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# Digital Transformation of Geopolitics: New Tools, Actors, and Power Dynamics

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## Abstract

This article explores the evolution of geopolitics in the digital era, emphasizing how technology has transformed traditional geopolitical frameworks. Initially grounded in the physical characteristics of territories, modern geopolitics, influenced by digital tools, has shifted to a more intangible domain. The interconnectedness brought about by digital technologies has blurred the boundaries between internal and external state affairs, reshaping how geopolitical power is understood and exercised. As new technologies such as artificial intelligence, large datasets, and digital infrastructure gain prominence, they become new tools in global competition. While digital geopolitics democratizes participation, enabling individuals to influence international discourse, it also presents challenges, such as the potential misuse of these tools. Furthermore, the rise of digital geopolitics reflects a critical approach, where ideological and political phenomena are redefined through digital means. This transformation leads to the merging of traditional and modern power dynamics, making geopolitics more accessible but also more complex in terms of influence, representation, and global rivalry.

*Key words:* geopolitics, digital geopolitics, new technologies, power structures, power dynamics, digital transition

## **Digital Transformation of Geopolitics: New Tools, Actors, and Power Dynamics**

Geopolitics, a term that has evolved over time, has always been a crucial element of society. The ancient Greeks and other civilizations structured their politics and state organization by considering environmental conditions such as terrain, neighboring nations, and weather conditions (Scholvin, 2016). Today, we understand geopolitics, as defined by Rudolf Kjellen, as a practical, realistic approach to international politics with a strong emphasis on the role of territories and resources for the state (Dodds, 2009). This classic approach to geopolitics combines geography and international politics, focusing on the relationship between the physical environment and foreign policy. Geopolitics can also be viewed as a process of managing global rivalries (Jay, 1979, p. 486), which is both spatially and temporally limited.

Geopolitics is not just a lens through which we view the relationship between the state and territory. It also encompasses the actions and outcomes that transform spaces, places, and politics (Flint, 2017, p. 302). This transformative nature of geopolitics gives rise to a critical approach that defines it as a discourse, always directly connected with ideological and political phenomena (Vukašinić, 2020).

Nowadays, however, new technologies significantly influence numerous changes in the world. Spatial, temporal, and even political factors are changing under the influence of new technologies, and geopolitics is gaining new tools for influencing the state and society and for further changes. That connection is two-way because new technologies also affect geopolitics as the main clients of geopolitics, the state, and society are changing under the influence of new technologies. Thanks to new technologies, the world is becoming a global village in the 21st century, increasingly connected in the economic, cultural, security, and even political domains, and changes are taking place much faster than in earlier times.

Global society today is often more identified and diversified according to other intangible characteristics, such as ideological or value

attitudes and national feelings, and not exclusively by being found in a specific geographical location. In other words, geopolitical borders are no longer just physical or geographical but more mental, in the minds of people who perceive in a certain way the differences between their society and another's, or their own and another's social group, which makes the modern geopolitical picture very unstable (Karpovich & Manoilo, 2015, p. 63). Therefore, the geopolitical world is becoming increasingly global, increasingly digital, and more intangible, transforming geopolitics into a digital form.

Digital geopolitics addresses a new, global, more technologically advanced, and much wider audience than before, uses the tools of the new age – algorithms, large databases, artificial intelligence, additionally deals with the topics of the new age – digitization and digital infrastructure, renewable energy, satellites. However, it also brings new challenges because all these new tools and topics can be misused geopolitically. With its unconventional and de-elitized approach and shifting the focus from geography to more intangible elements of relations between states, digital geopolitics falls within the structural direction of critical geopolitical discourse.

With the development of new technologies, the world is increasingly intertwined, which in some way leads to an overflow of the internal and external affairs of the state, intertwining internal and external politics, that is, politics and international relations. In this way, geopolitics becomes more interesting to a broader circle of individuals, and thanks to new digital tools, they can easily participate in the practice of digital geopolitics. On the wave of globalization with the help of digital tools, in our time and before our eyes, the process of migration of geopolitical content from the reality environment to the electronic environment is taking place. Also, in its digital edition, geopolitics passes from the hands of the elite to the hands of broader social strata. It enables each individual, connected to the world network, to become a digital geopolitician. However, due to the ease of access and the practical absence of barriers to the inclusion of wider social layers in digital geopolitics, the energy that could be used to influence the resolution of real geopolitical issues is wasted and is used to analyze

the broader discourse of participants with minor influence on real issues. Additionally, it opens space for malintendent manipulation of potentially subversive activities of foreign actors (Despotović, 2020, p. 103). However, suppose that challenge is taken as an opportunity to explore the market. In that case, as a kind of examination of domestic and foreign public opinion, the analysis of such discourse of digital geopolitics can be a valuable tool in solving the real challenges of geopolitics.

