Journal of Social Sciences Research & Policy (JSSRP)

GISSR Global Institute of Social Sciences Research

AI, Strategic Competition, and the Future of Power Politics in South Asia (2022 - 2026): A Critical Analysis

Ms. Ishrat Zeeshan[1], Mr. Muhammad Imran Humayun[2], Dr. Dilawar Khan[3]

1. MPhil Political Science, Department of Politics & International Relations, Abasyn University, Peshawar.
2. MPhil International Relations Scholar, Department of Politics & International Relations, Abasyn University, Peshawar.
3. Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Bacha Khan University, Charsadda, KPK, Pakistan.

How to Cite This Article: Zeeshan, I., Humayun, M. I. & Khan, D. (2026). AI, Strategic Competition, and the Future of Power Politics in South Asia (2022 - 2026): A Critical Analysis. *Journal of Social Sciences Research & Policy. 4 (02), 1-11.*
DOI: https://doi.org/10.71327/jssrp.42.1.11

ISSN: 3006-6557 (Online)
ISSN: 3006-6549 (Print)

Vol. 4, **No.** 2 (2026)
Pages: 1-11

Key Words:
Artificial Intelligence, Strategic Competition, South Asia, Power Politics, Regional Security, Technological Sovereignty

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Dilawar Khan
Email: dilawar1983@gmail.com

Abstract: *This study critically examines the intersection of artificial intelligence (AI), strategic competition, and evolving power dynamics in South Asia from 2022 to 2026. The rapid advancement of AI technologies has reshaped traditional understandings of power by integrating digital capabilities into military, economic, and political spheres. Regional actors, particularly India and Pakistan, are increasingly investing in AI-driven systems to strengthen national security, enhance economic performance, and achieve technological autonomy. The study argues that AI has intensified strategic rivalry while simultaneously generating new forms of asymmetry and limited cooperation. It highlights how emerging concepts such as technological sovereignty and digital innovation ecosystems are redefining regional geopolitics. Using a critical analytical approach, the research explores AI's impact on deterrence stability, security dilemmas, and the broader regional order. It concludes that while AI offers significant opportunities, its unchecked development may heighten instability and transform the future of power politics in South Asia.*

Introduction

This study explores the role of Artificial Intelligence in reshaping global power politics in South Asia, with a temporal focus on the near past, current developments, and future outlook from 2022 to 2026. It highlights how AI has rapidly evolved from an emerging technology into a central driver of strategic competition, security transformation, and geopolitical realignment in the region. The introduction sets the context by linking recent technological advancements with ongoing shifts in power dynamics and anticipates how AI will continue to influence South Asia's political and strategic landscape in the near future (Russell, 2019).

The literature review examines scholarly debates on Artificial Intelligence from the recent past to the present, focusing on its integration into global and regional power politics. It analyzes how earlier studies emphasized AI as an emerging technological tool, while more recent research highlights its role in strategic competition, surveillance systems, and military modernization. The review also identifies

that future-oriented literature increasingly predicts AI as a defining factor in reshaping global order, but notes a gap in comprehensive South Asia-specific analyses that connect past trends, current realities, and future implications (Crawford, 2021).

Despite rapid progress in Artificial Intelligence globally and in South Asia, there remains a significant gap in understanding how AI has evolved from recent developments into a current strategic tool and how it will shape future power politics in the region. The problem lies in the fragmented nature of existing studies, which often overlook the continuity between past technological adoption, present geopolitical competition, and future strategic uncertainty. This creates a need for a comprehensive analysis of AI's role in transforming South Asia's security and governance environment.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze the role of Artificial Intelligence in shaping power politics and strategic competition in South Asia (2022–2026).
2. To examine the governance, security, and geopolitical implications of Artificial Intelligence in the region in the present and near future.

Research Questions

1. How is Artificial Intelligence reshaping power politics and strategic competition in South Asia during the period 2022–2026?
2. What are the key governance, security, and geopolitical challenges emerging from the growing use of Artificial Intelligence in South Asia in the present and near future?

