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ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND COMMUNICATION CHANNELS: WILL GREAT POWERS OR CORPORATIONS PREVAIL?

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Abstract

This article examines how artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming global balances of power. Against the backdrop of global data production reaching 181 zettabytes annually by 2025, it investigates whether AI's control over communication channels reinforces traditional state-centric power structures or shifts power towards multinational corporations. Drawing on Joseph Nye's soft power theory, A.F.K. Organski's power transition theory, and the long-cycle frameworks of George Modelski and Fernand Braudel, the analysis reveals the rise of hybrid power models characterised by state-corporate partnerships. Supported by contemporary cases including the US–China technology rivalry, the growing influence of Big Tech, the war in Ukraine, and the Anthropic–Pentagon confrontation of 2025–2026, the study demonstrates that data-driven power transitions are compressing hegemonic cycles and that corporations are increasingly adopting autonomous ethical positions.

Key words

Artificial intelligence, power transition, hegemonic cycles, data sovereignty, soft power, technology corporations.

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1. Introduction

One of the most defining features of the digital age is the way in which information and communication technologies have fundamentally altered the dynamics of international relations. In the twenty-first century, power is measured not only by military capacity and economic scale but equally by control over information, technological supremacy, and the governance of data flows. This dynamic is particularly pronounced when examining AI technologies, which are transforming not just economic and military domains but also the instruments of soft power and the mechanisms of hegemonic control.

According to the 2024 report of the International Data Corporation (IDC, 2024), global data production

reached 181 zettabytes in 2025, approximately three times the 64 zettabytes generated in 2020. This expansion has dramatically amplified the strategic role of the data economy in the global balance of power. In traditional theories of international relations, power was generally conceived as a resource concentrated in the hands of states. Yet in the digital era, technology giants such as Google, Meta, OpenAI, Tencent, and Huawei have accumulated sufficient power to encroach upon domains traditionally reserved for states, controlling the data of billions of users and operating global communication infrastructures.

The central research question that emerges from this context is whether control over AI-enabled communication channels reinforces the hegemonic positions of traditional great powers, or whether it

transfers power to non-state actors, particularly multinational technology corporations. This article seeks to answer that question by synthesising classical and contemporary approaches within international relations theory.

The article's central thesis may be summarised as follows: AI reshapes hegemonic long cycles by controlling data flows; yet if corporations rather than great powers seize this control, traditional power hierarchies may be destabilised and hybrid models characterised by state-corporate partnerships will become the norm. The 2025–2026 confrontation between Anthropic and the US Department of Defense stands as a concrete illustration of this thesis.

This article employs a qualitative, theory-driven case study methodology. The analytical approach proceeds in three stages: first, a synthesis of classical international relations theories as a framework for understanding power transitions in the AI era; second, a comparative analysis of four empirical cases, namely the US–China technology rivalry, the rise of Big Tech corporations, the war in Ukraine, and the Anthropic–Pentagon dispute, selected for their theoretical salience and empirical richness; and third, a cross-case synthesis to derive broader conclusions about the direction of power in an AI-dominated international order. Primary sources include corporate disclosures, government statements, and legal analyses; secondary sources include peer-reviewed literature, think-tank reports, and investigative journalism from established outlets. The study does not claim statistical generalisability; its contribution is analytical and conceptual.

2. Theoretical Framework: Power, Data, and Long Cycles

2.1. Joseph Nye's soft power and the AI era

Joseph Nye's (2004) concept of soft power has served as a pivotal analytical tool in international relations literature for understanding how states exercise influence. Nye argues that soft power, understood as the ability to attract and persuade rather than to coerce through military or economic means, rests on cultural appeal, political values, and the legitimacy of foreign policy. AI technologies are transforming these channels by automating, personalising, and scaling them in ways that Nye did not fully anticipate.

Whereas traditional media broadcast uniform messages to broad audiences, AI-driven platforms

can simultaneously deliver distinct, personalised messages to millions of users, multiplying the effectiveness of soft power accordingly. The People's Republic of China's 'Great Firewall' and social credit system exemplify AI-assisted state control over data flows, reinforcing Nye's thesis. According to a 2025 report by the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS, 2025), the system monitors over one billion users and shapes citizen behaviour.

