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US and China AI rivalry and its impact on India's strategic position

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Abstract

The global strategic rivalry between the United States and China in artificial intelligence (AI) is remaking geopolitics, economic structures, and security systems globally. With the two leading powers in AI, their rivalry goes beyond a bilateral contest to impact international standards, military strategies, and technology governance. This competition has significant consequences for third parties, especially India, placed at the crossroads of democracy, technological explosion in the digital sphere, and influential regional blocs like the Quad. India is both presented with opportunities to raise its technical profile and threatened by vulnerabilities emanating from dependencies and international pressure games. India is getting advantages and also getting attention from US and learning from China but have to take sides from both of them and China mistrust India. Through realist theory and neorealist theory this research examines India's strategic positioning within the U.S.–China AI competition. It examines India's technological efforts, security alliances, and diplomatic balancing acts, in addition to evaluating challenges such as talent deficits, infrastructure deficits, and cybersecurity weaknesses. And also talks about how US and China are giving hard to become most advanced AI country. The paper posits that India's prosperity in taking advantage of this competition hinges on developing indigenous AI capability, promoting multilateralism, and sustaining strategic autonomy in a multipolar AI world.

Keywords: geopolitics, multilateralism, security alliances, artificial intelligence (AI)

Introduction

AI is being used in almost every field today such as health, education, business, and even defense. Artificial intelligence (AI) is so advanced technology in the 21st-century international relations, economics, and security. AI is no longer merely

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a technological innovation, but also an essential foundation for national power, shaping the way countries project influence, defend sovereignty, and compete in world markets. This new reality is best captured by the race between the United States and China to dominate AI. Two global superpowers, the United States and the China, are leading the charge in developing AI. The U.S. remains ahead in innovation and values-based governance, while China grows strongly with state-sponsored investments and the incorporation of AI into military and civilian infrastructure. They are competing aggressively to become the world number one AI power. This competition is not just about technology but also about power and influence on the world stage. As they race forward, their moves are impacting many other nations, including India. India, with its developing tech sector, is in the middle of this great power game.

It must make wise decisions while balancing relations with both the U.S and China. This study examines how the U.S and China AI rivalry is influencing India's strategic position. US is the world leader in AI with huge technologies like, Google, Microsoft, and OpenAI (chatgpt). These companies are developing advanced-level AI software that is being used throughout the world. AI is being backed by the U.S. government with policies and investments in research. AI is considered to be essential for national security, economic power, and global leadership. The U.S. wants to stay ahead of China by involving partners and promoting fair use of AI. The country believes that by being an AI leader, it can continue to play its superpower role. U.S. leadership also helps in the creation of international rules and standards for AI development.

China is also trying to control the world using AI and is moving very rapidly. It set a national plan in 2017 to become world-class in AI by 2030. The Chinese government is spending huge amounts of money on AI research and education Big tech giants like Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent are at the forefront of this drive. China uses AI in various sectors including surveillance, smart cities, and military technology. Its approach is more controlled, with extensive government engagement in technological development innovation. China believes AI can get China to the top as a global economic and military power. China is prioritizing speed and quantity, and challenging U.S. hegemony in the tech war. This rise of China in AI is causing fear and competition across the globe. India does not take part in the U.S.-China AI race but is significantly affected by it. India is technology-rich with sufficient engineers and IT professionals. India possesses a growing digital economy as well as