The significance of this study lies in its ability to bridge the gap between past developments, current realities, and future projections of Artificial Intelligence in South Asia. It provides valuable insights for policymakers, scholars, and strategic analysts by offering a comprehensive understanding of how AI is transforming regional geopolitics. The study also contributes to forecasting future challenges and opportunities in governance, security, and technological competition in South Asia. This research employs a qualitative methodology that integrates analysis of past developments, current policy trends, and future projections related to Artificial Intelligence in South Asia. It relies on secondary data sources such as academic literature, policy documents, think-tank reports, and global technology assessments. A thematic and comparative approach is used to trace continuity and change in AI-driven geopolitical dynamics across time.

The theoretical framework draws on Realism to explain ongoing and future strategic competition among South Asian states, Constructivism to analyze evolving norms and governance structures around AI, and Technology and Power Theory to understand AI as a transformative force shaping both present and future international relations. This combined framework allows for a dynamic analysis of past trends, current developments, and future implications.

AI and the Transformation of Global Power

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has emerged as a transformative force in global power politics, redefining the traditional foundations of state power that were once rooted primarily in military strength, territorial control, and economic capacity. In the contemporary era, power is increasingly shaped by technological capabilities, particularly the ability to develop, deploy, and control advanced AI systems. States that lead in AI innovation through investments in data infrastructure, machine learning, and algorithmic governance are gaining strategic advantages in intelligence gathering, surveillance, and decision-making processes. This shift marks a transition from conventional forms of hard power to a more complex configuration of "digital power," where dominance is exercised through control over data, digital platforms, and technological ecosystems. Consequently, global competition is no longer limited to

physical domains but extends into cyberspace, where AI-driven tools are reshaping diplomacy, warfare, and economic influence on a global scale (Kissinger, Schmidt, & Huttenlocher, 2021).

Moreover, the rise of AI as a central driver of power is accelerating geopolitical competition and contributing to the reconfiguration of the international system toward a more technologically stratified order. Major Powers are increasingly prioritizing AI development as a matter of national security and global influence, leading to what many scholars describe as a new "AI arms race." This competition is not only about military superiority but also about setting global standards, controlling innovation networks, and shaping the ethical and regulatory frameworks governing AI technologies. As a result, countries that lag in AI capabilities risk strategic dependency and marginalization in the emerging digital order. The implications of this transformation are particularly significant for developing regions, including South Asia, where disparities in technological capacity may exacerbate existing inequalities and influence regional power dynamics. Thus, AI is not merely a tool of progress but a defining element of contemporary and future global power structures, fundamentally altering how power is accumulated, projected, and sustained in the international arena (Crawford, 2021).

The Global AI Race

The global race for Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become a defining feature of contemporary international politics, intensifying strategic competition among major powers and reshaping the contours of the global order. Leading states such as the United States and China are investing heavily in AI research, innovation ecosystems, and digital infrastructure to secure technological supremacy and geopolitical advantage. This competition extends beyond mere technological advancement to include control over data flows, dominance in semiconductor production, and influence over global AI standards and norms. AI is now deeply embedded in national security strategies, with governments viewing it as critical to maintaining military superiority, economic leadership, and political influence. As a result, the global AI race is not only accelerating innovation but also deepening rivalries, contributing to the emergence of a technologically driven multipolar world where power is increasingly concentrated in states that can effectively harness and govern AI technologies (Lee, 2018).

Furthermore, the strategic competition surrounding AI is fostering a new geopolitical landscape characterized by alliances, technological blocs, and digital spheres of influence. Countries are forming partnerships to enhance their AI capabilities while simultaneously restricting technology transfers to rivals, leading to a fragmentation of the global technological ecosystem. This dynamic is evident in policies aimed at technological decoupling, export controls, and the protection of critical industries such as chip manufacturing and cloud computing. In this evolving environment, AI is not only a tool of competition but also a mechanism for shaping global governance, as major powers seek to influence international norms, ethical standards, and regulatory frameworks. The implications of this race are profound, particularly for developing countries, which may find themselves navigating between competing technological powers while striving to build their own capacities. Ultimately, the global AI race is redefining geopolitical alignments and creating a new hierarchy of power rooted in technological innovation and strategic control (Allison, 2017).

