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Geopolitics in the digital age: the U.S.-China competition through their narratives on digital technologies

Juan Pablo Soriano Gatica
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona

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Abstract

The intensifying technological competition between the United States and China is reshaping global power dynamics, deepening the digital divide, and complicating efforts to address shared global challenges. Adopting a neoclassical geopolitics approach –recognizing the interplay of material capabilities and ideational factors –, this article examines how geopolitical narratives regarding digital technologies, particularly artificial intelligence (AI), reflect and shape this competition. It proposes three heuristic "geopolitical narratives" grounded in international relations theories: a "closed world" narrative (realism), emphasizing security and sovereignty; an "open world" narrative (liberalism), focusing on cooperation and multilateral governance; and a "world of injustices" narrative (critical theories), highlighting global inequalities and digital divides. Through a qualitative content analysis of political speeches by Joe Biden and Xi Jinping (2018-2023), the study reveals how these leaders strategically deploy narratives to justify policies, promote interests, and influence global AI discourses. The findings underscore the bidirectional nature of narratives, which both reflect and shape strategic objectives and policy decisions. This article contributes to understanding how narratives influence global AI governance, highlighting their role in shaping international alliances and technological norms amid shifting geopolitical dynamics.

Keywords

United States; China; geopolitical narratives; discursive strategies; artificial intelligence; neoclassical geopolitics

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Geopolítica en la era digital: la competencia entre EE. UU. y China a través de sus narrativas sobre tecnologías digitales

Resumen

La creciente competencia tecnológica entre Estados Unidos y China está remodelando la dinámica de poder global, ensanchando la brecha digital y complicando los esfuerzos para abordar los desafíos globales compartidos. Adoptando un enfoque geopolítico neoclásico –reconociendo la interacción de capacidades materiales y factores de ideación–, este artículo examina cómo las narrativas geopolíticas sobre tecnologías digitales, especialmente la inteligencia artificial (IA), reflejan y dan forma a esta competencia. Propone tres «narrativas geopolíticas» heurísticas basadas en teorías de relaciones internacionales: una narrativa de «mundo cerrado» (realismo), que enfatiza la seguridad y la soberanía; una narrativa de «mundo abierto» (liberalismo), que se centra en la cooperación y la gobernanza multilateral; y una narrativa de «mundo de injusticias» (teorías críticas), que destaca las desigualdades globales y las divisiones digitales. Mediante un análisis cualitativo del contenido de los discursos políticos de Joe Biden y de Xi Jinping (2018-2023), el estudio revela cómo estos líderes implementan estratégicamente narrativas para justificar políticas, promover intereses e influir en los discursos globales sobre la IA. Los hallazgos subrayan la naturaleza bidireccional de las narrativas, que reflejan y dan forma a los objetivos estratégicos y a las decisiones políticas. Este artículo contribuye a comprender cómo las narrativas influyen en la gobernanza global de la IA, destacando su papel en la conformación de alianzas internacionales y normas tecnológicas en medio de una dinámica geopolítica cambiante.

Palabras clave

Estados Unidos; China; narrativas geopolíticas; estrategias discursivas; inteligencia artificial; geopolítica neoclásica

Introduction

The rapid advancement of digital technologies – especially artificial intelligence AI, digitization, automation, quantum computing, big data, and blockchain – is reshaping global politics (Allison, 2020; Bradford, 2023; Inkster, 2021; McCarthy, 2017). This transformation intensifies technological competition between the United States (U.S.) and China, altering geopolitical dynamics, complicating diplomatic relations, and raising concerns about international security. This competition risks fragmenting the global technological landscape, fostering divergent regulations, and expanding competing technological blocs. Furthermore, technological decoupling between the U.S. and China could further exacerbate the global digital divide, undermining international cooperation on global challenges such as climate change, global health, economic inequalities, poverty, and conflict prevention.

Recent analyses explore the geopolitical implications of this competition. Authors have investigated its geopolitical consequences, including concerns about a new Cold War-style contest for technological supremacy (Allison, 2020; Bryson & Malikova, 2021; Retzmann, 2024; Schmid *et al*., 2025; Wu, 2020), the potential effects of technological decoupling (Inkster, 2021), the influence on military strategies and policy development (Johnson, 2021; Mori, 2019; Sun, 2019; Wong, 2021), and the conflict of regulatory standards and governance models in AI and cyberspace (Bradford, 2023; Hine & Floridi, 2022). Understanding how narratives shape geopolitical strategies is crucial, as discourse significantly influences world politics and affects how states justify their actions and strategic priorities (Deudney *et al*., 2023; Hagström & Gustafsson, 2019; Linklater, 2009; Prochniak & Nitoiu, 2023). Narratives aid political leaders in constructing persuasive frameworks, impacting perceptions and shaping debates on global governance (Miskimmon *et al*., 2018).

