between the United States and China lies at the centre of this transformation, it is possible to identify several scenarios for the evolution of the global order, each arising from different dynamics of technological development and political interaction.

5. Conclusion

The development of artificial intelligence in the first decades of the twenty-first century has become more than a technological revolution; it has emerged as a profound force of transformation in global politics, economics, and security. Whereas in previous historical eras, state power could be defined by control over material resources, territory, or military capabilities, today the true source of power is increasingly shifting to intangible infrastructure such as algorithms, data, and digital architectures. In this new reality, the rivalry between the United States and China represents not only a struggle between the world's two largest powers, but also a clash between two visions of future civilisation. It embodies, among other things, a conflict between a liberal technological model that emphasises innovation, private initiative, and global interconnectedness, and an authoritarian digital model that prioritises stability, national security, and centralisation. This indicates that the differences are not merely economic or political in nature, but lie in the very conception of the digital individual and digital society.

For this reason, the U.S.–China rivalry in artificial intelligence cannot be understood as a transient confrontation, but rather as a long-term process that will shape the structure of the international order in the decades to come.

What makes this competition particularly significant is the fact that AI technology has systemic implications: whoever controls chips controls algorithms; whoever controls algorithms controls data. And whoever controls data controls the economy, military power, and political stability. The United States enters this process as a power seeking to preserve the existing order in which its own technological and institutional dominance lies at the centre. For the United States, AI therefore serves as a means of defending the global liberal system that America shaped after 1945 and that enabled its long-term hegemony. China, by contrast, enters this process from an opposite historical position—as a power that has only recently acquired the capacity to challenge Western technological superiority and that views AI as a tool of national rejuvenation, geo-economic ascent, and civilizational emancipation from Western dominance. These two approaches cannot be dominant simultaneously, which is why the struggle over technological standards, regulation, data control, and semiconductor supply chains is so intense. The state that first succeeds in institutionalising its own model at the global level would gain a strategic advantage comparable to that once held by empires that controlled sea lanes or key energy resources.

Another dimension concerns the inevitable fragmentation of the world. Artificial intelligence does not unite the international community; it divides it. The reason lies in the fact that technology is deeply political. Autonomous systems, algorithmic governance, digital surveillance, cyber operations, and data infrastructures have become instruments of political control and international power projection. In such a world, states have little interest in open technological cooperation; instead, they seek to protect their own digital sovereignty and prevent competitors from gaining dominance. The result is the emergence of technological blocs in which digital systems, standards, and algorithmic infrastructures are incompatible. This is already evident in telecommunications, semiconductors, AI in the public sector, and data regulation.

Despite the growing confrontation, a segment of the scholarly community emphasises that the United States and China, aware of the scale of the risks involved, will be compelled at some point to establish a minimal level of cooperation in areas with existential implications, such as the development of autonomous weapons or the regulation of generative models that can influence political processes. Even if such cooperation does occur, however, it is likely to be limited, fragmented, and conducted in an atmosphere of deep mistrust. In the broadest sense, the U.S.–China rivalry in artificial intelligence is accelerating the transition toward a new form of international structure in which technological infrastructure becomes a new border, digital standards become new laws, and algorithms become new instruments of power. The question that arises is not whether the world will change, but what form that change will take: whether artificial intelligence will become a means of liberating human potential or a tool of political control; whether the digital order will be open or fragmented; and whether the future will be defined by cooperation or confrontation. At present, there is no clear answer to these questions. What is certain, however, is that the outcome of the U.S.–China rivalry will be a decisive factor in shaping that answer. In this sense, AI is not merely a technological innovation, it is the axis around which a new history of the world will be constructed.

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