increased interest in AI research. Both the U.S. and China view India as a potential trading and technology partner. This affords India a chance for growth through partnership and investment in AI. Along with this, India also needs to take into consideration national security and data protection. India has a singular strategic position in this unfolding competition. (Rajagopalan D. R., India's Strategic Response to the U.S.–China AI Rivalry: A Multi-Theoretical Analysis, 2025)As the world's biggest democracy with a growing digital economy and expanding defense alliances, India is confronted by a difficult arithmetic: how to leverage the advantages of AI without compromising national security and strategic space in the wake of U.S.–China tensions. The stakes are high. AI integration into military networks, surveillance systems, and economic networks means technological dominance equals geopolitical leverage. India's AI adoption choices, foreign policy alignments, and digital governance decisions will determine its regional power and global status. Selecting the correct partners and developing its own AI agendas is extremely important. India can play a wise and balanced role in this AI contest between nations. The U.S.-China rivalry in Artificial Intelligence is not a competition between two countries but it's shaping the future of technological and global power. US and China are both making huge progress in AI, each towards different purposes and in different ways. India, although it is not competing directly, is at a decisive position. With its already settled tech talent pool and growing digital domain, India can benefit from this competition if it acts wisely and strategically. (V, 2025)

And it must also be extremely cautious in assuming control over security risks, data privacy, and international geopolitics. What India does to address this challenge will decide what India turns out to be in the world. This article answers three fundamental questions: How does the U.S.–China AI competition reshape strategic balances globally impacting India's foreign policy and security? What risks and opportunities are created for India by its possible alignment with either of these powers in AI? How can India use its geopolitical and technology position to spur strategic autonomy and technological self-reliance? Based on neorealist theory and techno-nationalism, this research analyzes India's policy, partnerships, and challenges against the backdrop of this competition and concludes with policy suggestions for strategic balance and sustainable growth

Theoretical framework

The increasing Artificial Intelligence (AI) rivalry between the United States and China represents more than a competition over technological dominance. It reflects that they both are struggling for global influence, power, and security. In today's geopolitical landscape, India finds itself at a strategic position. As a rising power and growing influence India should work around this AI rivalry between two global powers US and China without sacrificing its strategic autonomy. To understand India's response and positioning, it is important to analyze the AI rivalry through some well-known international relations theories in which are Realism, Neorealism, and hegemonic stability theory. Each of these frameworks can help us understand the motivations, problems, and strategic choices before India.

Classical Realism: Power, National Interest, and Survival

- **Theory Explanation**

Realist theory explain the importance of power how human nature works, and what are the national interest in international affairs. According to realist the global system follows anarchic system, meaning there is no central authority in the world, and that states pursue their interests only to survive and get power in the world. Military and political powers are the powers that really matter in this order. Realism theory says that states act based on their national interest, states are selfish and compete for power.

Why is it applied?

The AI race between U.S. and China may be considered as a modern application of traditional realism. Both nations are behaving like this because they want to accumulate power and protect their respective national interests. AI technologies, especially those applied to military means, surveillance, and cyber warfare, immense strategic advantages. Hence, the development and control of AI are now deeply connected to national interests of great powers.

- **Application to India**

India needs to put its national interest and survival first in this new tech-driven world, from a classical realist approach. India cannot be left behind in the AI revolution. For a nation ringed by competitors such as China and Pakistan, AI is not

only a developmental aid but an imperative of national security. Classical realism explains why India is now investing more in domestic AI capabilities and limiting Chinese digital influence. Bans on Chinese apps, Huawei exclusion from 5G trials, and enhanced defense-tech collaboration with the U.S. all demonstrate realist considerations. Essentially, realism explains India's pursuit of strategic autonomy. It positions India's tech diplomacy not in terms of ideological convergence but as measured steps towards maintaining Indian sovereignty, maximizing security, and advancing national interest.

Neorealism (Structural Realism): Systemic Pressures and Strategic Hedging

- **Theory Explanation**

Neorealism, developed by Kenneth Waltz, extends realism but changes the emphasis from human nature to the anarchic nature of the international system. Neorealism holds that the distribution of power in the system (unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar) determines state behavior. States are rational actors who pursue survival, and they are constrained and affected by the structure of the system and by the capabilities of other states. Neo-realist are security obsessed.

- **Why is it applied?**

The AI competition has remapped the world order into a bipolar rivalry in the style of the Cold War, now between China and the U.S. AI as a strategic strength is now part of national power. Technological dominance now characterizes power in global politics in much the same way as military or economic power does. Neorealism assists us in comprehending how systemic pressures of this bipolarity influence third-party nations such as India.