The article adopts a neoclassical geopolitics perspective, that conceptualizes geopolitics as shaped by material and ideational factors. Neoclassical geopolitics is a perspective that "joins geopolitical factors (e.g., space, position, circulation, resources, politicomilitary structures), and systemic imperatives [...] with the geopolitical agents' perceptions and capacities" (Morgado, 2024, p. 2; see also, Morgado, 2023).

This study integrates insights from neoclassical geopolitics, geopolitical narratives, and strategic narrative analy-

sis to examine how the U.S. and China utilize "geopolitical narratives" surrounding AI and digital technologies to frame their policy priorities and enhance their influence in the development of global governance for these technologies. Analyzing speeches by Presidents Joe Biden and Xi Jinping reveals how these narratives justify policy decisions, legitimize strategic choices, and influence international alliances within the framework of global digital competition. By focusing on speeches from the highest political leaders, this analysis captures how "geopolitical narratives" are constructed to justify policies and engage with both domestic and international audiences. As Retzmann (2024) underscores, examining discursive processes related to AI is crucial for understanding how political actors construct meaning within broader power dynamics.

To operationalize the concept of "geopolitical narratives", this study presents three narratives as heuristic tools for analyzing how political leaders frame AI and digital technologies. Based on international relations (IR) theories, these narratives include: a "closed world" narrative, which emphasizes security, sovereignty, and power competition, grounded in realism; an "open world" narrative, highlighting cooperation, multilateralism, and shared governance, rooted in liberalism; and a "world of injustices" narrative, focusing on inequalities and global divides, emerging from critical theories. These narratives do not test or validate IR theories; rather, they serve as heuristic tools to identify how leaders employ different narratives to justify policies, critique competitors and legitimize alliances. This approach integrates neoclassical geopolitics, strategic narrative analysis, and IR theories to create a flexible and theoretically grounded model for analyzing debates on the geopolitical implications of AI and digital technologies.

The article employs a structured coding scheme to classify frames and keywords linked to these narratives. The empirical analysis focuses on U.S. and Chinese political speeches from 2018 to 2023. During this period, both governments emphasized the need to promote technological autonomy, reduce dependencies on competitors, and foster alliances with democratic states. Additionally, during this time, these governments advanced policy initiatives to become leaders in AI-driven innovation, positioning AI as a tool for economic development and technological sovereignty (Jaworsky & Qiaoan, 2021; Lambach *et al*., 2023). Between 2018 and 2023, U.S.-China technological competition intensified, as reflected in key policy initiatives. The U.S. CHIPS and Science Act, signed in 2022, aimed at strengthening domestic semiconductor manufacturing and AI research to reduce foreign dependency and counter China's influence (Stanford HAI, 2022). The U.S.-EU Trade and Technology Council (TTC) was created to promote transatlantic cooperation on AI standards and supply chain resilience. China's AI Self-Sufficiency Policy focused on reducing reliance on foreign technologies by investing in domestic innovation. Meanwhile, the Digital Silk Road advanced China's digital influence by promoting infrastructure development, particularly in the Global South (Heeks et al., 2024). These initiatives highlight the strategic efforts of both nations to secure technological leadership (Chow, 2024).

The following sections analyze how U.S. and Chinese leaders employ geopolitical narratives in their speeches to reflect and influence policy strategies, shaping the course of global debates on AI and digital technologies.

1. Literature review and analytical framework

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) and digital technologies is reshaping global power dynamics, with narratives emerging as essential tools for framing geopolitical strategies and influencing governance structures. This section examines the role of narratives in international politics and AI policy, introducing three geopolitical narratives – "closed world", "open world" and "world of injustices" – to understand how political leaders frame AI's geopolitical implications.

1.1. Framing power dynamics: international relations theories and geopolitical narratives

Classical geopolitics emphasizes geographical determinism and material power structures, yet it often overlooks ideational and discursive influences on state behavior (Moisio, 2015). Critical geopolitics, in contrast, focuses on the social construction of geopolitical space but neglects material constraints and power dynamics (Dalby, 1991; Ó Tuathail, 1996). This study adopts a neoclassical geopolitical approach that integrates material and ideational factors to construct AI-related geopolitical narratives (Morgado, 2023; 2024). Given the role of AI in shaping global interactions – where narratives about security, cooperation, and inequality intertwine with material considerations – neoclassical geopolitics offers a framework to understand how states justify AI-related policies. This ap-

proach acknowledges that geopolitical strategies depend on material power and narratives to justify actions and shape international politics. He and Ramasamy emphasize that narratives are essential to power politics, influencing interstate relations and shaping policy (2020, p. 318).