Geopolitics of AI Infrastructure

The geopolitics of Artificial Intelligence (AI) infrastructure has become a central dimension of contemporary global power, as states increasingly recognize that control over data, semiconductors, and computational capacity forms the backbone of technological dominance. Unlike traditional geopolitical resources such as oil or territory, AI infrastructure is rooted in intangible yet highly strategic assets, including vast datasets, advanced chip manufacturing, and high-performance computing

systems. Countries that command these resources are better positioned to lead in AI innovation, influence global markets, and shape digital ecosystems. The concentration of data within a few technologically advanced states and corporations has created new asymmetries of power, enabling them to extract economic value and exert political influence globally. As a result, AI infrastructure is no longer merely a technical concern but a strategic asset that underpins national security and international competitiveness in the 21st century (Crawford, 2021).

A critical component of this geopolitical landscape is the control over semiconductor production, which serves as the physical foundation of AI systems. Advanced chips are essential for training and deploying sophisticated AI models, and their production is concentrated in a limited number of countries, creating strategic vulnerabilities and dependencies. This has led to increased competition among major powers to secure supply chains, invest in domestic manufacturing, and restrict access to cutting-edge technologies through export controls and sanctions. The struggle for dominance in semiconductor technology highlights how material infrastructure continues to play a decisive role in shaping digital power. Furthermore, the race for computational supremacy measured in processing power and access to cloud computing resources has intensified, with leading states and corporations building massive data centers to support AI development. These dynamics illustrate how the geopolitics of AI infrastructure is driving a new form of technological rivalry that extends beyond software into the realm of hardware and physical systems (Miller, 2022).

In addition to data and chips, the governance and control of digital infrastructure such as cloud platforms, communication networks, and data storage systems are emerging as key determinants of global influence. Major Powers are increasingly seeking to establish digital spheres of influence by exporting their technological standards, investing in infrastructure projects, and shaping regulatory frameworks in other regions. This has significant implications for developing countries, which often rely on external actors for AI infrastructure and may become technologically dependent as a result. Such dependencies can influence policy choices, economic strategies, and even national sovereignty. As the global competition for AI dominance intensifies, the ability to control and govern critical infrastructure will play a decisive role in determining the future distribution of power in the international system. Ultimately, the geopolitics of AI infrastructure reflects a broader transformation in global politics, where technological capabilities are becoming the primary currency of influence and control (Kissinger, Schmidt, & Huttenlocher, 2021).

Economic Power in the AI Era

The rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is fundamentally transforming the nature of economic power by redefining the sources of growth, productivity, and global competitiveness. In the AI era, economic strength is no longer determined solely by traditional factors such as natural resources, industrial capacity, or labor force size; instead, it increasingly depends on a country's ability to harness data, develop advanced algorithms, and invest in digital infrastructure. AI-driven economies benefit from enhanced efficiency, automation of complex processes, and the creation of new industries, particularly in sectors such as finance, healthcare, manufacturing, and logistics. These transformations enable leading economies to accelerate innovation cycles and maintain a competitive edge in global markets. As a result, AI is reshaping the global economic landscape by concentrating power in technologically advanced nations while redefining the metrics through which economic success is measured (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014).

At the same time, the integration of AI into economic systems is profoundly altering labor markets and the nature of work. Automation and machine learning technologies are increasingly replacing routine

and repetitive tasks, leading to significant disruptions in employment patterns across both developed and developing economies. While AI creates new opportunities in high-skilled sectors such as data science, robotics, and software engineering, it simultaneously threatens traditional jobs, particularly in manufacturing and service industries. This shift is contributing to a growing skills gap, where workers without advanced technical capabilities face increased vulnerability to unemployment or underemployment. Consequently, the benefits of AI-driven growth are unevenly distributed, raising concerns about widening income inequality within and between countries. Governments are therefore challenged to design policies that promote inclusive growth, such as investing in education, reskilling programs, and social safety nets to mitigate the adverse effects of technological disruption (Acemoglu & Restrepo, 2020).