- **Relevance to India**

India, being a middle power, is structurally limited by the U.S. and Chinese dominance. It is under systemic pressure to align with either one of the two AI superpowers. India, however, has been opting for a strategic engaging with both powers (e.g., U.S. and China)., between the West and China and gradually developing native capabilities. India's hedging behavior under neorealism is logical. India engages with the U.S. in forums such as the Quad and iCET to gain Western technological assistance. At the same time, it does not pursue complete decoupling from China because of economic dependence. The theory also accounts for India's

focus on multilateralism and regional diplomacy—a strategy to water down systemic pressures and not get caught in the middle of great power competition. Furthermore, neorealism accounts for the AI security dilemma. As China develops its military AI, India is driven to keep pace with these developments. This cross-suspicions stimulates an AI arms race between the Indo-Pacific. For this reason, India is making investments in AI defense applications, cyber defense, and intelligence technologies

Hegemonic Stability Theory: Global Order, Leadership, and Institutional Influence

- **Theory Explanation**

Hegemonic Stability Theory (HST) argues that the international system is more stable with a single dominant power state (hegemon). The hegemon supplies public goods, establishes norms, and provides global order. Historically, the U.S. has been this hegemon since World War II by promoting liberal norms, free markets, and multilateral institutions. The emergence of China challenges this hegemony, which results in institutional contestation and instability.

- **Why is it applied?**

The AI competition puts U.S. hegemony directly at stake. China is constructing its own digital infrastructure, establishing alternative digital norms and surveillance standards, and exporting these through the Digital Silk Road initiative. The competition is technological but also about who will establish the rules of the global digital system. HST offers a tool to examine this competition for institutional and normative supremacy.

- **Application to India**

India is unable to decide between the two rival hegemonic models: The U.S. model: Open internet, democratic governance, innovation through private enterprise. The Chinese model: State-driven AI development, surveillance-based control, and digital authoritarianism. India has tilted overwhelmingly toward the U.S. model with a focus on data protection laws, democratic oversight, and free-market innovation. Its membership in China-dominated institutions such as BRICS and SCO, however, indicates a sophisticated strategy. Hegemonic Stability Theory also accounts for India's interest in shaping global norms. As an ascending power, India does not only want to emulate the hegemon but to make the rules. Its efforts on responsible AI, ethical use of data, and inclusive digital growth seek to create a

normative space. India wishes to be a rule-shaper, not a rule-taker. Hegemonic Stability Theory demonstrates how India employs the competition in order to position itself as a stakeholder in global digital governance. (Rajagopalan, 2025)

Comparative Insights of the Three Theories

Each theory makes specific contributions to understanding India's strategic response: Realism identifies the national interest, power, and immediate survival imperatives. It explains India's practical choices. Neorealism unpacks the structural constraints and systemic pressures underpinning India's hedging and balancing games. Hegemonic stability theory conceptualizes the AI rivalry as a normative struggle and enables an understanding of India's role in world rule-making. All three together offer a multi-layered perspective on how India responds to the U.S. and China AI rivalry. A combination of realism-informed self-interest, structural adjustment, and ambition for global leadership.

(Rajagopalan, India's Strategic Response to the U.S.–China AI Rivalry: A Multi-Theoretical Analysis, 2025)

- **United States: Technological Supremacy and Strategic Collaborations**

The United States has traditionally led AI research, taking advantage of a decentralized innovation ecosystem supported by leading universities, private industry vitality, and venture capital. Industry leaders like Google, Microsoft, Amazon, and OpenAI power innovations in machine learning, natural language processing, and autonomous systems. The American government's awareness of the strategic value of AI is demonstrated through large appropriations under the National AI Initiative Act (2020) and the creation of institutions such as the Joint Artificial Intelligence Center (JAIC) in the Department of Defense (DoD).