Despite extensive literature, there is no consensus on the definition of "geopolitical narratives". For Postel-Vinay (2005, p.2), a geopolitical narrative sets out "a clear, quasi-visual manner, arguments that will stimulate at least the mobilization of the nation, and if possible, the greater part of the international community". Pamment (2014) connects geopolitical narratives, strategic narratives, and geopolitical discourses to analyze public diplomacy. He writes that "[g]eopolitical discourse forms the building blocks through which actors understand the world and make decisions amid complex struggles over ideas, power relations, and credibility" (Ibid., 2014, p. 51). Gillwald and Wavre (2023) define geopolitical narratives as tools "to examine the intersection of geopolitics and communications, [...] understood as a dynamic and ever-negotiated social product based on the interactions of states with their societies and with external actors, states and societies" (Ibid., 2023, p. 24). This article adopts Jansen *et al.*'s (2023) perspective that "geopolitical narratives" are discursive instruments central to strategic competition. These narratives are constructed to influence international agendas, perceptions, and policy frameworks, and they are "designed to influence and shape ideas and beliefs through persuasion, framing, and agenda-setting to pursue a specific worldview" (Ibid., p. 3). This aligns with neoclassical geopolitics, which emphasizes the role of narratives in shaping geopolitical actions alongside material factors. Both perspectives recognize that narratives shape evolving geopolitical competition.

The literature indicates that states utilize narratives to justify and legitimize their policies. From the perspective of strategic narratives analysis, Miskimmon et al. (2018) highlight how narratives shape global perceptions, justify decisions, and influence governance. Narratives provide coherence to complex international dynamics, assisting in framing decisions and mobilizing audiences. This article advocates for a deeper dialogue between the literature on geopolitical narratives and strategic narratives analysis. In recent studies, Retzmann (2024) demonstrates how AI narratives shape U.S.-China competition, while Schmid *et al*. (2025) describe it as a "geopolitical innovation race", emphasizing how varied narratives influence international positioning. Consistent with these studies, this article explores how U.S. and Chinese leaders deploy geopolitical narratives on AI and digital technologies to advance national objectives and justify policy decisions.

1.2. Geopolitical narratives: closed, open, and unjust worlds

To identify how political actors leverage geopolitical narratives as strategic tools for framing political realities and influencing global power structures (Jansen *et al*., 2023; Miskimmon *et al*., 2018; Morgado, 2023; 2024), this study employs IR theories as the foundation to operationalize the concept of "geopolitical narratives". Three narratives were developed to analyze political speeches on AI and digital technologies: a "closed world" narrative emphasizing security, sovereignty, and power competition; an "open world" narrative highlighting cooperation, multilateralism, and shared governance; and a "world of injustices" narrative addressing global inequalities, digital divides, and power asymmetries.

Realism, liberalism, and critical theories serve as the foundations for the three ideal-type geopolitical narratives. This study employs the social science approach of "ideal types" to construct these narratives. The ideal type highlights critical aspects of a social phenomenon without capturing its full complexity (Swedberg, 2018). By focusing on security, sovereignty, and power competition, realism aids in analysing how states prioritize AI development to safeguard national interests and achieve technological autonomy. Liberalism, which emphasizes cooperation and shared governance, frames narratives that promote AI as a tool for global collaboration. Critical theories, concentrating on inequalities and power asymmetries, provide insights into how narratives approach global digital divides and the ethical implications of AI. These international relations theories function as analytical tools for constructing narratives that examine how states justify their strategic objectives and policies regarding AI and other digital technologies.

The "closed world" narrative is based on realist approaches to international relations (Morgenthau, 1993 [1948]; Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 2001). In a "closed world", constant rivalry for power and security often results in conflicts and zero-sum competition. Key concepts such as power politics, self-help, and the anarchic nature of the international system shape this narrative. Examining digital technologies through this lens highlights how states utilize them to bolster security, sovereignty, autonomy and competitive advantages. This narrative also demonstrates

states' use of digital technologies for power projection and domestic control in a world characterized by uncertainty.

The geopolitical narrative, referred to as an "open world" narrative, draws upon liberal approaches in international relations (Doyle, 1986; Ikenberry, 2020; Keohane, 2020). While recognising power dynamics, liberalism emphasizes the potential for mutual advantage through diplomacy, trade and multilateral cooperation. Concepts such as interdependence and international institutions are integral to this narrative, highlighting shared norms and values that foster cooperation. By examining digital technologies through this narrative, this study focuses on how they facilitate global connectivity, international cooperation, and cross-border communication and understanding.

The narrative of a "world of injustices" is rooted in the critical theories of International Relations (Cox, 1981; Ashley, 1984; Linklater, 2007). Critical theories focus on injustices, inequalities, and the necessity for emancipation in global politics, critiquing established power structures and promoting solidarity among marginalized groups of states and peoples to confront oppression and inequalities. Analysing digital technologies from this perspective reveals how they can either reinforce or challenge existing power dynamics and their connection to broader struggles for global justice. Digital technologies can amplify the voices of the marginalized and facilitate grassroots movements for social change. Conversely, they also raise concerns about digital surveillance, censorship, algorithmic biases, and "digital authoritarianism".

In the following section, these three geopolitical narratives guide the analysis of U.S. and Chinese political speeches on digital technologies, particularly AI.