Furthermore, the global diffusion of AI technologies is intensifying economic inequality at the international level, creating a divide between AI leaders and lagging economies. Countries with strong technological ecosystems, access to capital, and advanced research institutions are able to dominate AI innovation and capture a disproportionate share of its economic benefits. In contrast, developing countries often lack the necessary infrastructure, skilled workforce, and financial resources to compete effectively in the AI-driven global economy. This disparity risks reinforcing existing patterns of dependency and marginalization, as less developed nations become consumers rather than producers of AI technologies. Moreover, the dominance of a few multinational technology firms in controlling data and digital platforms further concentrates economic power, limiting opportunities for broader participation in the global digital economy. As AI continues to evolve, addressing these inequalities will be crucial for ensuring a more balanced and inclusive global economic order (Stiglitz, 2019).

AI and the Future of Warfare

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is rapidly transforming the nature of warfare by introducing autonomous systems and algorithmic decision-making into military operations, fundamentally reshaping modern security dynamics. The integration of AI into defense technologies has enabled the development of autonomous weapons systems, including drones, robotic combat units, and surveillance platforms capable of operating with minimal human intervention. These systems enhance precision, speed, and operational efficiency, allowing states to conduct military actions with greater accuracy and reduced human risk. At the same time, AI-driven intelligence systems are revolutionizing battlefield awareness by processing vast amounts of data in real time, enabling predictive analysis and faster strategic decisions. This shift toward algorithmic warfare marks a transition from traditional forms of combat to technologically sophisticated engagements where dominance is determined by computational superiority and data integration. As a result, AI is not only augmenting military capabilities but also redefining the very nature of power projection and deterrence in the contemporary security environment (Scharre, 2018).

However, the rise of AI in warfare also introduces significant ethical, strategic, and security challenges that have profound implications for global stability. Autonomous weapons systems raise critical concerns regarding accountability, decision-making, and the potential for unintended escalation, particularly in high-stakes conflict scenarios where machines may act faster than human oversight allows. Moreover, the increasing reliance on AI in military operations has intensified the risk of cyber vulnerabilities, algorithmic bias, and technological arms races among major powers. States are now competing to develop and deploy advanced AI capabilities, leading to a new form of arms competition that extends beyond traditional weapons into the digital domain. This competition may lower the threshold for conflict, as AI-enabled systems can facilitate rapid and potentially destabilizing responses.

Consequently, the future of warfare is likely to be shaped not only by technological innovation but also by the ability of the international community to establish norms, regulations, and governance frameworks that can mitigate the risks associated with AI-driven military transformation (Horowitz, 2018).

Information Power and Digital Influence

Artificial Intelligence (AI) has become a powerful instrument in shaping information power and digital influence, transforming how narratives are constructed, disseminated, and contested in the global information environment. Through advanced algorithms, machine learning, and natural language processing, AI enables the rapid creation and amplification of content across digital platforms, allowing state and non-state actors to influence public opinion at an unprecedented scale. AI-driven tools such as deepfakes, automated bots, and targeted advertising systems have significantly enhanced the ability to spread disinformation and manipulate narratives, often blurring the line between truth and falsehood. This has given rise to a new dimension of power—cognitive dominance where influence is exerted not through physical force but by shaping perceptions, beliefs, and decision-making processes of individuals and societies. In this context, control over information flows and digital platforms has become a strategic asset, enabling actors to project influence across borders and interfere in political processes, including elections and public discourse (Bradshaw & Howard, 2019).