- **AI in U.S. Military Modernization**

The U.S. military incorporates AI to advance autonomous weapons, predictive maintenance, battlefield analytics, and cyber defense. This is part of a general plan to have a technological advantage over rivals, particularly China and Russia. AI-driven systems like unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), cyberattack detection, and AI-driven command and control systems are prioritized more and more.

❖ **Export Controls and Tech Decoupling**

In order to contain China's ascendance, the U.S. has launched severe export controls on leading-edge semiconductors, AI software, and research collaboration. These policies seek to retard China's access to leading-edge AI capabilities while promoting allied countries to transition to compatible technologies. This technological containment also falls under broader economic and strategic decoupling initiatives.

Strategic Alliances: Indo-Pacific Economic Framework and iCET

The Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) seeks cooperation on digital economy norms, supply chains, and governance of AI by regional partners such as India. The India-U.S. Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET) is a breakthrough, institutionalizing cooperation on research on AI, quantum computing, semiconductors, and defense technology.

These efforts reflect a meeting of strategic and technology interests between India and the U.S. for constructing robust supply chains and a common vision of ethical AI governance based on democratic values.

China: Technological Ascendancy and Strategic Assertiveness

China's AI strategy features firm state guidance and combination of military and civilian spheres. The "New Generation AI Development Plan" (2017) establishes bold visions for China to dominate the world in AI by 2030. The government invests huge sums of funding in AI research institutions, state-owned companies, and private technology behemoths like Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent, Huawei, and SenseTime.

Military-Civil Fusion and AI in Defense

Beijing's military-civil fusion policy incorporates civilian AI achievements directly into the modernization of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), such as autonomous systems, facial recognition, and electronic warfare capabilities. China's military-civil fusion policy amasses asymmetric warfare capability and makes U.S. and allied strategic calculations more difficult.

Digital Authoritarianism and Surveillance Technologies

China uses AI to undertake the world and vast domestic surveillance, social credit systems, and censorship, becoming a worldwide concern for digital authoritarianism. China extends its influence in South Asia, Africa, and the wider region through the sale of these technologies through the "Digital Silk Road" initiative, creating dependencies and exporting governance models that offend liberal democratic norms.

Economic Influence and Geopolitical Reach

China's technology-powered infrastructure projects, particularly in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), extend Chinese technology standards and establish economic influence over partner nations. In the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), China's increasing digital presence through undersea cables, 5G networks, and data centers complicates India's historic sphere of influence.

India: Walking Between Giants

India has a complex crisis: it is aligned with democratic values and strategic interests of the U.S., and at the same time, has very close economic relations with China. India gets a considerable amount of its telecommunication and computing hardware from China, which poses possible vulnerabilities in digital infrastructure and national security.

Domestic AI Ecosystem and Policy Initiatives

The Indian government has introduced various initiatives to promote a domestic AI ecosystem: IndiaAI Mission: Aims to establish an AI-focused innovation ecosystem, encompassing collaboration among government, academia, and industry to nurture AI startups and research. Atmanirbhar Bharat (Self-Reliant India): A key policy focusing on indigenization of manufacturing, such as semiconductors and AI technology, to decrease dependence on imports from other countries. Startup India and Digital India: These initiatives encourage digital transformation, AI skill training, and entrepreneurship, with the goal of creating a thriving AI innovation culture. In spite of all these attempts, India is faced with limited R&D investment (approximately 0.7% of GDP), poor AI talent retention because of brain drain, and infrastructural deficiencies like uneven broadband connectivity and inadequate computing resources.

Cybersecurity and Digital Sovereignty

India banned various Chinese apps (e.g., WeChat, TikTok) on data privacy and national security grounds. Huawei was also introduced 5G trials, indicating reserve towards Chinese technology in strategic infrastructure. These moves are all bigger efforts to save India's space and keep it data secure and reinforcing the country's push for digital sovereignty.