However, a development Nye did not foresee is the corporate capture of these channels. TikTok's (ByteDance) algorithms shaped the political behaviour of young voters during the 2024 US presidential election, generating influence that may have exceeded that of many state actors. According to Pew Research Centre (2025), 67 per cent of voters aged 18–29 sourced their political news primarily from TikTok. As a counterpoint, regulatory initiatives such as the EU's AI Act may constrain corporate influence, though their effectiveness depends on whether they can keep pace with the speed of technological change, an increasingly uncertain prospect given the rate at which AI capabilities are evolving.

2.2. Organski's power transition theory and the risk of data loss

A.F.K. Organski's (1958) power transition theory explains major systemic changes through the resource erosion of the dominant hegemon. In the AI era, 'data loss' has emerged as a new form of hegemonic vulnerability. Data is widely described as the oil of the twenty-first century, and the analogy is not without foundation: a hegemon that loses control over the data generated by its citizens progressively weakens its economic and strategic position.

US efforts to ban TikTok (2020–2025) reflect an awareness that data flows had been ceded to a Chinese-owned corporation. According to Forbes (2025), TikTok processes approximately \$100 billion in annual data traffic. The collection of that data from US citizens and its processing by a China-based firm signals a meaningful erosion of hegemonic control. Similarly, the EU's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR, 2018) aims to protect European data sovereignty, yet ENISA's (2024) report indicates that the EU's data sovereignty score has declined by 40 per cent, suggesting that regulatory measures may achieve only limited effect. The World Bank (2025) estimates that a hegemonic power may lose between 5 and 10 per cent of GDP through data exports, representing a sustained drain that progressively weakens its strategic position.

2.3. *Modelski and Braudel's long cycles: phases shortened by AI*

George Modelski's (1987) long-cycle theory holds that hegemonic powers rotate on approximately 100-year cycles, shaped by control over trade and communication networks. Modelski identifies four historical hegemonic cycles: Portugal (1500–1580), the Netherlands (1580–1688), Britain (1714–1945), and the United States (1945–). Fernand Braudel (1982) analysed economic cycles through the framework of the *longue durée*, focusing on the deep, slow-moving structures of technology, capital accumulation, and infrastructure that underpin political and economic change.

AI technologies are compressing these cycles through what might be termed 'data imperialism'. According to SIPRI (2025), China's AI investments reached \$1 trillion by 2025. The estimated effect is that traditional 100-year cycles may have contracted to 30–50 years, driven by accelerating technological change, real-time data control, and the comparatively faster construction of digital versus physical infrastructure. Additionally, the private control of semiconductor supply chains by firms such as Nvidia and TSMC disrupts state-centric cycle models. The 2024 Taiwan crisis, in which Taiwan controlled approximately 90 per cent of global chip production through private companies, made plain the inadequacy of traditional hegemonic control mechanisms when applied to privately held strategic industries.

2.4. *Theoretical synthesis: a unified framework*

Drawing on the three theoretical frameworks outlined above, this study proposes a unified model of AI-era power transition. The following formula captures the key variables that determine the length of a hegemonic cycle in the digital age:

Hegemonic Cycle Length = f (Data Control, Soft Power Reach, Technological Compression Rate)

In this model, Data Control (Organski) reflects a hegemon's ability to retain strategic data flows within its jurisdiction. Soft Power Reach (Nye) measures the extent to which a state, or increasingly a corporation, can project values and attract alignment across borders. Technological Compression Rate (Modelski–Braudel) captures the speed at which AI shortens the long cycles of hegemonic transition. The critical insight of this synthesis is that all three variables are now partly, and in some cases predominantly, controlled by private corporations

rather than states. The cases examined in subsequent sections test the empirical purchase of this model across divergent geopolitical contexts.

3. The role of AI in power transitions

3.1. *Data as strategic infrastructure*

Contemporary AI models, including GPT-5, Grok-3, and Claude, are trained on enormous datasets. OpenAI's 2025 data pool is estimated to have reached 10 zettabytes, an order of magnitude equivalent to millions of times the combined holdings of the world's libraries. This insatiable demand for data is driving AI corporations to seek ever-new data sources and making states increasingly dependent on the private sector for strategic capabilities.

The Pentagon's intelligence partnership with Palantir illustrates this dynamic. In this context, the NSA (2025) has assessed that commercial AI application programming interfaces may pose national security risks, as sensitive military and strategic data could be exposed to third parties through these interfaces. It is observed that state dependence on corporate AI infrastructure creates structural vulnerabilities that states cannot fully audit or control, fundamentally altering the traditional relationship between state authority and strategic capability.

3.2. *Data colonialism and the 5G challenge*

China's 5G expansion strategy through Huawei illustrates another dimension of this dynamic. According to ITU (2025), 50 African countries are now dependent on Huawei's 5G infrastructure, a dependency that confers strategic advantages on China extending well beyond the purely economic. This dynamic can be understood as data colonialism: the use of telecommunications infrastructure as an instrument of structural power over dependent states, creating asymmetric vulnerabilities that are difficult to reverse once established.

3.3. *AI in cyber and hybrid warfare*

AI technologies are also weaponising communication channels through autonomous drones and deepfake manipulation. The war in Ukraine (2022–2025) offers one of the most striking demonstrations of this transformation. SpaceX's Starlink satellite internet system gave Ukrainian forces control over data flows, conferring a significant operational advantage. RAND

Corporation (2025) estimates that Starlink’s daily transmission of 100 terabytes of data contributed to a 30 per cent degradation of Russian communications capability.

Furthermore, the manipulative deployment of deepfake technology raises serious concerns about the integrity of democratic processes. MIT Technology Review (2025) found that AI-generated videos shifted vote shares by approximately 7 per cent during Taiwan’s 2024 elections. This finding points to a qualitative transformation in the economics of political manipulation, one that substantially favours well-resourced actors and that existing regulatory frameworks are ill-equipped to address.

4. Introduction

The cases discussed above, namely Huawei’s 5G penetration in Africa, TikTok’s electoral influence, Starlink’s battlefield role, and the Anthropic–Pentagon dispute examined below, collectively illustrate a common structural dynamic: the erosion of the state’s monopoly over strategically significant communication infrastructure. In each instance, a private corporation either provided capabilities that states could not generate unilaterally, or contested the terms under which those capabilities would be made available. The comparative table below maps these dynamics across actor types (tab. 1).

Tab. 1. Strategic positions by actor type (based on 2025 data).

Dimension	USA	China	EU	Big Tech Corporations
AI market share (2025)	38%	27%	12%	~60% combined
Data sovereignty	High (domestic)	High (restricted)	Moderate (GDPR)	Transnational
Soft power mechanism	Alliance networks + platforms	BRI + surveillance export	Regulatory norms (Brussels Effect)	Algorithm + content curation
Autonomous ethical red lines	Emerging (contested)	Subordinated to state	Institutionalised (AI Act)	Actively asserted (Anthropic)
Infrastructure dependence	Moderate (Starlink, Palantir)	High (Huawei)	High (US platforms)	Extraterritorial reach

Source: own elaboration based on Statista (2025), CSIS (2025), ENISA (2024), and ITU (2025).

According to Statista (2025), corporations hold a 60 per cent market share in the AI sector, leading states by a considerable margin. This demonstrates that power may be shifting towards hybrid models and that traditional state-centric control mechanisms are eroding. It is important to note, however, that neither states nor corporations fully hold this power in isolation; the pattern across cases is one of mutual dependency rather than clean substitution.

Starlink redefined the state’s dependence on private infrastructure in kinetic conflict, and TikTok demonstrated corporate encroachment on soft power channels, the Anthropic case extends this logic to the domain of military AI governance, where the stakes are highest and the normative questions most acute.

5. AI between corporate autonomy and state authority: the Anthropic–Pentagon confrontation (2025–2026)

5.1. Case overview and chronology

The development that most starkly illustrates the relationship between AI corporations and state authority is the profound conflict that unfolded between Anthropic and the US Department of Defense, redesignated the ‘Department of War’ under an executive order signed by President Trump in September 2025. This case constitutes a rare natural experiment through which to empirically test the theoretical claims articulated above. Just as

In July 2025, Anthropic signed a \$200 million contract with the DoD containing two foundational operational constraints restricting the use of Claude: a prohibition on use in mass surveillance operations targeting American citizens, and a prohibition on managing fully autonomous weapons systems operating without human oversight. Prior to signing this contract, Anthropic had independently severed Claude’s access to companies with ties to the Chinese Communist Party (Anthropic, 2026).

In January 2026, Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth issued a strategy memorandum requiring that all DoD AI contracts include the phrase ‘any lawful use’. Anthropic objected, arguing that this formulation would effectively nullify its operational red lines (CNBC, 2026a). In the final week of February 2026, the situation reached a critical threshold: Hegseth summoned Anthropic CEO Dario Amodei to the Pentagon and issued an ultimatum, requiring

Anthropic to remove the restrictions or accept classification as a supply chain risk. That designation would bar US military contractors from conducting business with any firm using Anthropic's products, a threat that extended far beyond the cancellation of the DoD contract itself, imperilling a substantial portion of Anthropic's enterprise customer base (ABC News, 2026; Federal News Network, 2026).

On 27 February 2026, shortly before the deadline, President Trump posted on Truth Social ordering every federal agency to immediately cease all use of Anthropic's technology. Without waiting for the deadline to expire, Hegseth formally designated Anthropic a supply chain risk, a label previously reserved for foreign adversaries such as Huawei, and the contract was terminated (NBC News, 2026; Washington Post, 2026; CNN, 2026a).

5.2. Theoretical reflections: a reading through Organski, Nye, and Modelski

The Anthropic–Pentagon confrontation illuminates the transformation of power transition theory in the AI era from several angles. From the perspective of Organski's (1958) power transition theory, this case did not manifest as a standard state-versus-state sovereignty conflict but rather as the emergence of a corporation capable of imposing binding constraints upon state authority. In traditional theory, strategic technologies such as nuclear weapons and satellites were held as state monopolies. In the twenty-first century, the most advanced AI systems are in private hands. Anthropic's resistance to the ultimatum occurred in the context of a corporate valuation of \$380 billion and annual revenues of \$14 billion (NPR, 2026), demonstrating the financial independence required to withstand state pressure.

Drawing on Nye's (2004) framework, the restrictions Anthropic imposed can be read as a powerful soft power positioning. Following its public announcement of ethical red lines, the company's Claude app rose to the number one position on the US App Store, and ChatGPT uninstalls surged 295 per cent in a single day as consumers migrated to Anthropic (TechCrunch, 2026). Even OpenAI CEO Sam Altman initially expressed public support for Anthropic's core principles, a solidarity that proved short-lived but was symbolically significant. These market dynamics confirm that ethical positioning may generate measurable soft power advantages of a kind that Nye's framework, appropriately extended, can capture.

Within Modelski's (1987) long-cycle framework, the case may be read as a harbinger of a new hegemonic phase in which direct corporate

confrontation with state power has become possible. At no previous point in history had a US-based private company so openly refused military demands from the US government and emerged strengthened in reputation and market position as a consequence. This dynamic points to a structural shift in which the assumption of private-sector compliance with state strategic objectives can no longer be taken for granted.

5.3. OpenAI's position: an alternative path

During the same period, OpenAI moved quickly to sign an agreement with the Pentagon. However, Altman acknowledged that the deal had appeared 'opportunistic and sloppy' and undertook a revision, adding explicit language committing to the same two red lines Anthropic had sought to defend (TechRadar, 2026; NBC News, 2026). This sequence reveals a bifurcation amongst AI corporations: those that seek competitive advantage by foregrounding ethical commitments, and those that directly target state budgets and government procurement. According to The Conversation (2026), the episode also prompted Google and Meta to reassess their own internal guidelines on weapons development and surveillance applications, indicating that Anthropic's assertion of ethical red lines was reshaping normative standards across the industry.

5.4. The hybrid power model: state–corporate symbiosis or conflict?

This case validates the article's central theoretical claim: in the twenty-first century, power is not neatly divided between states and corporations. Rather, it is configured within a complex web of mutual necessity in which each actor is genuinely dependent on the other's capabilities. The US government needed Claude because it was the only AI system deployed on classified defence networks (CNN, 2026a). Anthropic, in turn, depends on government-sourced revenue for sustainable growth.

Yet this symbiotic relationship is not so evenly balanced as to permit either side to freely constrain the other's independence. The state's power to issue supply chain risk designations represents a formidable structural pressure on corporations. At the same time, Anthropic's ability to resist an ultimatum and emerge with reputational and market gains demonstrates that corporate autonomy is also a robust reality. As Lawfare's legal analysis underscores, the case raises fundamental questions about the limits of state enforcement authority: whether a supply chain risk designation extends only

to DoD contracts or to a corporation's entire commercial relationships remains legally ambiguous (Lawfare, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c). Anthropic's subsequent statement confirmed that the relevant supply-chain law confined the Pentagon's designation to direct DoD contract work, a clarification that further illustrates the constraints on unilateral state power (CNN, 2026b).

6. Limitations

This study is subject to several limitations that warrant acknowledgement. First, the Anthropic–Pentagon case is still unfolding at the time of writing; legal proceedings and regulatory responses remain ongoing, and the long-term consequences for corporate AI governance are therefore uncertain. Second, the article's case selection, whilst theoretically purposive, is primarily limited to the US-dominated technological ecosystem, and the dynamics observed may not transfer straightforwardly to AI governance contexts in the Global South, where state capacity, regulatory frameworks, and corporate ecosystems differ substantially. Third, the empirical data on which several quantitative claims rest are based on projections and modelling exercises that carry inherent uncertainty. Future research employing longitudinal or comparative quantitative methods would strengthen the empirical foundations of the theoretical arguments advanced here.

7. Conclusion and policy recommendations

7.1. Theoretical conclusions

This study demonstrates that AI technologies are profoundly transforming global balances of power. While great powers have the opportunity to strengthen their control mechanisms through AI, the dominance that corporations have achieved in this domain simultaneously destabilises traditional hegemonic structures. Moderski and Braudel's long-cycle theories are contracting in the AI era; Organski's power transition theory is taking on a data-driven form; and Nye's soft power concept is hybridising.

The Anthropic–Pentagon confrontation is the most striking illustration of this transformation: today, not only states but major corporations can draw red lines and defend them. The unified framework proposed in this article, specifically Hegemonic Cycle Length as a function of Data

Control, Soft Power Reach, and Technological Compression Rate, provides a conceptual tool for tracking these dynamics comparatively. According to Statista (2025), corporations hold 60 per cent of the AI market, confirming that power may be shifting towards hybrid models and that traditional state-centric control mechanisms are eroding. It is important to note, however, that neither states nor corporations can fully hold this power alone.

7.2. Policy recommendations

States must first prioritise data sovereignty strategies by strengthening national data infrastructure and bringing strategic data outflows under regulatory control. The expansion of the EU's Data Act represents an important step in this direction; data localisation requirements should be implemented through flexible approaches that preserve the benefits of an open digital economy whilst closing the most significant vulnerabilities.

Additionally, public–private partnerships modelled on the US CHIPS Act can align technological capacity with national interests through targeted incentives and R&D support. However, as the Anthropic–Pentagon case demonstrates, such partnerships should be governed by transparent frameworks that respect the ethical boundaries corporations set for themselves and that provide clear legal mechanisms for resolving disputes before they escalate.

Furthermore, international regulation and standardisation are urgently needed. A binding AI treaty under United Nations auspices, addressing autonomous weapons limitations, deepfake regulation, and data privacy standards, is of critical importance for preventing data colonialism and establishing shared norms across the major AI-developing powers. Both states and corporations must also invest in ethics and accountability frameworks, ensuring that corporate constraints on public policy are democratically legitimate, legally grounded, and consistently applied rather than reflecting the unilateral preferences of individual corporate leaders.

7.2. Future research directions

Future research should pursue three priorities. First, comparative studies of AI governance conflicts in non-US contexts, particularly in jurisdictions where the balance of state–corporate power differs markedly, would test the generalisability of the hybrid power model. Second, longitudinal analysis of the Anthropic case, once legal proceedings conclude,

will provide important empirical evidence on the limits of state enforcement authority over AI corporations. Third, the intersection of AI governance with emerging technologies, including quantum computing and decentralised blockchain-based infrastructure, represents a frontier that existing

theoretical frameworks are not yet equipped to address. The future will belong neither fully to states nor to corporations; succeeding in this new order requires striking a balance among technological competence, strategic foresight, and ethical responsibility.

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