Technopolarity

"Technopolarity" refers to an emerging world order in which the largest technology companies rival nation-states as the primary players in international affairs. It differs from traditional notions of global power in that sovereignty and influence are determined not by physical territory and military might but by control over data, algorithms, and servers.

Nation-states have defined the global order since the Treaty of Westphalia enshrined them as the building blocks of geopolitics nearly 400 years ago. But over the past decade, a handful of large technology firms like Amazon, Apple, Meta, Alphabet, Microsoft, Alibaba, and Tencent have come to wield power and influence comparable to that of major states. These companies have effectively become independent, sovereign actors in the vast and growing digital realms they have created and control. As such, they set rules and exert power in virtual space much like national governments do over physical territory.

The shift away from an international system dominated solely by nation-states and toward a technopolar order is being driven by two key advantages technology companies have over nation-states:

1. They dominate digital space, an entirely new dimension of geopolitics where people increasingly live their lives and which governments – whose power is mostly wielded in physical space – do not control. Their choices directly impact the lives of billions of people globally in ways even the most powerful nation-states can only dream of, bearing on virtually all aspects of civic, economic, and private life. They decide much of what people see and hear, determine their economic and social opportunities, and influence what and how they think.

2. They provide a growing share of the digital and physical infrastructure required to run modern economies and societies, from smartphones, telecommunications, and logistics networks to cloud services, e-commerce platforms, and payment systems. This gives them control over forces like artificial intelligence and automation that will drive the next industrial revolution, and it shapes the global environment in which governments themselves operate.

Tech companies' geopolitical influence will only grow as more of daily life shifts online – and as emerging technologies like artificial intelligence (AI) expand their capabilities and further erode the power of governments. Their influence will extend beyond the digital sphere into areas once reserved exclusively for nation-states, such as economics, politics, and even national security. Some of this is already happening, as evidenced by social media companies deciding whether to deplatform political leaders and promote conspiracy theories. Or cybersecurity and satellite communications firms empowering Ukraine to repel the 2022 Russian invasion.

Technopolarity requires rethinking long-held assumptions about international relations. The balance of power in the 21st century may well be determined as much by competition between nation-states and tech companies as it is by competition between the United States and China. How these new geopolitical actors choose to wield their power, and whether governments are willing and able to wrest control from them, will define the economic, social, and political life of the future.

Technopolarity also suggests that 20th-century governance models centered on nation-states are growing increasingly inadequate. For example, effective regulation of emerging technologies like AI will require giving major technology firms a formal role in the rule-making process alongside governments.

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