Strategic Partnerships and Multilateralism

India's alliances with the U.S., Japan, Israel, and Australia demonstrate increased convergence of research in AI, chip production, and defense technology. The Quad—a strategic coalition of democracies—offers a platform for cooperation on AI regulation, supply chain security, and ethical standards. But India also wants to avoid provoking China unnecessarily, keeping diplomatic channels open even when there are border tensions and rivalry in South Asia. This equilibrium of cooperation and hedging is integral to India's strategic autonomy. (Tirkey, 2021)

Strategic Implications and Foreign Policy Dimensions

- **The U.S.–China AI competition forces India to reshape its foreign policy and defense strategy:**

Strengthening Strategic Autonomy: India seeks to develop robust indigenous AI strengths to minimize dependence on either superpower, holding back policy leverage.

Alliance Building: Deeper cooperation with Quad democracies and through bilateral relations enhances India's access to technology, investment, and military AI uses.

Geopolitical Balancing: India is caught in a treacherous neighborhood where the digital footprint of China increases, balancing economic gains from Chinese trade with security threats.

Normative Leadership: India can take the lead in world debates on ethical AI, data privacy, and shared innovation, riding on its democratic foundation and

developmental experience. (Rajagopalan, India's Strategic Response to the U.S.–China AI Rivalry: A Multi-Theoretical Analysis, 2025)

- **Challenges and Risks to India**

India is confronted with some internal as well as external challenges in this dynamic context:

Talent and Education: India's AI talent pool is increasing but is still short of quality and scale, with considerable brain drain to the West.

Infrastructure Gaps: Unstable internet availability and computing infrastructure constrain large-scale AI adoption, particularly in rural and underserved regions.

Cybersecurity Threats: Software and hardware supply chain vulnerabilities subject India to risks of espionage and sabotage.

Economic Interdependencies: China is a key supplier of vital hardware components, making decoupling difficult (Rajagopalan R., 2025)

Diplomatic Risks: Excessive alignment with the U.S. threatens to estrange China and make Indian regional diplomacy more complicated.

Pressure to take sides: India have strong relations with US and somehow with china. no doubts India is getting advantages from both side but India have a pressure to take side from both superpowers.

Policy Recommendations

In order to navigate AI competition, India must:

Escalate R&D Spending: Augment public and private expenditure in AI research, particularly in key areas such as semiconductors, quantum computing, and defense AI.

Foster Education and Talent: Overhaul education to focus on STEM and AI skills, offer incentives for retention, and attract diaspora talent.

Strengthen Cybersecurity: Establish strong standards and infrastructure to protect AI supply chains and key digital assets.

Promote Multilateral Cooperation: Participate actively in international AI governance forums and alliances that promote democratic and ethical AI values.

Support Local Manufacturing: Support domestic semiconductor and AI hardware manufacturing to lessen dependencies.

Balance Diplomacy: Preserve strategic autonomy by hedging the U.S.-China relationship without zero-sum alignments.

Advance Ethical AI: Promote open, inclusive, and privacy-respecting AI models that embody democratic values.

The U.S.–China AI rivalry is transforming the world strategic order, and India's foreign policy is observing. With AI becoming a significant part of influence, both Beijing and Washington are competing to set global standards, lead innovation, and project influence. Through Smart Partnerships and selective collaboration: India can collaborate with both the U.S. and China where national interests are involved but not overdependence. With the US it should focus on high tech defense collaboration and joint innovation projects. When it comes to china partnership should be limited to safer, low risk economic areas to avoid strategic vulnerabilities. At the same time, India should widen its circle by building deeper ties with other tech countries like Japan, France and South Korea. This helps avoid being boxed into US or China and keep own choice. Multilateral platforms like Quad, G20 and BRICS also offer India powerful spaces to influence.

- **Opportunities with the U.S.**

Access to technology and collaboration: India can leverage American research in AI, defense technology, and cutting-edge semiconductor supply chains.

Strategic partnerships: Initiatives such as the Quad, iCET, and IPEF present India with a platform to co-develop strategic technologies and influence regional tech standards.