2. Methodological framework

Dittmer and Sharp (2014) categorize geopolitical discourse into formal (academic), practical (state-oriented), and popular (media-driven) branches. This study focuses on practical geopolitical discourse, analysing how U.S. and Chinese leaders articulate narratives on AI and digital technology in their speeches. Such speeches serve as strategic tools to justify policies and shape geopolitical strategies, aligning with research that emphasizes speeches as key sources for identifying foreign policy objectives (Jansen *et al*., 2023; Miskimmon *et al*., 2018).

The analysis focuses on public speeches and statements by top political leaders that reference AI and digital technologies. For the U.S., fourteen speeches were analyzed from 2021 to 2023. This includes ten speeches by President Joe Biden, one by President Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris (White House, 2023e), one by Kamala Harris (White House, 2023f), and two by Alondra Nelson, Deputy Director for Science and Society in the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP) (White House, 2022c and 2022e).[1] For China, twelve speeches were analyzed from 2018 to 2023, consisting of ten by President Xi Jinping, one by Li Xi, a member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (FMPRC, 2023), and one by Zheng Zeguang, Chinese Ambassador to the UK (Chinese Embassy in the UK, 2023).[2]

The selected period captures key shifts in the U.S.-China geopolitical competition. It marks a transition from the first Trump administration's more unilateral and transactional approach to a focus on multilateralism, international partnerships, and strategic competition with China. Biden emphasized multilateralism, ethical AI governance, and global technological leadership. Additionally, 2018 marked the beginning of China's strategic "assertive turn" (Lams, 2018; Peña, 2018). This shift emphasized intensified research in basic and applied sciences, prioritization of cutting-edge technologies, national innovation system development, and the cultivation of new science and technology leaders (Chinese Embassy in Argentina, 2017).

A qualitative content analysis (QCA) was conducted following Mayring (2014), using a deductive coding framework to systematically examine geopolitical narratives in political

1. The U.S. speeches were sourced from the White House's digital archive of the Biden administration (https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/).
2. The English translations of China's speeches were obtained from the Center for Security and Emerging Technologies at Georgetown University (https://cset.georgetown.edu/), the DigiChina Project at Stanford University (https://digichina.stanford.edu/), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China (https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/), the State Council Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China (SCIO) (http://english.scio.gov.cn/), and the Xinhuanet news agency (http://www.xinhuanet.com/english).

speeches. QCA was selected for its ability to identify patterns in textual data while maintaining contextual sensitivity, making it appropriate for analyzing the rhetorical framing of AI-related policies. The coding framework was developed around three IR-based geopolitical narratives: – the "closed world, "open world, and "world of injustices. This framework draws on literature regarding geopolitical narratives, the geopolitics of AI and digital technologies, and the U.S.-China technological competition. Keywords and frames were assigned to each category, facilitating structured yet flexible identification of narratives in political discourse (see Table 1).

The narratives provided a structured framework for identifying specific frames and keywords that reflected how U.S. and Chinese leaders constructed and justified AI-related policies. For instance, references to sovereignty, security, and technological autonomy were coded under the "closed world" narrative, while multilateral cooperation and shared governance were aligned with the "open world" narrative. Discussions of inequalities, digital divides and global justice were categorized as part of the "world of injustices" narrative. This ensured that the theoretical framework directly informed the empirical analysis and enhanced methodological coherence by explicitly connecting strategic narrative analysis with coding procedures.

The coding process adopted an iterative approach to ensure validity and reliability. Initially, the scheme was tested on a sample of speeches, refined for clarity, and adjusted to capture nuances and overlapping frames. Coding was performed manually, supplemented by PDF viewer software to systematically identify and categorize relevant textual segments. Annotation and highlighting tools were utilized to mark key phrases and frames within the speeches. To enhance reliability, the coding scheme underwent multiple rounds of refinement, ensuring accuracy in narrative identification. Finally, narratives were not treated as mutually exclusive; instead, they were analyzed as rhetorical tools used to justify AI-related policies. This approach acknowledges the fluidity of geopolitical discourse, where multiple narratives may coexist or be strategically combined within political rhetoric.

Table 1. Keywords and frames for identifying geopolitical narratives in AI-related speeches