Moreover, the growing reliance on AI in the information domain raises critical concerns about the resilience of democratic institutions, social cohesion, and global stability. The ability of AI systems to personalize content and exploit user data has made disinformation campaigns more sophisticated and difficult to detect, increasing the vulnerability of societies to manipulation and polarization. Major Powers are increasingly incorporating information warfare into their strategic doctrines, recognizing that shaping narratives can be as impactful as military or economic power. This trend is contributing to the emergence of “digital battlegrounds,” where competing actors seek to dominate the information space and undermine adversaries through psychological and informational means. As AI technologies continue to evolve, the challenge of regulating their use in the information sphere becomes more complex, requiring coordinated international efforts to establish norms, enhance transparency, and protect the integrity of digital ecosystems. Ultimately, AI-driven information power is redefining the nature of influence in international relations, making cognitive and narrative control central to contemporary geopolitics (Bennett & Livingston, 2018).

AI, Energy, and Resource Politics

In the near past, the rapid expansion of Artificial Intelligence (AI) has been closely tied to rising energy consumption and the intensification of global resource politics. As AI systems particularly large-scale machine learning models require vast computational power, their development has significantly increased demand for electricity, data centers, and critical raw materials such as rare earth elements, lithium, and cobalt. Over the past few years, major technology companies and states have invested heavily in energy-intensive digital infrastructure, linking AI growth with energy security concerns. This has brought AI into the broader geopolitics of resources, where access to reliable energy supplies and critical minerals has become essential for sustaining technological advancement. Consequently, countries with abundant energy resources or control over mineral supply chains are gaining strategic advantages, while others face increasing dependency. The convergence of AI development and energy demand has thus redefined traditional resource politics, integrating digital infrastructure into the global competition for power and influence (IEA, 2023).

In the current scenario and looking toward the future, the relationship between AI, energy, and resource competition is expected to deepen further, shaping new patterns of geopolitical rivalry and cooperation. As AI adoption accelerates across industries and military sectors, global electricity demand is projected to rise substantially, placing pressure on existing energy systems and accelerating the transition toward renewable energy sources. At the same time, competition over critical minerals required for both AI hardware and green technologies is intensifying, particularly in regions rich in these resources. This dynamic is likely to drive new alliances, trade strategies, and geopolitical tensions as states seek to secure stable supply chains and technological independence. In the future, AI-driven optimization may also play a role in improving energy efficiency and resource management, potentially mitigating some of these pressures. However, without effective global governance and equitable distribution mechanisms, the intersection of AI expansion, energy demand, and resource politics may exacerbate global inequalities and create new fault lines in international relations, reinforcing the strategic importance of technological and resource control in the evolving global order (Van der Velden, 2020).

Digital Sovereignty and Global Fragmentation

In the near past, the concept of digital sovereignty has emerged as states increasingly recognized the strategic importance of controlling data, digital infrastructure, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) ecosystems within their territorial boundaries. As global digitalization accelerated, major powers began to assert greater authority over cyberspace through data localization laws, cyber security regulations, and restrictions on cross-border data flows. This shift was largely driven by concerns over foreign surveillance, economic dependency on foreign technology platforms, and the dominance of a few multinational tech corporations. The United States, China, and the European Union have each developed distinct approaches to digital governance, laying the groundwork for fragmented regulatory models. In this context, AI has further intensified sovereignty debates, as states seek to control not only data but also algorithms and computational infrastructure that shape economic and political decision-making. These developments mark the early stages of a fragmented digital order where technological governance is increasingly aligned with national interests and strategic competition (Goldsmith & Wu, 2006).

In the current scenario and future outlook, global digital fragmentation is expected to deepen, leading to the formation of competing AI blocs and a divided digital world order. The United States and its allies are increasingly promoting open-market digital ecosystems, while China advances a state-centric model of digital governance through initiatives such as the Digital Silk Road. This divergence is creating parallel technological ecosystems with different standards, platforms, and governance norms, effectively splitting the global internet into competing spheres of influence. Emerging economies are often caught between these blocs, forced to align with one side for access to technology, investment, and infrastructure. Looking ahead, this fragmentation is likely to intensify as AI becomes more embedded in national security, economic competitiveness, and social governance. Future scenarios may involve stricter data borders, competing AI standards, and reduced interoperability between global systems, further solidifying a multipolar digital order. Without coordinated international frameworks, this trend may undermine global digital cooperation and deepen geopolitical divisions in the AI era (Segal, 2016).