Alignment of democratic values: Engagement with the U.S. enhances India's international position for ethical AI, digital rights, and data privacy.

- **Risks with the U.S**

Overdependence: Excessive dependence on American technology firms or the military alliance may curtail India's policy freedom.

Geopolitical tension: Greater alignment with the U.S. could raise tensions with China, especially along the contested border or in the Indian Ocean Region.

India's naval Expansion and Regional security

India's expansionist naval strategy in the Indian Ocean Region. He notes that India's pursuit of regional hegemony has direct implications for Pakistan's security, highlighting the need for strategic responses to maintain stability. (Askari, 2023)
China opportunities:

Economic efficiency: Cheap Chinese technology goods are in high demand, and this encourages India's rapidly expanding digital economy.

- **Risks with China**

Security threats: Chinese presence in India's cyber infrastructure creates security risks, including surveillance and espionage.

- **Strategic dependence**

Dependence upon Chinese technology can lead to compromising India's ability to react to regional security issues or advance its interests. How does India remain independent and develop its own AI capabilities in this global tech race?

- **Adoption of AI in Warfare**

This study investigates the impact of AI on military strategies in South Asia, focusing on India and Pakistan. It explores how both nations are integrating AI into their defense frameworks and the potential consequences for regional security. (dr Usman askari and Iqbal, M. A, 2024)

In order to remain autonomous and enhance its AI strength, India has to concentrate on three pillars: domestic capacity-building, strategic partnerships, and regulatory leadership.

- **Develop Domestic AI Capacity**

Invest in R&D: India must significantly increase investment in AI research through public-private partnerships and support for universities and startups Improve infrastructure: Building local semiconductor fabrication, data centers, and cloud infrastructure is essential. Talent development: Scaling up AI training and skilling initiatives will retain homegrown talent and limit brain drain.

- **Strategic Autonomy**

Through Smart Partnerships and selective collaboration: India can collaborate with both the U.S. and China where national interests are involved but not overdependence. With the US it should focus on high tech defense collaboration and joint innovation projects. When it comes to china partnership should be limited to safer, low risk economic areas to avoid strategic vulnerabilities. At the same time, india should widen its circle by building deeper ties with other tech countries like Japan, France and South Korea. This helps avoid being boxed into US or China and keep own choice. Multilateral platforms like Quad, G20 and BRICS also offer India powerful spaces to influence.

Ethical and Legal Frameworks

India has a real opportunity to become a pioneer in global AI governance by leading the way on ethical guidelines, data protection, and responsible innovation. By supporting open source AI through transparent algorithms and shared models. India can help make AI more accessible and less controlled by a few powerful nations. At the same time, stronger cybersecurity laws can protect the digital rights of Indian citizens and shield the country from external interference. If India invest in these areas, it doesn't have to choose sides in the US China tech rivalry. Instead it can chart its own path as a credible independent voice in the global AI landscape.

Conclusion

The US and China rivalry in Artificial Intelligence (AI) reflects the broader trends of 21 century geopolitics. This race is not just about technology but it is deeply rooted

in strategic thinking that international relations theories help us understand classical realism shows us the raw power dynamics at play, while neorealism helps us explain the India's action within the larger international system. Then Hegemonic Stability Theory, on the other hand highlight the role of norms and leadership in shaping global competition. For India, the challenge lies in maintaining its strategic autonomy while adapting to rapid technological change and shifting global powers structure. When viewed through these theoretical lenses, it became clear that India's policies are not random or reactive. Instead they represent careful, rational decisions based on power realities, systemic pressures, and the evolving lobal order., Under such theoretical insight, policymakers, analysts, and scholars can gain a better sense of the depth and richness of India's strategic positioning in the AI era. India must keep investing in AI capabilities, establishing global norms, and finding a delicate balance between engagement and independence. Then and only then can it ensure its national interest, uphold its democratic values, and be a major power in the digital century

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