Considering that the wheel of technological changes will not go backward and that further changes in society and institutions can be expected with the further development of new technologies, it is important to look at the digital world towards which this path of accelerated technological changes leads and how it will affect the state of society, in the states and relations between states.

### **The impact of digital technology on traditional power structures**

Traditional power structures are defined as systems or institutions that have established authority, influence, and power within the state or world order that have existed for a long time and are essential for shaping society at both the national and international levels. Ideological, economic, military, and political networks, abbreviated as the "IEMP" model, represent a sociological view of the framework in which institutions are located. These are the fundamental organizational bases for generating power in society. Their strength comes from the unique organizational means they possess with which they can achieve human aspirations (Domhoff, 2005). The boundaries of these networks are variable and vary depending on the emergence of new technologies and new organizational forms, so the classic division into exogenous and endogenous factors of social conflicts is not helpful. Nowadays, social conflicts are mainly reflected in the disparity between the social classes of owners and non-owners of capital, in the fact that non-owners do not have easy ways to organize themselves socially (Mann, 1986, p. 1).

Over the past decades, the world has been significantly changed by the invention and increasingly widespread use of the Internet and new technologies. However, as one of the traditional pillars of power, policymakers and public discourse have failed to notice these invisible changes in the global distribution of power, which have revolutionized politics, conflicts, the economy, society, and even foreign policy (Owen, 2016, p. 6). Digital technologies and new media are changing that situation. The expansion of the World Wide Web on the wave of technological innovation has the potential to affect all areas of life, including international relations. Also, it affects the transformation of foreign policy concepts and practices (Adesina, 2017, p. 1).

As we witness the profound changes in society at the dawn of the twenty-first century, marked by the advent of more powerful computers, enhanced networks, and faster Internet, the impact of digital technologies on traditional power structures becomes strikingly evident. These technologies are not merely influencing but overturning and transforming many traditional power structures, including governments, businesses, media, and social institutions, in diverse ways. They are also opening up new opportunities for individuals or organizations with lower levels of influence. Even the army, as a pillar of security, is not immune to the changes brought about by new technologies.

The potential of these changes is vast, given the rapid development and widespread integration of technologies into all aspects of society. For instance, the digitization of information has made it more accessible globally, challenging traditional power sources. Moreover, digital technologies are reshaping traditional industries like media, publishing, and retail, leading to the emergence of new players and necessitating changes in existing ones.

Digital technologies also enable the formation of decentralized networks that bypass traditional power structures, such as peer-to-peer networks or blockchain technologies. More importantly, they empower individuals by enabling them to participate more easily and widely in social and political processes, such as online activism or independent fundraising for a cause. New types of power are also emerging based

on digital technologies, such as data-based or network-based power, which go beyond traditional power structures. Social media, therefore, provide political actors with new opportunities, which can simultaneously be used as a tool to resolve asymmetry in a tight balance of power. Flint notes that "social media is a weapon of geopolitical representation on the battlefield that can favor the weak over the strong" (Flint, 2017, p. 97), but it should be emphasized that social media is like any other weapon, and its effectiveness depends on the knowledge, skills, and abilities of the user (Simons, 2019, p. 113)

While digital technologies have the potential to democratize power and amplify the voices of previously marginalized groups, they also bring new challenges. The concentration of power in the hands of large technology companies, such as Amazon, Apple, Google, and Facebook, who own and use their users' data with minimal restrictions, poses a significant threat to social, political, and geopolitical issues.

This situation can also be reflected in the geopolitical landscape, in which weaker geopolitical actors finally get the means and ways to influence their position on the world stage significantly. Digital technologies simultaneously strengthen the existing world order through the intensive promotion of its postulates down to the capillary level of society to everyone with access to the world network. However, at the same time, they question it to its limits, enabling each of those individuals, personally or in any organizational form, to present their opinions, views, criticisms, and potential solutions. New technologies also make it possible to erase traditional geopolitical limitations because geography and time are no longer the only relevant factors, which opens up space for the creation of new global networks of power and relations, i.e., geopolitics no longer occupies only elites but is also engaged at the popular level (Simmons, 2019, p.112). Popular geopolitics, previously represented through films, music, and mass media, today finds the ideal (carrier) of its ideas in social media.