Global Governance and AI Regulation

Global governance of artificial intelligence has rapidly evolved in the near past (2019 - 2024) from fragmented ethical principles into a complex but still incomplete regulatory architecture. Early milestones such as the OECD AI Principles (2019) and UNESCO's Recommendation on the Ethics of AI

(2021) established foundational norms emphasizing human-centered, transparent, and accountable AI development. However, these frameworks remain largely non-binding, reflecting a persistent tension in global governance: while states and international organizations broadly agree on the need for "responsible AI," they diverge significantly on enforcement, sovereignty, and regulatory scope. In the current phase (2024 - 2026), regulatory experimentation has intensified, particularly with the European Union's AI Act, which introduces the most comprehensive risk-based legal framework to date and is already shaping global compliance expectations beyond Europe. At the same time, initiatives at the United Nations and UNESCO highlight growing calls for a coordinated global mechanism, including proposals for international AI standards, monitoring bodies, and capacity-building funds. Despite this momentum, governance remains fragmented across competing models - ranging from strict regulatory regimes (EU), to voluntary frameworks (United States), to state-centric control approaches (China). This divergence has produced what scholars describe as a "multi-layered but uncoordinated governance ecosystem," where international norms exist but lack universal enforceability, creating gaps in accountability, safety assurance, and equitable access to AI benefits. (OECD, 2019; UNESCO, 2021; Novelli et al., 2024)

Looking toward the future (2026 and beyond), global governance of AI is likely to intensify but also further fragment before convergence occurs. The accelerating capabilities of generative AI, autonomous systems, and AI-enabled critical infrastructure will increase pressure for binding international agreements, similar to arms control or climate governance regimes. However, geopolitical competition especially between the United States, China, and the European Union will likely shape "AI blocs," where interoperable standards exist within regions but not necessarily across them. Emerging proposals such as a global AI watchdog, international scientific panels, and shared safety benchmarks under the UN system suggest a gradual move toward minimum global norms, particularly around safety, transparency, and frontier model risk management. Yet, the effectiveness of such mechanisms will depend on enforcement capacity and trust between major powers, which remains uncertain. In the most plausible scenario, global AI governance will evolve into a hybrid system: strong regional regulation (notably the EU AI Act as a global standard-setter through regulatory diffusion or "Brussels effect"), combined with soft international coordination under UN-led frameworks. If cooperation succeeds, the future could see the emergence of shared global safety thresholds for advanced AI; if it fails, the world may face deep regulatory fragmentation, increasing risks of misuse, inequality, and strategic instability in AI development. (OECD, 2025; UNESCO, 2024; Chatham House, 2024)

Future Scenarios of Global Power Politics (Post-2026)

The post-2026 global power structure is increasingly expected to move away from a unipolar or even stable bipolar order toward a fluid and contested multipolar system shaped by technology, economics, and military modernization. In this scenario, power is distributed among several major centers particularly the United States, China, the European Union, and emerging middle powers such as India, Türkiye, and Brazil each exerting influence through regional alliances and technological capabilities rather than purely military dominance. Artificial intelligence, semiconductor supply chains, quantum computing, and data governance become central instruments of state power, reinforcing the idea that technological sovereignty is now a core pillar of geopolitical influence. Unlike classical multipolarity in earlier historical eras, this emerging system is highly interdependent, meaning states compete while simultaneously relying on shared global infrastructures such as digital platforms, financial networks, and energy markets. This interdependence creates both stability and tension: while full-scale confrontation is constrained by economic integration, strategic rivalry intensifies in critical domains like AI standards,

cyber capabilities, and space technologies. As a result, the future multipolar order is likely to be "selectively cooperative," where states collaborate on global risks such as climate change and AI safety but remain deeply competitive in high-tech and strategic sectors. (Acharya, 2018; Ikenberry, 2020; Nye, 2023)