Geopolitical narrative	*Key frames*	*Key words & representative phrases*
Closed world (*Realism*)	AI as a national security asset	"Technological sovereignty", "national security", "military applications", "AI arms race", "autonomous systems", "AI for defense", "strategic advantage", "geopolitical competition", "containment strategy", "AI in intelligence operations"
	Techno-nationalism & digital sovereignty	"Technological blocs", "digital borders", "domestic AI innovation", "technological self-sufficiency", "state-backed AI research", "national AI strategy", "technological independence", "restricted AI trade", "strategic decoupling", "digital infrastructure"
	Economic protectionism in AI development	"AI export controls", "safeguarding critical technology", "domestic AI supply chains", "economic security", "strategic AI investments", "AI industrial policy"
Open world (*Liberalism*)	AI as a driver of international cooperation	"Common global challenges", "multilateral governance", "global partnerships", "AI for good", "transnational AI research", "cross-border collaboration", "international AI treaties", "harmonized AI regulations"
	AI and economic globalization	"AI-driven trade", "global AI workforce", "foreign AI investments", "market-driven AI innovation", "AI startups", "public-private AI partnerships", "AI-driven economic growth", "interoperable AI standards"
	AI as a tool for diplomatic engagement	"AI diplomacy", "tech alliances", "bridging the AI divide", "international AI ethical standards", "open AI ecosystems", "shared AI norms", "global AI standardization"
World of injustices (*Critical theories*)	AI as a tool of global power asymmetries	"Digital colonialism", "AI-driven inequality", "data exploitation", "AI and surveillance", "monopolization of AI", "corporate AI dominance", "unequal access" "technological imperialism"
	Technological dependency and digital inequalities	"North-South AI divide", "Global South cooperation", "AI regulatory inequalities", "technological dependence", "digital underdevelopment", "AI-driven socio-economic inequalities"
	AI and social control mechanisms	"AI surveillance", "state AI monitoring", "digital authoritarianism", "algotritmic bias", "AI-driven social credit systems", "cyber-policing through AI"

Source: own creation

3. Geopolitical narratives on digital technologies in U.S. and Chinese political discourse

This section utilizes the three geopolitical narratives to analyze how President Joe Biden and President Xi Jinping portrayed AI and other digital technologies in their political discourse.

3.1. A "closed world": geopolitical competition and technological blocs

The "closed world" narrative emphasizes technological autonomy and sovereignty to enhance national interests and security. Frames within this narrative draw parallels between current technological competition and the Cold War, warning of a world divided into technological blocs. Discourses from the U.S. and China underscore that technological competition is central to protecting their geopolitical positions.

President Biden's speeches consistently portrayed China as a strategic rival. Early in his term, he warned that:

> "Other countries – especially China – are making unprecedented investments and doing everything in their power to promote the growth of new industries and eclipse America's scientific and technological leadership. Our future depends on our ability to keep pace with our competitors in the fields that will define the economy of tomorrow" (White House, 2021a).

Similarly, during the 2021 virtual Munich Security Conference, Biden told European leaders:

> "You know, we must prepare together for a long-term strategic competition with China [...] Competition with China is going to be stiff. That's what I expect, and that's what I welcome, because I believe in the global system Europe and the United States, together with our allies in the Indo-Pacific, worked so hard to build over the last 70 years" (White House, 2021b).

President Biden's speeches promoted investments in critical technologies to address competition with China, ensure national security, and set global regulatory standards for emerging technologies (White House, 2021b; 2022a; 2023d; 2023e). In 2023, during a meeting with the President's Council of Advisors on Science and Technology, Biden portrayed winning the technological competition as vital for restoring global leadership, noting that the U.S. had fallen behind in several critical technologies due to its strategic competitors investing aggressively to displace the U.S. from technological leadership (White House, 2023d).

China's "closed world" geopolitical narrative can be seen in its opposition to technological blockades and bloc confrontations rooted in Cold War mentalities, its rejection of unilateralism and hegemonism, and its condemnation of sanctions, technological decoupling, and supply chain disruptions. Additionally, the frames employed by Xi Jinping and other high-ranking officials consistently advocate for safeguarding the interests of developing countries within the global technology landscape (CSET, 2020; SCIO, 2023b; Chinese Embassy in the Netherlands, 2023; FMPRC, 2023). President Xi Jinping's speeches promote the acceleration of AI development to position China as a global leader in innovation and productivity while emphasizing digital autonomy and avoiding technological dependencies. Some of his speeches urge China to become a global science and technology superpower (Murphy *et al*., 2018) and to adopt a "cyber superpower strategy" (Creemers *et al*., 2021).

President Xi Jinping also employs the frames of technological nationalism and autonomy to stress that China must: avoid scientific and technological dependencies, consolidate its digital autonomy, and develop its autonomous capabilities and technological self-reliance (Creemers & Kania, 2018; Murphy *et al*., 2018b; CSET, 2020; Creemers *et al*., 2021). In 2018, Xi Jinping led a Politburo study session emphasising the ongoing importance of AI in furthering China's development and governance objectives. During that meeting, he urged for:

> "[A]ccelerating the development of a new generation of AI as an important strategic handhold for China to gain the initiative in global science and technology competition, and it is an important strategic resource driving our country's leapfrog development in science and technology, its industrial optimization and upgrading, and a comprehensive leap ahead in productivity" (Creemers & Kania, 2018).

The U.S. and China both regard AI as a critical national security issue due to its transformative potential and associated risks. Policymakers emphasize the dual nature of AI, presenting transformative opportunities in addressing

global challenges alongside significant risks to national security, economic stability, and societal well-being. Joe Biden (White House 2021a; 2023a; 2023b; 2023c; 2023d; 2023e) and Xi Jinping (Creemers & Kania, 2018; Creemers *et al*., 2018; 2021; Murphy *et al*., 2018) utilize the national security framework to protect AI systems from cyber threats, establish strong industry standards, and limit access to advanced AI technologies that could jeopardize their security.