While previously popular geopolitics was a means by which the elite determined their discourse in society (Dittmer and Gray 2010, p. 1665, cited in Simmons 2019, p.113), today, a feedback loop appears through social media, i.e., the possibility that geopolitical elites gain a

more realistic insight into the situation and the results of their efforts. They can use it as a kind of market survey to adjust the discourse or to find new ways to establish their positions.

In other words, new technologies and new media based on them enable the transfer of levers of power from traditional firmly in the hands of the state to the virtual power of individuals and movements, such as the Yellow Vests movement in France or the power possessed by the global corporations Google and Facebook, which irreversibly changes the dynamics of global politics and global power (Simons, 2019, p.113). Potential dialogue and relations in digital geopolitics between traditional power structures and people through social networks and other new media do not have to be exclusively based on differences, misunderstanding, and conflict but can also convey positive messages. Such an approach requires that the receivers of the message are not seen exclusively as consumers of the message. However, an approach that reinforces and respects the feedback loop and the tone of cooperation and togetherness is needed. However, such an approach in today's digital scene, where everyone is fighting for one's attention with many other actors, is challenging to achieve due to the long period in which the effects are seen, unlike the quickly noticeable effects of a narrowly targeted message

### **The role of technology in shaping global power dynamics**

For centuries, the global power dynamic has rested on states and their economic and military power, enabling them to influence events in the world in their favor in international relations. It is also evident that technology is a factor that has always irreversibly changed societies and states and that affects humanity's ability to overcome locational and physical-geographical barriers and use its advantages in these matters (Scholvin, 2016, p. 14). Thanks to advances in technology, the geopolitical picture of the world is also changing. The geopolitical positions of countries, the problems and challenges they face, and how they seek solutions are changing. Modern technologies, especially the world computer network with their global connectivity,

on a daily basis, affect the world's political, military, social, information, and infrastructure systems and subsystems in countries and change them irreversibly (Huskaj, 2023, p. 152). On the other hand, with the transformation of global politics into a less hierarchical form, there are also changes in global power and a "transition of international relations into many more hands" (Klieman 2015, p. 254, quoted in Simons 2019, p. 121).

### **New geopolitical factors**

Traditional factors such as access to resources or management of transport routes remain geopolitically significant. However, in the digital geopolitics age, new factors can influence a country's geopolitical situation. New technologies represent a particularly important geopolitical element for smaller states or states deprived of other resources because they represent a resource that the state itself can build anew and use for the further development of its society or the improvement of its geopolitical position, thereby strengthening its power on a global scale. Consequently, there is a change in the type and level of concessions they are ready or forced to make in geopolitical calculations.

Apart from technology, politics remains important for digital geopolitics; that is, the political environment in which decisions are made about the use of all resources, including technological ones, to prevent potential conflicts over their (mis)use (Scholvin, 2016, p. 5). Also, despite new technologies and other innovations, the importance of geography for the state's position is still not irrelevant (Fettweis, p. 247, cited in Scholvin 2016, p. 5), but the resources of digital and other modern technologies also appear significant. For example, new technologies require new types of resources, materials, and knowledge for making hardware, new types of knowledge and infrastructure for making software, and even new demographics with a younger and more educated population to keep up with the development of world technologies. Innovations in all areas ensure humanity's progress, development, and prosperity, and those who develop and own innovations will also have a certain geopolitical advantage.

## **New geopolitical questions**

Moreover, geopolitical issues are also becoming different – where is the hardware that stores the data, where are the databases, and who manages the software that manages the data? There are also actual trade and technological wars through and because of digital technologies, at least in the sphere of social networks and mass media, such as the marketing of stories about Chinese espionage through 5G equipment, which are then reflected in geopolitical issues, actions (banning the use of Chinese-made telecommunications equipment), and reactions (complaints of the Chinese Communist Party about American protectionism).

Social and new media are also becoming increasingly important in international relations and international politics, becoming more powerful instruments in influencing the international discourse on world issues and possible directions for the further development of the world order. With the help of social media, groups and individuals who could not previously be placed in the same geopolitical framework can unite around certain issues. However, there is also a dilemma regarding including the public in global politics and international relations issues–topics previously reserved for the political elite. Should the public be included as an active participant or a passive observer? Bearing in mind the gradual movement of the world towards multipolarity and the failures in the functioning of the traditional approach to diplomacy and governance, the inclusion of the public as an active element in the international discourse could have positive effects (Simons, 2016, p. 6).

Digital technologies, therefore, significantly impact changes in global power dynamics by reshaping the economy, information flows, security, and international relations. Given that their growth continues at a high speed and that they are being applied in an increasing number of areas, their impact on global power structures and the geopolitical landscape can be expected to continue increasing.

## **Technology as the foundation for emerging geopolitical conflicts**

Technological superiority also becomes part of geopolitical rivalries. Competition for technological dominance in areas such as artificial intelligence, 5G networks, or quantum computers is becoming the main feature of the strategies of superpower contenders: the United States, China, and Russia. Even countries with less influence are starting to stand up for themselves more in the global opportunities provided by new technologies. They are starting to value their resources, such as lithium (Asiegbu, 2023), more realistically, which is necessary due to the constantly growing demand for new technologies.

The global race for prestige in defining international norms and regulations regarding cyber security, privacy, data protection, or artificial intelligence is also interesting. Leading states want to be the first to pass laws or norms in this area, as this would confirm their importance in these crucial areas in international and digital geopolitics. Global agreements and debates around the sovereignty of digital data and its regulation reflect this digital geopolitical battle, such as the meeting of the leaders of global technology companies with US congressmen (Pequeno, 2023). For now, the EU is the most advanced in this process.

Digital geopolitics is increasingly entering the information warfare domain, where three essential domains are physical, informational, and cognitive (Alberts et al., 2001, p. 10). The most crucial domain in the search for political and military influence is informational, facilitating military operations and foreign policy in the physical domain (Simons, 2019). Information exists and is created in the information domain from where it is shared and can be manipulated, meaning the media may not reflect the truth correctly. The information domain represents the subject of competition and mutual influence of engaged actors, which implies both offensive and defensive dimensions of communication activities to achieve information superiority in the information domain over the opposite party. The manipulative use of fear within the framework of the global war against terrorism, where politicians incited that fear in their

speeches and election campaigns through various channels by citing examples of interference by foreign powers in national political events, is an example of the defensive use of information warfare, which diverts the public's attention from domestic sources of dissatisfaction to geopolitical issues (Pain 2010, p. 228). New digital technologies make such use of information much more accessible.

The participants' minds are in the cognitive domain, making decisions based on their feelings, understandings, and beliefs (Alberts et al., 2001, p. 13). It is where physical battles are actually won or lost, and it concerns intangible concepts such as morale, leadership, situational awareness, knowledge level, or training through the filter of one's perception. New media, primarily social networks based on digital technologies with a personal approach tailored to each user, are ideal tools for conveying messages in this domain. All these domains are important and relevant for the processing and operationalization of geopolitics in international relations (Simons, 2019, p. 117), and digital geopolitics successfully frames them with new technologies.

In line with this, it should be noted that the three domains mentioned above permeate information warfare and its functioning, where politically subjective representations of the physical domain are used in the information domain (Simons, 2019) to help shape the cognitive domain (Alberts et al., 2001, p. 14). These concepts are crucial for digital geopolitics because they allow us to influence them through new means of communication and thus achieve geopolitical goals much more effectively.

### **Effects of digital transition of geopolitics**

The use of new information and communication technologies achieves several important effects, also significant from the perspective of digital geopolitics: 1) new opportunities and resources for actors who want to influence debates; 2) the power relationship between the government and citizens changes because it enables easier and faster organization and mobilization of people for political purposes regardless of physical distance (Simons, 2019); and 3) creates and strengthens new types of relationships in international relations between different

stakeholders (citizens, corporations, governments) (Hart, 2012, p. 212).

The field of digital geopolitics is accessible to a much wider number of actors, unlike the state implementation of geopolitics, which is reserved for the elite. In this way, a wider circle of people can participate in and influence geopolitical events through global activism on various issues, such as facilitating the mobilization of apolitical voters and, paired with state actors, help defend "red lines" in critical situations (Petrović, 2015, p. 148). That fact partly undermines the efforts of the global forces of power towards globalization and, in that process, also goes backward (World Economic Forum 2020). Elections in numerous European countries confirm this because even in the EU, an example of a region striving for globalization in every respect, political events tend towards greater nationalization of individual states. The question of the speed with which these two processes take place and the tendency towards a greater or lesser degree of globalization becomes an important issue, and a large part of these processes take place in the arena of digital geopolitics.

Changes are also taking place in the field of security. Interstate conflicts are an exception today; the main battlefield has been moved to cyberspace. Cyber attacks, espionage, and sabotage are changing conflict and security dynamics today. Military capacities are also changing under the influence of new technologies; weapons are becoming "smart," which also impacts the geopolitical situation because the threat is no longer necessary to appear at the door, i.e., at the border. However, with the help of new weapons, serious threats can also be made over long distances (Zirojević, 2024, str. I/77). That fact, of course, affects both the military balance and national defense strategies.

Surveillance, a significant power lever, is undergoing a transformation with the aid of new technologies. While these technologies offer unprecedented surveillance capabilities, their global affordability has shifted the balance of power from the state to individuals. This democratization of surveillance tools, however, also opens the door to potential misuse.

The upside of the digital revolution, which moves humanity forward, is greater networking. Today, the world is electronically connected in every possible way, from underwater cables to space satellites. This growing connectivity facilitates the flow and sharing of information and ideas and has a global impact. Digital technologies also transform diplomatic efforts and enable real-time communication and negotiations between states, and digital diplomacy is becoming increasingly important in shaping international relations. However, the lack of infrastructure and unequal access to digital capacities can negatively affect the state's position in the geopolitical sense. If countries lag in this matter, their population lags in education and misses out on global social flows, and the weaker flow and use of information reinforce social differences. Countries that think strategically and invest in equipping citizens, businesses, and institutions with the most modern technological tools and prepare for the next technological leap in the field of artificial intelligence will be able, despite other geopolitical factors (geography, resources), to occupy a more advanced position in the developing world order (Fleming, 2020).

## **Conclusion**

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has fundamentally transformed the landscape of geopolitics, shifting its focus from traditional territorial and resource-based concerns to more intangible and networked domains. As geopolitical content migrates from the physical world to the digital realm, the tools and actors involved in shaping global power dynamics have diversified. Digital platforms, artificial intelligence, and large datasets now serve as instruments of geopolitical influence, offering opportunities for both state and non-state actors to engage in international relations in unprecedented ways.

While the digitalization of geopolitics allows for greater public participation and democratizes access to geopolitical discourse, it also introduces significant challenges. The ease with which digital tools can be manipulated and misused in information warfare and cyberattacks highlights the risks posed by this transformation. Additionally, as geopolitical borders become more mental than physical, the complexity

of global power dynamics increases, with both positive and negative outcomes.

Ultimately, the future of geopolitics lies in the balance between harnessing the potential of new technologies for global cooperation and managing the risks of misuse and disruption. States, policymakers, and global institutions must adapt to this evolving digital reality, recognizing that geopolitical influence is no longer confined to elites but extends to a wider audience, empowered by digital tools. As technology continues to evolve, so too will the structures and processes that define global power, leading to a more interconnected, yet more contested, geopolitical landscape.

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## **Digitalna transformacija geopolitike: Novi alati, akteri i dinamika moći**

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### **Sažetak**

Ovaj članak istražuje evoluciju geopolitike u digitalnoj eri, naglašavajući ulogu tehnologije u transformisanju tradicionalnih geopolitičkih okvira. Tradicionalno zasnovana na fizičkim karakteristikama teritorija, savremena geopolitika, pod uticajem digitalnih alata, prelazi u neopipljiviji, mrežni, oblik. Međusobna povezanost koju donose digitalne tehnologije zamaglila je granice između unutrašnjih i spoljnih državnih poslova, preoblikujući način na koji se geopolitička moć shvata i primenjuje. Kako nove tehnologije kao što su veštačka inteligencija, veliki skupovi podataka i digitalna infrastruktura dobijaju na značaju, postaju novi alati u globalnoj konkurenciji. Digitalna geopolitika demokratizuje učešće, omogućavajući pojedincima da utiču na međunarodni diskurs, ali sa druge strane, ona takođe, potencijalnom zloupotrebom ovih alata, postavlja i nove izazove. Štaviše, uspon digitalne geopolitike odražava kritički pristup, gde se ideološki i politički fenomeni redefinišu putem digitalnih sredstava. Ova transformacija dovodi do konvergencije tradicionalne i moderne dinamike moći, čineći geopolitiku pristupačnijom, ali i složenijom u smislu uticaja, zastupljenosti i globalnog rivalstva.

*Ključne reči:* geopolitika, digitalna geopolitika, nove tehnologije, strukture moći, dinamika moći, digitalna tranzicija