A second and more conflict-prone future scenario is the emergence of an "AI Cold War," in which global politics is structured around intense technological rivalry between two dominant blocs, primarily led by the United States and China. In this scenario, artificial intelligence becomes the defining arena of competition, similar to nuclear weapons during the 20th-century Cold War, where control over advanced AI models, chips, data ecosystems, and cloud infrastructure determines global influence. Technology decoupling accelerates, resulting in parallel internet systems, separate semiconductor supply chains, and competing AI governance standards. Countries are pressured to align with one bloc or the other, reducing strategic autonomy for middle powers and increasing geopolitical polarization. Alongside this, cyber warfare, information manipulation, and AI-enabled military systems raise the risks of miscalculation and escalation, especially in contested regions such as the Indo-Pacific. However, unlike the original Cold War, the AI Cold War is more diffuse and economically entangled, making complete separation difficult and increasing the risk of hybrid dependency. This scenario may also trigger arms-control-style negotiations on AI safety, but such agreements would likely be limited and fragile due to mistrust between major powers. (Allison, 2020; West, 2022; Kissinger, 2021)

A third plausible trajectory is the emergence of fragmented techno-blocs, where global power is organized not strictly along ideological or bipolar lines, but through competing technological ecosystems and regulatory spheres. In this scenario, the world is divided into multiple overlapping blocs such as a US-led liberal tech ecosystem, a China-centered state-controlled digital sphere, and a European regulatory bloc emphasizing rights-based digital governance along with regional clusters in Asia, the Middle East, and the Global South seeking technological autonomy. Instead of a single AI race or unified multipolar balance, governance becomes decentralized and inconsistent, producing "islands of standards" in data protection, AI ethics, and digital trade. This fragmentation leads to inefficiencies but also allows states to tailor technology policies to domestic political and cultural contexts. For developing countries, including many in Asia and Africa, this creates both opportunity and vulnerability: they can engage selectively with multiple blocs but may also face dependency on imported technologies and regulatory pressure from competing powers. Over time, fragmented techno-blocs could either stabilize into a loose global patchwork of interoperable systems or deepen into rigid digital spheres of influence, fundamentally reshaping sovereignty, economic development, and global governance structures in the post-2026 world order. (Farrell & Newman, 2019; Floridi, 2021; Goldfarb & Trefler, 2023)

Conclusion

The period 2022 - 2026 marks a decisive transformation in South Asia's power politics, where artificial intelligence has emerged as a strategic asset reshaping military capabilities, economic competitiveness, and diplomatic influence. India's rapid investment in digital infrastructure and AI-driven defense systems, China's deep integration of AI through CPEC-linked technologies, and Pakistan's emerging but constrained digital transition collectively illustrate a widening technological asymmetry in the region. Rather than traditional territorial rivalry alone, competition is increasingly shifting toward data dominance, cyber capabilities, and AI-enabled decision-making systems. This evolving landscape suggests that South Asia is entering a new phase of "technologically mediated geopolitics," where control over emerging technologies will define regional hierarchy, stability, and strategic autonomy.

Findings

1. AI is reshaping South Asia's power politics by shifting rivalry from traditional military competition to technological and digital dominance.
2. India holds a growing AI advantage, widening the strategic and technological gap with Pakistan.
3. China and the United States significantly influence South Asia's AI development through investment, infrastructure, and strategic partnerships.
4. Weak regional governance structures increase risks of cyber conflict, misinformation, and AI-driven security instability.
5. AI is becoming a core determinant of strategic autonomy and regional power hierarchy in South Asia.

Recommendations

1. South Asian states should establish regional AI cooperation frameworks to reduce mistrust and manage technological competition.
2. Pakistan must prioritize AI education, digital infrastructure, and innovation ecosystems to close its capability gap.
3. India, China, and Pakistan should initiate AI risk-reduction dialogues to prevent cyber escalation and strategic miscalculation.
4. Regional organizations like SAARC should develop shared norms on AI ethics, cyber security, and data governance.
5. South Asian countries should actively engage in global AI governance systems to safeguard regional interests and influence international rules.