Regarding alliances, U.S. and Chinese leaders advocate for closer collaboration with their allies. Biden emphasizes partnerships with the E.U., the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and G7 partners (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and the United Kingdom) to ensure technological security and innovation leadership (White House, 2021c, 2023c, 2023e). China uses the frames of sovereignty and autonomy as narrative tools to advocate for strengthening international alliances with developing countries. Xi Jinping highlights the importance of collaboration with these nations to improve digital infrastructures, promote the digital economy, and enhance cybersecurity and AI development. China employed these frames to legitimize its initiatives, such as the Belt and Road's "Digital Silk Road" (Creemers *et al*., 2018), to support his proposal of transforming Central Asia into a global connectivity hub, to promote collaboration with the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, and South Africa) in developing and regulating AI, and to bolster the efforts of the Group of 77 (the G-77, which today comprises more than 130 countries) to increase South-South technological cooperation (CSET, 2020; Creemers *et al*., 2021; SCIO, 2023a and 2023b).

3.2. An "open world": international cooperation and global governance for addressing worldwide challenges

The "open world" narrative positions digital technologies, particularly AI, as vital tools for fostering international collaboration to address urgent global challenges such as climate change, global health crises, poverty, inequality, and human rights violations. AI is regarded as a way to generate data-driven insights that facilitate coordinated and effective policy responses. This narrative also highlights the importance of science diplomacy in promoting multilateralism, enhancing cooperation, and fostering mutual understanding among nations. Such collaboration is crucial for developing international governance frameworks that ensure the responsible development of emerging technologies, including AI, and contribute to creating a peaceful, secure, open and cooperative cyberspace.

Xi Jinping (Murphy *et al*., 2018; Xinhuanet, 2021; CSET, 2020; FMPRC, 2023; SCIO, 2023a) and Biden (White House, 2021a; 2022a; 2023a; 2023b; 2023c; 2023e) used similar frameworks in their speeches to emphasize that breakthroughs in science and technology, particularly in digital technologies like AI, can provide solutions to various global challenges. While they share concerns about global risks and the role of digital technologies in addressing these issues, distinct differences arise in their governance preferences.

Biden (White House, 2021a; 2021b; 2022e; 2023a), Vice President Harris (White House, 2023f), and key experts like Alondra Nelson (White House, 2022e) emphasize the need to manage AI developments to safeguard society and personal privacy, address algorithmic bias and discrimination, avoid disinformation, and ensure safety prior to deployment. In their speeches, Biden and his collaborators advocate for the global governance of digital technologies and for close collaboration with partners and allies to ensure that international standard-setting organizations prioritize "democratic values" over the repressive or nationalistic interests of certain states (e.g., China) (White House, 2021b; 2023c; 2023f).

Xi Jinping's speeches emphasize the necessity for robust AI governance to guarantee safety, privacy, and fairness. Key measures encompass risk testing and monitoring systems, stringent data security and privacy protection laws, respect for cyber sovereignty, and the need to address AI ethical challenges (e.g., Creemers et al., 2018; Creemers *et al*., 2021; Chinese Embassy in the Netherlands, 2023). In 2023, the Chinese Ambassador in the UK, Zheng Zeguang, published an opinion piece to present China's vision for global AI governance. Concerning digital technologies, the article stresses that the international community should «ensure fairness and non-discrimination regarding ethnicity, belief, nationality, and gender» (Chinese Embassy in the UK, 2023).

The speeches show significant differences in how the U.S. and China frame the norms and types of governance they promote. U.S. leaders seek to establish a common international framework for responsible AI use and to reorganize the global governance system of the Internet. In collaboration with allies, the UN, and the G7, the U.S. aims for its domestic actions to be adopted worldwide. Biden

and Harris (White House, 2023e) indicated their intention for actions taken domestically "will serve as a model for international action, understanding that AI developed in one nation can impact the lives and livelihoods of billions of people around the world." Similar arguments can be found in other speeches by Biden directed at domestic audiences (White House, 2023c) and by Harris aimed at international publics (White House, 2023f). Meanwhile, China defends its active participation in international digital-themed negotiations to affirm its role in global digital governance initiatives. Speeches by Xi Jinping highlight that AI and cyberspace governance should occur within the UN framework, should adhere to multilateralism, and must respect the sovereignty of all nations (Creemers *et al*., 2018; Murphy *et al*., 2018; Creemers *et al*., 2021; Chinese Embassy in the Netherlands, 2023; SCIO, 2023b).

3.3. A "world of injustices": technological inequalities and digital authoritarianism

The "world of injustices" geopolitical narrative highlights that technological inequalities can foster a global digital divide. This narrative focuses on how international technological competition can exacerbate divisions and disparities within and between countries and world regions. Moreover, the "world of injustices" narrative stresses that, worldwide, states do not share equal access to technological innovations or the same capacity to develop and utilize them effectively.