References

Acemoglu, D., & Restrepo, P. (2020). The wrong kind of AI? Artificial intelligence and the future of labor demand. Journal of Economic Perspectives, 34(4), 3–30.

Acharya, A. (2018). The end of American world order. Polity Press.

Allison, G. (2017). Destined for war: Can America and China escape Thucydides's trap? Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Allison, G. (2020). Destined for war: Can America and China escape Thucydides's trap? Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Bennett, W. L., & Livingston, S. (2018). The disinformation order: Disruptive communication and the decline of democratic institutions. European Journal of Communication, 33(2), 122–139.

Bradshaw, S., & Howard, P. N. (2019). The global disinformation order: 2019 global inventory of organized social media manipulation. Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford.

Brynjolfsson, E., & McAfee, A. (2014). The second machine age: Work, progress, and prosperity in a time of brilliant technologies. W. W. Norton & Company.

Chatham House. (2024). Artificial intelligence and the challenge for global governance. Royal Institute of International Affairs.

Crawford, K. (2021). *Atlas of AI: Power, politics, and the planetary costs of artificial intelligence*. Yale University Press.

Crawford, K. (2021). Atlas of AI: Power, politics, and the planetary costs of artificial intelligence. Yale University Press.

Farrell, H., & Newman, A. L. (2019). Weaponized interdependence. International Security, 44(1), 42–79.

Floridi, L. (2021). The fight for digital sovereignty. Philosophy & Technology, 34(4), 1–6.

Goldfarb, A., & Trefler, D. (2023). AI and international trade. Journal of Economic Perspectives, 37(2), 3–28.

Goldsmith, J., & Wu, T. (2006). Who controls the Internet? Illusions of a borderless world. Oxford University Press.

Horowitz, M. C. (2018). Artificial intelligence, international competition, and the balance of power. Texas National Security Review, 1(3), 36–57.

Ikenberry, G. J. (2020). A world safe for democracy. Yale University Press.

International Energy Agency (IEA). (2023). Electricity 2023: Analysis and forecast to 2025. IEA Publications.

Kissinger, H. (2021). Leadership: Six studies in world strategy. Penguin Press.

Kissinger, H., Schmidt, E., & Huttenlocher, D. (2021). *The age of AI: And our human future*. Little, Brown and Company.

Kissinger, H., Schmidt, E., & Huttenlocher, D. (2021). The age of AI: And our human future. Little, Brown and Company.

Lee, K. F. (2018). AI superpowers: China, Silicon Valley, and the new world order. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.

Miller, C. (2022). Chip war: The fight for the world's most critical technology. Scribner.

NESCO. (2024). Framing the issues: The evolving state of AI governance. UNESCO Policy Brief.

Novelli, C., Hacker, P., Morley, J., Trondal, J., & Floridi, L. (2024). A robust governance for the AI Act: AI Office, AI Board, scientific panel, and national authorities. arXiv.

Nye, J. S. (2023). Soft power and great-power competition. Public Affairs.

OECD. (2019). OECD principles on artificial intelligence. Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

OECD. (2025). Leveraging the standards and quality assurance system for global challenges: Reinforcing regulatory frameworks through standards, measurements and assurance. OECD Publishing.

Scharre, P. (2018). Army of none: Autonomous weapons and the future of war. W. W. Norton & Company.

Segal, A. (2016). The hacked world order: How nations fight, trade, maneuver, and manipulate in the digital age. Public Affairs.

Stiglitz, J. E. (2019). People, power, and profits: Progressive capitalism for an age of discontent. W. W. Norton & Company.

UNESCO. (2021). Recommendation on the ethics of artificial intelligence. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

Van der Velden, M. (2020). 'Fixing the world': Ethics and the politics of AI and data. Ethics and Information Technology, 22(4), 297–309.