In their speeches, U.S. leaders emphasize the importance of ensuring an equitable distribution of the benefits of science and technology across societies, highlighting the potential negative impact of AI and automation on the global labor market, such as the elimination of thousands of jobs and the increase in economic inequalities. President Biden and his collaborators consistently underscore ongoing shifts in politics, economics, and technology, presenting a critical choice between leveraging these changes for societal advancement or risking exclusion and disillusionment. Furthermore, the speeches advocate for science and technology policies to be rooted in ethical considerations, equity, accountability, and public involvement, without excluding vulnerable populations (White House, 2021a; 2022b; 2022c; 2022d; 2022e; 2023e; 2023f).

The "world of injustices" narrative also allows us to examine how the Biden Administration framed digital technologies' ethical, normative, and human rights challenges. The speeches reflect significant concerns regarding how advanced AI-based surveillance technologies, such as facial recognition systems and mass data analytics, can be used by different state and non-state actors for diverse purposes. President Biden and Vice President Harris emphasize how some governments abuse digital technologies, especially targeting specific social groups, human rights defenders, and journalists, and attempting to heighten international tensions by manipulating public opinion and exacerbating social polarization (White House, 2021b; 2023b; 2023c; 2023e; 2023f). This narrative helps U.S. political leaders legitimize their country's central role in shaping the rules and norms for the governance of emerging technologies, ensuring they promote humanity and democratic values while countering authoritarianism (White House, 2023f).

Similarly, Xi Jinping's speeches highlighted the importance of digital development for national well-being, emphasizing that global inequalities risk concentrating power among technological superpowers, which creates geopolitical imbalances and new technological hegemonies (CSET, 2020; Xinhuanet, 2021; Chinese Embassy in the Netherlands, 2023). During the opening ceremony of the 2023 World Internet Conference in Wuzhen, Xi Jinping called for:

> "[R]espect cyber sovereignty and each country's Internet development path and governance model, abide by international rules in cyberspace and oppose seeking hegemony, bloc confrontation, and arms race in cyberspace, deepen practical cooperation in cyber security, [...] and properly deal with the conflicts in rules, social risks and ethical challenges brought about by the development of science and technology" (Chinese Embassy in the Netherlands, 2023).

This rhetoric legitimizes China's investments to foster open, inclusive, and mutually beneficial South-South scientific and technological cooperation. The framing present in various speeches emphasizes that China's solidarity will ensure developing countries can gain from technological advancements and will not be marginalized or left behind in their pursuit of digital transformation (CSET, 2020; Chinese Embassy in the UK, 2023; Chinese Embassy in the Netherlands, 2023; FMPRC, 2023).

4. Narrative intersections and strategic policy objectives

This section discusses findings from the analysis of the speeches, focusing on how the geopolitical narratives of

the U.S. and China regarding AI intersect with their strategic policy objectives.

4.1. Narrative intersections

While categorized into three ideal types, narratives often overlap in political discourse, reflecting the strategic complexity of U.S. and Chinese AI policies. Both nations blend "closed world", "open world" and "world of injustices" narratives to appeal to diverse audiences. For example, the U.S. combines sovereignty-focused rhetoric with calls for global collaboration. Meanwhile, China merges critiques of inequality with proposals for inclusive governance frameworks that consider the voices of developing nations.

The U.S. seeks to strengthen its leadership in emerging technologies, countering China's influence through alliances and regulatory frameworks. Conversely, China positions itself as an actor advocating for alternative governance models, fostering partnerships with the Global South to expand its influence.

The U.S. and China differ in how each country frames the other. While Biden's speeches adopt a more confrontational stance in addressing the challenges posed by China's technological advancements, Xi Jinping's speeches avoid direct mention of the U.S., preferring to focus on the broader competitive geopolitical context, national sovereignty, and the importance of indigenous innovation and technological self-reliance. These findings from the empirical analysis coincide with the literature that has examined how U.S. political rhetoric employs negative images of China to justify an increasingly hardline approach to that country (He & Ramasamy, 2020; Okuda, 2016; Ooi & D'arcangelis, 2017; Yang, 2017), and with the literature arguing that Chinese foreign policy narratives aim to portray China as both a cooperative global actor and a challenger to the Western-led international order (Lams, 2018, p. 391).

4.2. Geopolitical narratives and AI-related policies

Political speeches from U.S. and Chinese leaders both reflect and shape AI policies. The U.S. CHIPS and Science Act and China's AI Self-Sufficiency Policy are illustrative examples.

The CHIPS and Science Act (2022), signed by Biden, aims to strengthen U.S. semiconductor manufacturing, boost AI research, and enhance economic resilience (White House, 2022a; Stanford HAI, 2022). The 'closed world' narrative frames the Act as vital for national security and reducing dependence on foreign – primarily Chinese – supply chains. The "open world" narrative emphasizes fostering international alliances to build resilient global supply chains. The 'world of injustices' narrative could be less prominent but present in how the Act was presented as a tool for supporting minority-owned and disadvantaged businesses. On the other hand, China's AI Self-Sufficiency Policy, initiated in the late 2010s, seeks to strengthen domestic innovation and reduce reliance on foreign technologies (Creemers & Kania, 2018; Zhang, 2024). The "closed world" narrative highlights China's response to U.S. export restrictions by investing in domestic AI and semiconductor development (CSET, 2020). The "world of injustices" narrative emphasizes reducing global technological divides by supporting AI infrastructure in the Global South. The "open world" narrative could be less prominent, with China favouring selective partnerships that enhance strategic positioning rather than broad multilateral engagement. These short cases show that geopolitical narratives extend beyond rhetoric, shaping concrete policy outcomes. Whether emphasizing security, promoting cooperation, or addressing inequalities, narratives justify and guide AI policies. Understanding these narratives is crucial to analyzing how states frame strategic priorities and shape global governance frameworks.

Conclusions

Drawing on neoclassical geopolitics, geopolitical narratives, and strategic narrative analysis, this study examined how the U.S. and China construct and deploy 'geopolitical narratives' on AI and digital technologies to shape policy priorities and influence global governance frameworks. Three narratives – "closed world", "open world" and "world of injustices" – served as heuristic tools to analyze political speeches by Presidents Joe Biden and Xi Jinping. The "closed world" narrative reflected protectionist policies, security-focused regulations, and technological decoupling; the 'open world' narrative promoted multilateral cooperation, regulatory alignment, and ethical AI frameworks; and the "world of injustices" narrative emphasized AI capacity-building in the Global South while addressing digital authoritarianism, algorithmic bias, and global inequalities.

The analysis revealed that these narratives strategically justify policy decisions, legitimize strategic objectives, and shape international alliances amid intensifying digital

competition. Narratives were not mutually exclusive; both countries blended them to justify strategies and engage diverse audiences. Moreover, as seen with the policy examples of the U.S. CHIPS and Science Act, and China's self-sufficiency policy, geopolitical narratives on AI can have a bidirectional role, reflecting current priorities while actively shaping and legitimizing future policies. These findings align with existing literature, emphasizing that strategic narratives shape competitive dynamics, extending beyond security concerns to include broader economic, social, and innovation strategies (Retzmann, 2024; Schmid et al., 2025).

The findings offer a snapshot of the 2018-2023 period, acknowledging that the use and emphasis of geopolitical narratives may shift in response to evolving geopolitical dynamics and domestic political and economic realities in the U.S. and China. However, the analytical approach is adaptable, providing a flexible framework for analyzing how these narratives evolve and are strategically deployed in changing contexts. This is relevant, given the potential shift from the Biden administration to the second Trump administration, which could introduce significant implications for U.S. AI policies and global geopolitical competition. While Biden's approach combined strategic competition with international cooperation, early signals from Trump's second term emphasize a stronger focus on AI sovereignty, deregulation, and protectionism (Friedland, 2025; Klein, 2025; Mui, 2025).

While this study offers valuable insights, it recognizes some limitations. First, focusing on political speeches and state-led policies overlooks the influence of corporate actors, civil society, and international regulatory bodies in shaping global AI narratives. Second, the study does not analyze how these narratives are received, contested, or internalized by the broader public or international actors. Building on this, the study identifies key areas for future investigation. First, further analysis of the global consequences of competing U.S. and China narratives for AI regulation is needed, particularly regarding governance standards, cooperation mechanisms, and ethical concerns such as algorithmic bias, digital surveillance, and the digital divide. Second, research could explore how emerging AI narratives reshape global alliances and shift geopolitical and geoeconomic dynamics. Third, investigating the role of corporate actors and international regulatory bodies in constructing and disseminating AI geopolitical narratives is crucial. Finally, examining how different audiences perceive, contest, and respond to these narratives would provide deeper insights into narrative reception and its broader societal impacts.

As digital technologies reshape global power dynamics, understanding how narratives justify policy decisions is essential for analyzing the future of global AI governance. Paraphrasing Jansen *et al*. (2023, p.3), geopolitical narratives on AI serve as strategic tools through which political actors construct and impose meanings that shape global policies and norms. As AI technologies evolve, these narratives will play a pivotal role in redefining the global digital order, influencing how nations compete, collaborate, and envision their digital futures.

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About the author

Juan Pablo Soriano Gatica
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona
juanpablo.soriano@uab.cat
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4792-0042

Assistant Professor (professor Lector) in International Relations and International Security in the Public International Law and International Relations unit of the Department of Public Law and Historical-Legal Sciences at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB). He is a member of the Observatory of European Foreign Policy, a research group within the Barcelona Institute of International Studies (IBEI). The Observatory and its researchers are a reference in the field of European foreign policy research. He holds a PhD. and a master degree in Political Science from the UAB, a master degree in International Security from the University of Hull, United Kingdom, and a Bachelor's degree in Political Science from the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM).