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Artificial Intelligence, Great-Power Rivalry, and the Erosion of Unipolarity: A Structural-Realist Assessment of U.S.–China Competition

Maha Nasser Al-Nuaimi[1]

[1]Master's Program in International Affairs and Public Policy, College of Education and Arts, Lusail University, Qatar
Corresponding Author

ABSTRACT: This article examines how the U.S.–China rivalry in artificial intelligence (AI) is reshaping the structure of the international system. Drawing on structural realism, it asks to what extent AI competition has altered the distribution of capabilities that defines the post-Cold War unipolar order, and it assesses this across three dimensions: political influence, economic–technological power, and military capability. The study applies a qualitative, structured comparison of the two states' AI strategies, using official strategy documents, export-control measures, corporate regulatory filings, and international indices covering 2010 to mid-2026. Three analytical propositions derived from structural realism are assessed against this evidence. The findings indicate that AI has become a structural variable in great-power competition, but its effects are uneven across dimensions. Economically and technologically, China has narrowed the performance gap and now offers an alternative supply of AI infrastructure, while the United States retains decisive advantages in private capital, computing capacity, and frontier-model development. Politically, China's state-led diplomacy and engagement with the Global South have widened the range of options available to third states without producing a stable counter-alliance. Militarily, AI has diluted rather than ended U.S. superiority, particularly in China's regional theatre. It also considers how the European Union, India, and the Gulf states hedge within this structure. The article concludes that the system is moving from uncontested unipolarity toward contested primacy, a condition best described as layered polarity, and it discusses implications for middle powers and for AI governance.

INTRODUCTION

Few technologies have attracted as much strategic attention as artificial intelligence (AI). Policymakers increasingly treat it not as a sectoral innovation but as a general-purpose capability that conditions economic productivity, military effectiveness, and political influence. Data, algorithms, and computing capacity now sit alongside territory, population, and conventional forces among the resources from which states derive power. The remark attributed to Vladimir Putin in 2017, that the leader in AI would "rule the world," is routinely cited because it captures a belief widely shared among strategic elites: that leadership in this field will shape the distribution of power in the coming decades (Horowitz, 2018; Kissinger et al., 2021).

The rivalry between the United States and China is the main arena in which this belief is being tested. The United States emerged from the Cold War as the sole superpower, and the order that followed has been described as unipolar (Krauthammer, 1990/1991; Wohlforth, 1999; Brooks & Wohlforth, 2008). China, by contrast, has set out to become a world leader in AI by 2030 (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2017) and has built a technology sector able to compete with U.S. firms across a growing range of applications. Washington has responded with public investment, alliance-building, and unprecedented restrictions on the export of advanced semiconductors. Commentators often describe the result as a "technological cold war," but the label obscures an empirical question that remains unsettled: does the AI rivalry alter the structure of the international system, or does it merely reproduce familiar competition within an unchanged distribution of power?

This article addresses that question. Its central research question is: *to what extent has U.S.–China competition in AI contributed to a transformation of the structure of the international system, understood as a shift from unipolarity toward a more multipolar distribution of power?* Three sub-questions follow. How has the rivalry affected (1) the political influence, (2) the economic and technological position, and (3) the military capabilities of the two powers, and what do these effects imply for the distribution of power among states?

The article makes three contributions. First, it integrates political, economic, and military analysis within a single structural-realist framework, rather than treating each dimension in isolation, as much of the literature does. Second, it updates the empirical base to mid-2026, a period that has seen the oscillation of U.S. export-control policy, the release of America's AI Action Plan, the emergence of competitive Chinese open-weight models, China's proposal for a World AI Cooperation Organization, and the announcement of a U.S.–China intergovernmental dialogue on AI. Third, it proposes the concept of *layered polarity* to capture the finding that the distribution of AI-related power differs across layers of the system, so that a single polarity label can mislead.

Section 2 reviews the literature and identifies the research gap. Section 3 presents the theoretical framework and the analytical propositions. Section 4 explains the methodology. Sections 5 to 7 analyze the political, economic–technological, and military dimensions in turn. Section 8 considers how selected third actors, namely the European Union, India, and the Gulf states, position themselves within the rivalry. Section 9 synthesizes the findings and considers alternative explanations, and Section 10 concludes.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND RESEARCH GAP

2.1 AI and the balance of power

A first body of work analyzes AI as a determinant of the balance of power. Horowitz (2018) argues that the consequences of AI for international competition depend less on invention than on the capacity of states to adopt and diffuse the technology across their economies and militaries. Kissinger et al. (2021) warn that AI may alter human perception and strategic decision-making in ways that existing diplomatic frameworks are not equipped to manage. Lee (2018) emphasizes the structural advantages that data abundance and state support give China, while Allison et al. (2021), in a Belfer Center study, characterize China as a peer competitor in AI applications and attribute its progress to market scale, data availability, and sustained state backing. Allen (2019) offers a detailed reading of Chinese strategic documents and shows how AI is embedded in national security planning. These studies agree that the rivalry is structural in character, but they differ on whether it will produce Chinese primacy, a bipolar technology order, or prolonged U.S. leadership.

2.2 Military AI and strategic stability

A second body of work addresses military and security effects. Kania (2017) traces the thinking of the People's Liberation Army on "intelligentized" warfare and its ambition to overcome existing U.S. advantages. Scharre (2018) examines autonomous weapons and the risks of diminished human control. Related analyses warn of an AI arms race and of a security dilemma intensified by the difficulty of verifying rivals' capabilities, since AI is software-based, dual-use, and diffuses quickly. Calls for international norms on lethal autonomous systems have multiplied, although the response of the major powers has been limited.

2.3 Technological competition, interdependence, and decoupling

A third body of work examines technological competition and interdependence. Farrell and Newman (2019) show how states that control central nodes in global networks, such as financial systems and digital infrastructure, can "weaponize" interdependence to coerce others, a logic visible in U.S. restrictions on semiconductors. Miller (2022) documents the concentration of advanced chip manufacturing in a small number of firms and locations, with Taiwan at the center, and Segal (2016) analyzes how states use cyber capabilities as instruments of both competition and coercion. The National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence (2021) framed AI leadership as a national security imperative and urged sustained investment and talent policies. This literature points toward partial technological bifurcation, but it generally stops short of linking that trend to changes in the polarity of the system.

2.4 Arabic-language scholarship

Arabic-language scholarship on the subject has grown rapidly. Atiyyah (2025) analyzes the technological rivalry between China and the United States from 2001 to 2025 as a driver of change in the international order, combining descriptive and foresight methods. Qada and Saad (2023) examine the strategies and tensions of the race for AI leadership, and Hadi (2023) explores

how AI is reshaping the core concepts of international relations, including power, sovereignty, and security. Sayim (2024) uses historical comparison to trace the Sino-American rivalry after the Cold War, Murad (2022) and ʿUraibi (2023) assess its consequences for the future international system, and Fahmy (2025) analyzes paths of hegemony in the AI era. These studies converge on the centrality of AI to the future order and on the leading position of the two powers. They diverge in scope and conclusions: some emphasize scenario-building or conceptual change, others historical context, and some leave open the possibility that U.S. primacy persists as long as its innovation lead holds.

2.5 Research gap

Three limitations recur. Many studies examine a single dimension, military or economic, without connecting it to systemic change. Others lack an explicit theoretical framework that specifies what would count as evidence of a shift in polarity. And because AI evolves quickly, many analyses are overtaken by events. The present study responds to each: it uses a unified structural framework, specifies observable indicators in advance, and incorporates evidence through mid-2026.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND ANALYTICAL PROPOSITIONS

3.1 Structural realism and polarity

Structural realism holds that the outcomes of international politics are explained primarily by the structure of the system, defined by anarchy and the distribution of capabilities among states (Waltz, 1979). The number of great powers determines whether the system is unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar, and each configuration carries distinct expectations about stability and balancing. Waltz regarded unipolarity as inherently unstable because other states would sooner or later seek to balance the dominant power. Wohlforth (1999) countered that a sufficiently large preponderance can make unipolarity durable by discouraging challengers, and Brooks and Wohlforth (2008) argued that the United States' lead across military, economic, and technological capabilities was unusually wide. Mearsheimer (2001) adds that great powers seek to maximize relative power and are particularly alert to rising challengers. Gilpin (1981) links hegemonic decline to the diffusion of technology and the rising cost of sustaining the order, a mechanism directly relevant to AI.

3.2 Adapting the framework to AI

Applying these theories to AI requires specifying what counts as capability in the digital age. This study treats data, algorithms, computing power, and control over supply-chain chokepoints as components of material capability, alongside conventional economic and military resources. It also recognizes that AI-related power operates through attraction and standard-setting as well as coercion (Nye, 2011), and that control of network nodes can generate coercive leverage (Farrell & Newman, 2019). Structural realism predicts balancing, but it is less specific about the form and timing of balancing. In the AI domain, balancing is likely to take technological and institutional forms, such as indigenous capability building, alternative infrastructure, and rival norm-setting, rather than formal military alliances.

3.3 Analytical propositions

The overarching proposition is that the AI race between the United States and China acts as a structural catalyst for the transition of the international system from unipolarity toward multipolarity. Three subordinate propositions correspond to the dimensions of analysis:

P1 (political). AI competition erodes the unilateral political influence of the United States by enlarging the options available to third states and by enabling China-led technology partnerships and norm initiatives.

P2 (economic–technological). AI competition shifts the global techno-economic order toward two competing ecosystems, ending U.S. monopoly over the digital economy and reshaping supply chains, standards, and trade rules.

P3 (military). The adoption of AI by both states redistributes military capability and creates new deterrence relationships, gradually eroding unilateral U.S. military superiority.

Because these are qualitative propositions, Table 1 specifies in advance the indicators examined and what patterns would count as consistent with persistent unipolarity or with transition.

Table 1. Analytical framework: dimensions, indicators, and expected patterns

Dimension	Indicators examined	Pattern consistent with persistent unipolarity	Pattern consistent with transition
Political (P1)	Technology partnerships; alliance behavior; norm and institutional initiatives; options available to third states	Third states rely mainly on U.S. technology and norms; Chinese initiatives gain little traction	Third states diversify suppliers; rival norm and institutional blueprints gain adherents
Economic–technological (P2)	Investment; frontier-model performance; research and patent output; supply-chain control; standards	U.S. lead is wide across all indicators; export controls hold	Performance gap closes; alternative ecosystems and self-reliance emerge; bifurcation of standards
Military (P3)	Strategies and doctrine; command and control; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; autonomy; cyber; deterrence and strategic stability	U.S. superiority is stable globally and regionally	Superiority becomes contestable; new deterrence relationships and risk-management mechanisms appear

4. METHODOLOGY

The study adopts a qualitative, analytical–critical design based on structured, focused comparison (George & Bennett, 2005). The same set of questions is asked of each state's strategy in each of the three dimensions, which allows systematic comparison and the cumulative assessment of the propositions. A historical–descriptive approach is used to trace the evolution of the rivalry from the early 2010s, when machine-learning breakthroughs brought AI to strategic prominence, to mid-2026.

Evidence comes from four types of source. The first comprises primary strategy and policy documents: China's New Generation AI Development Plan (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2017), U.S. Executive Order 13859 (White House, 2019), the Department of Defense AI strategies of 2018 and 2023, the final report of the National Security Commission on AI (2021), America's AI Action Plan (White House, 2025), and China's Global AI Governance Action Plan (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2025). The second comprises corporate regulatory filings, notably NVIDIA's annual and quarterly reports to the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, which record the timing and scope of export-control measures as they affect a central market participant. The third comprises international indicators, principally the Stanford AI Index (Stanford Institute for Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence [HAI], 2026). The fourth comprises peer-reviewed and think-tank analyses in English and Arabic. For recent developments among third actors, discussed in Section 8, the study also draws on official statements and reputable news and policy-analysis sources.

Each proposition is rated as supported, partially supported, or not supported, according to the convergence of indicators and the presence of disconfirming evidence. This is a judgment-based assessment, not a statistical test, and it should be read as such. Several limitations apply. Military AI capabilities are largely classified, so the analysis relies on public documents and expert estimates. Chinese-language primary sources were accessed mainly through translations and secondary analyses. Aggregate figures for Chinese AI spending are difficult to compare with U.S. private investment because state guidance funds are poorly captured. Finally, it is difficult to isolate the effect of AI from other drivers of power transition, such as economic growth, demography, and regional security dynamics. The analysis addresses this by examining AI as one factor within the wider strategic context rather than as a sole cause.

To situate the analysis chronologically, Table 2 lists the principal milestones of the rivalry between 2017 and 2026. The sequence shows an alternation of competitive escalation, policy reversal, and tentative dialogue that the following sections interpret.

Table 2. Chronology of key milestones in the U.S.–China AI rivalry, 2017–2026

Date	Event	Significance
July 2017	China issues the New Generation AI Development Plan	Sets the goal of global AI leadership by 2030
February 2019	U.S. Executive Order 13859 launches the American AI Initiative	AI formalized as a national priority
2022	U.S. introduces export controls on advanced chips and related equipment aimed at China	Beginning of technological containment
October 2023	China announces the Global AI Governance Initiative	Start of Chinese norm entrepreneurship
May 2024	First formal bilateral U.S.–China talks on AI, in Geneva	A dialogue channel opens
November 2024	Presidents Biden and Xi affirm human control over decisions to use nuclear weapons	First joint statement on the AI–nuclear nexus
Early 2025	Chinese models, including DeepSeek-R1, reach near-parity with leading U.S. models	Challenges the assumption of a durable U.S. lead
April–August 2025	U.S. requires licenses for H20 chip exports to China (April), then grants licenses for certain shipments (August)	Policy oscillation
July 2025	U.S. releases its AI Action Plan (23 July); China releases its Global AI Governance Action Plan and proposes WAICO (26 July)	Competing blueprints for exports and governance
November 2025	U.S. authorizes advanced chip exports to G42 (UAE) and Humain (Saudi Arabia)	Gulf states tied into the U.S. stack under conditions
December 2025–February 2026	U.S. announces H200 sales to China (December); small-quantity licenses begin (February)	Partial loosening of controls
February 2026	New Delhi AI Impact Summit; declaration endorsed by the U.S. and China	Convening power of a middle power
April 2026	Stanford AI Index 2026 reports that the U.S.–China model performance gap has effectively closed	Evidence of capability convergence
May 2026	Trump–Xi talks in Beijing agree to launch an intergovernmental AI dialogue; Commerce guidance of 31 May extends license requirements to overseas subsidiaries of Chinese firms	Dialogue alongside tightening enforcement

Sources: as cited in Sections 4 to 8.

5. THE POLITICAL DIMENSION

5.1 U.S. strategy: from innovation policy to statecraft

The United States has increasingly framed AI as a matter of national security and foreign policy. The American AI Initiative, launched by Executive Order 13859 (White House, 2019) and later reinforced by the National Artificial Intelligence Initiative Act of 2020, committed the government to research funding, infrastructure, and public–private cooperation. U.S. technology firms operate the cloud services, platforms, and data systems on which many states depend, which gives Washington indirect influence over the global digital environment (Farrell & Newman, 2019; Nye, 2011).

Alliances are central to the U.S. approach. Cooperation with the European Union, Japan, Australia, and other partners, including through the Five Eyes and the Quad, seeks to harmonize technical standards, protect sensitive technologies, and reduce allied reliance on Chinese suppliers. Alongside these cooperative measures, Washington has pursued a policy of technological containment, restricting China's access to advanced chips and manufacturing equipment and pressing allies to align their own controls. The most recent articulation of this approach, *Winning the Race: America's AI Action Plan* (White House, 2025), has three pillars: accelerating domestic innovation, building AI infrastructure, and leading in international diplomacy and security. Its third pillar calls for the export of "full-stack" American AI packages, comprising hardware, models, software, applications, and standards, to allies and partners, together with stronger export controls against adversaries. An accompanying executive order established an American AI Exports Program within the Department of Commerce. The strategy thus combines attraction, through the supply of technology, with coercion, through denial.

The role of firms deserves emphasis. U.S. cloud, platform, and AI companies are not merely commercial actors; they are channels through which the American model of technology governance, market-led, innovation-oriented, and relatively open, is diffused. States that build on these platforms adopt not only tools but also data architectures, default standards, and, to a degree, regulatory assumptions. Washington supports its firms through a permissive regulatory environment at home and diplomatic backing abroad, a combination that the 2025 Action Plan makes explicit (White House, 2025). The resulting influence is largely indirect, operating through dependence rather than command (Farrell & Newman, 2019).

AI also extends U.S. soft power. Digital platforms shape public discourse, and AI systems that curate and generate content influence the information environments in which publics and policymakers operate (Nye, 2011). To the extent that these systems embody U.S. norms of openness and free expression, they reproduce the ideological foundations of the liberal order without recourse to coercion. The related struggle over technical standards, covering data governance, privacy, safety, and cybersecurity, matters for the same reason: whoever sets the standards shapes the range of technological models that other states can adopt at low cost. The effect is, however, double-edged. Efforts to impose or tightly condition standards risk being perceived as hegemonic, and they give China's rival standard-setting initiatives a receptive audience.

5.2 China's strategy: state-led technology diplomacy

China's approach is anchored in the New Generation AI Development Plan of 2017, which set the goal of making China the world's leading AI power by 2030 and treated the technology as a tool of comprehensive national strength (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2017). The state sets priorities, directs investment, and links technological development to foreign-policy goals. Internationally, Beijing has supplied digital infrastructure and AI applications to developing countries, often at competitive prices and with training and capacity-building components, through initiatives associated with the Digital Silk Road.

China has increasingly complemented this with norm and institutional entrepreneurship. Following the Global AI Governance Initiative announced in 2023, the Global AI Governance Action Plan, adopted at the World AI Conference in Shanghai on 26 July 2025, set out thirteen proposals for international cooperation (American National Standards Institute, 2025). On the same occasion, Premier Li Qiang proposed a World AI Cooperation Organization, and President Xi Jinping repeated the proposal at the APEC leaders' meeting in November 2025 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2025; Xinhua News Agency, 2026). Chinese officials also point to a China-sponsored UN General Assembly resolution on AI capacity-building, framed as a means of ensuring that developing countries benefit from AI (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2025). These initiatives present China as a provider of public goods and a champion of the Global South, and they contest the U.S. claim to set the rules.

Beijing's technology diplomacy extends beyond the sale of equipment. It combines infrastructure provision, financing, training of technical personnel, and knowledge transfer, which together build long-term relationships and, plausibly, a measure of reciprocal dependence. It is directed in particular at developing countries, which value affordability and fewer political conditions on cooperation. Because these ties rest on shared economic interest rather than on military or ideological alignment, they are more flexible than traditional alliances, and they allow China to expand its presence without direct confrontation with the United States (Allen, 2019).

China also presents its technology model as an alternative development path, one in which the state plays a central role in directing technology and in which efficiency and low cost are prominent selling points. For governments that do not follow a liberal model, this offers a template compatible with their domestic arrangements. The proposed World AI Cooperation Organization and the capacity-building initiatives discussed above are institutional expressions of the same aim: to build, incrementally, a parallel set of arrangements that reduces reliance on Western-led institutions, rather than to overturn the existing order outright.

5.3 Constraints and counter-effects

Both strategies carry constraints that moderate their effect on the distribution of influence. For the United States, containment is double-edged. Restricting access to advanced technology preserves a lead in the short run, but it also gives China a strong incentive to build indigenous capabilities and to market alternatives, thereby accelerating the diversification that Washington seeks to prevent (Farrell & Newman, 2019). Pressure on allies to align their controls imposes political costs, and reversals in U.S. policy itself, documented in Section 6, can weaken the credibility of the strategy. The tension between leading norm-setting and resisting multilateral constraints was visible at the 2026 New Delhi summit, where the U.S. delegation reportedly rejected global governance of AI (techUK, 2026).

For China, the main constraint is trust. Some governments hesitate to rely on Chinese technology because of concerns about data security, surveillance, and the role of the state. China also remains dependent on foreign technology for the most advanced chips, which limits what it can offer, and restrictions imposed on Chinese suppliers narrow its access to some markets. Internal challenges, including the need to develop skilled talent and to ensure the safe use of the technology, add to these limits. Taken together, these constraints indicate that the contest remains open: neither side can convert technological capability into political influence automatically.

5.4 Assessment

The evidence supports a qualified reading of P1. The U.S. ability to act as the sole supplier of digital infrastructure and the sole architect of AI norms has weakened, because third states now have a credible alternative and can bargain between suppliers. This is the sense in which AI rivalry erodes unilateral influence. Yet the evidence does not show displacement. The United States retains a dense alliance network, a leading position in key international institutions, and advantages in frontier technology on which many states still depend for security, finance, and technology. China's model, for its part, faces constraints: concerns among some states about data governance and state control, and U.S. restrictions that limit what Chinese firms can offer. Studies that infer a China-led political bloc from technology partnerships should therefore be treated with caution; systematic evidence on voting alignment or alliance behavior remains thin. A more defensible reading is that AI has expanded the room for hedging and multi-alignment, so that the political effect is more a widening of choice than a realignment into blocs. P1 is thus assessed as partially supported.

6. THE ECONOMIC AND TECHNOLOGICAL DIMENSION

6.1 The U.S. position: private capital, compute, and chokepoints

The U.S. economic model rests on private-sector leadership. According to the Stanford AI Index, U.S. private AI investment reached USD 285.9 billion in 2025, more than twenty-three times the USD 12.4 billion recorded for China, and the United States hosts by far the largest stock of data centers (Stanford HAI, 2026). U.S. firms dominate cloud computing, advanced chip design, and a large share of frontier-model development. These advantages translate into leverage over other states' access to computing resources, and they underpin the policy of export controls on advanced semiconductors (Miller, 2022).

The implementation of that policy, however, has been inconsistent, which illustrates the difficulty a hegemon faces in reconciling commercial and strategic aims. Following the restrictions introduced in 2022, the U.S. government informed NVIDIA in April 2025 that a license would be required to export its H20 chips to China; licenses for certain H20 shipments

were granted from August 2025, and in February 2026 licenses were granted for small quantities of the more powerful H200 (NVIDIA Corporation, 2026a, 2026b). In December 2025, President Trump announced that H200 sales would be permitted under a revenue-sharing arrangement (CNBC, 2025). In May 2026, the Department of Commerce issued guidance confirming that license requirements for advanced chips apply to entities headquartered in China even when they operate outside China, closing a gap through which overseas subsidiaries could have obtained restricted chips (CNBC, 2026; Al Jazeera, 2026). Such oscillation suggests both that the United States retains substantial leverage and that its capacity to wield that leverage coherently is constrained by competing domestic interests.

6.2 China's position: state-guided investment and self-reliance

China's model relies on state-guided investment, industrial policy, and the integration of AI into manufacturing, logistics, finance, and e-commerce. That China leads in industrial-robot installations (Stanford HAI, 2026) is consistent with this emphasis on deployment in the real economy. Private-investment figures understate Chinese spending, since the Stanford AI Index notes that government guidance funds channel substantial resources that are difficult to measure (Stanford HAI, 2026). U.S. restrictions have intensified Beijing's drive for technological self-reliance, particularly in semiconductors, a dynamic that U.S. chip makers themselves invoke when they argue that restrictions risk strengthening competitors (NVIDIA Corporation, 2026a). Despite these constraints, Chinese models, including DeepSeek-R1, reached near-parity with leading U.S. systems in early 2025 (Stanford HAI, 2026).

China's weaknesses remain significant. It depends on foreign technology for the most advanced chips and manufacturing equipment, faces growing scrutiny of its technology exports, and must sustain investment against slowing growth and high debt. Moreover, the concentration of advanced semiconductor fabrication in Taiwan ties the technological rivalry directly to the most sensitive geopolitical flashpoint in the relationship (Miller, 2022).

6.3 Structural vulnerabilities on both sides

The strengths of the U.S. model carry corresponding vulnerabilities. Heavy reliance on private firms yields speed and innovation but limits the state's ability to coordinate priorities, and it exposes strategy to the commercial interests of firms, as the debate over chip sales to China illustrates (NVIDIA Corporation, 2026a). Balancing regulation, privacy, and competitiveness remains contested. Talent is a further concern: the AI Index reports that the ability of the United States to attract global AI researchers has declined (Stanford HAI, 2026), while the cost of frontier development continues to rise. Finally, dependence on complex, globally distributed supply chains, in which Taiwan plays a central role, exposes U.S. AI capacity to geopolitical shocks that no domestic policy can fully neutralize (Miller, 2022).

China's vulnerabilities are equally structural. Dependence on foreign-designed or foreign-manufactured chips at the frontier is the most acute, and U.S. controls bear directly on it. Qualitative innovation, as distinct from volume, remains a challenge, as the U.S. lead in top-tier models and high-impact patents suggests (Stanford HAI, 2026). Reliance on a small number of large technology firms exposes the strategy to regulatory and market disruption, slower growth and high debt may constrain the capacity to sustain large-scale investment, and international scrutiny of Chinese technology on data-security grounds may restrict the markets open to it. These constraints show that China's progress, though substantial, does not amount to displacement.

6.4 Comparative indicators and fragmentation

Table 3 summarizes selected indicators from the 2026 AI Index. The picture is of an uneven balance. The United States leads in private investment, the production of top-tier models, and high-impact patents; China leads in publication volume, citations, patent output, and industrial-robot installations; and the performance gap between the best U.S. and Chinese models has, in the report's words, effectively closed (Stanford HAI, 2026). The report also notes that the ability of the United States to attract global AI talent is declining, a trend with long-term implications for its research base.

Table 3. Selected indicators of the U.S.–China AI balance

Indicator	United States	China	Reading
Private AI investment, 2025	USD 285.9 billion	USD 12.4 billion	U.S. lead; Chinese total likely understated because of state guidance funds
Notable AI models produced, 2025	50	30	U.S. leads in top-tier models
Frontier-model performance	Top U.S. model ahead by under 3% (March 2026)	Near-parity	Gap described as effectively closed; lead has changed hands since early 2025
Publication volume, citations, patent output, industrial-robot installations	Behind	Leads	China leads in research volume and industrial deployment
High-impact patents	Leads	Behind	U.S. leads in impact
Attraction of global AI talent	Declining	n/a	Long-term risk to the U.S. research base

Source: Stanford HAI (2026).

These trends reinforce a gradual technological bifurcation. Supply chains, technical standards, and digital infrastructure are increasingly organized around two competing ecosystems, a trend that the U.S. strategy of exporting a "full-stack" American AI offering and China's strategy of promoting alternative infrastructure and governance frameworks both reflect. The bifurcation is partial rather than complete: interdependence between the two economies remains deep, and it continues to constrain how far either side can go in severing ties (Farrell & Newman, 2019).

6.5 Assessment

P2 is supported, with qualifications. The U.S. monopoly over the frontier of AI and over the architecture of the digital economy has ended: China has closed the performance gap, supplies an alternative to many states, and has forced Washington to expend effort and political capital to sustain its lead. At the same time, the United States retains decisive advantages in capital, compute, and the conversion of innovation into global products. The result is not a Chinese economic order replacing the American one, but a contested leadership structure with two ecosystems and unequal strengths.

7. THE MILITARY DIMENSION

7.1 U.S. military AI strategy

The U.S. Department of Defense has treated AI as central to maintaining military advantage since its 2018 AI strategy (U.S. Department of Defense, 2018), reaffirmed in its 2023 Data, Analytics, and Artificial Intelligence Adoption Strategy (U.S. Department of Defense, 2023). Priorities include AI-enabled command and control, faster intelligence processing and "decision advantage," autonomous and uncrewed systems, cyber operations, and multi-domain integration across land, sea, air, space, and cyberspace. A distinctive feature of the U.S. approach is its reliance on civilian technology firms, which allows commercial innovation to be transferred to military use at speed, even as it raises questions about coordination and control (Horowitz, 2018).

Within U.S. doctrine, four functions stand out. In command and control, AI fuses data from satellites, drones, and sensors into a near-real-time picture of the battlespace and compresses decision cycles. In intelligence, AI supports pattern detection, prediction, and the conversion of large datasets into actionable knowledge. In autonomy, uncrewed aerial, ground, and maritime systems promise to reduce risk to personnel and to enable operations in contested environments. In cyber operations, AI is

used both to detect and repel attacks and to support offensive operations against adversary networks. The common thread is the pursuit of what U.S. strategy documents call decision advantage: the ability to observe, decide, and act faster than an adversary (U.S. Department of Defense, 2018, 2023).

7.2 China's military AI strategy

China's military thinking centers on "intelligentized" warfare, in which AI is integrated at every level from command to logistics (Kania, 2017). The state directs military technological development through military–civil fusion, which channels civilian innovation toward defense applications (Allen, 2019). Chinese strategy appears to emphasize asymmetric approaches: rather than matching U.S. forces platform for platform, it seeks to degrade the networks on which U.S. power depends, such as command-and-control systems, communications, and space assets, and to exploit AI for intelligence, surveillance, and information operations. Taiwan occupies a special place in this picture, both as a potential theater of conflict and as the center of advanced chip production on which AI-enabled military systems ultimately depend (Miller, 2022).

China faces constraints of its own: limited recent operational experience, continued reliance on foreign components in some areas, restricted access to advanced chips, and the risks associated with delegating decisions to autonomous systems. Its military AI capabilities are also less transparent than those of the United States, which complicates external assessment.

7.3 Cross-cutting issues: cyber, deterrence, and cost

Three cross-cutting issues bear on both powers. First, cyber and information operations: AI is used to defend networks, to automate intrusions, and to support influence campaigns, and both states are reported to develop such capabilities. Here the line between peacetime competition and conflict is blurred, which complicates deterrence and attribution (Segal, 2016). Second, deterrence: AI-enabled intelligence, surveillance, and precision capabilities can strengthen conventional deterrence by signaling capability, but they may also undermine stability if they erode confidence in the survivability of retaliatory forces or compress decision time in a crisis. Third, cost: AI-enabled maintenance, logistics, and uncrewed systems can lower the cost of generating and sustaining military power, which narrows the advantage of larger defense budgets and helps a challenger compete with fewer resources (Horowitz, 2018).

7.4 Taiwan: where the military and technological rivalries meet

Taiwan concentrates both dimensions of the rivalry. It is the most likely flashpoint for a U.S.–China military confrontation: the United States has long supported the island politically and militarily, while Beijing insists that it is an inseparable part of its territory. It is also the center of the advanced semiconductor manufacturing on which both powers' AI ambitions depend (Miller, 2022). Any conflict or blockade would therefore have immediate consequences for global AI supply chains, and this shared vulnerability may both deter escalation and raise the cost of miscalculation. China's push for semiconductor self-reliance and U.S. efforts to relocate chip production can each be read, in part, as responses to this exposure. Taiwan illustrates why the AI rivalry cannot be separated from conventional geopolitical competition: technological chokepoints and territorial disputes reinforce one another.

7.5 Strategic stability and the limits of cooperation

The military AI rivalry heightens the risk of a security dilemma, because AI capabilities are difficult to observe and verify and because their rapid development can compress decision times in a crisis. There have, nonetheless, been tentative steps toward risk management. In November 2024, Presidents Biden and Xi affirmed the need to maintain human control over the decision to use nuclear weapons ("Biden, Xi agree," 2024). China raised AI as an area for cooperation at the October 2025 meeting between Presidents Trump and Xi, and following their talks in Beijing in May 2026, China's foreign ministry announced that the two sides had agreed to launch an intergovernmental dialogue on AI (Agence France-Presse, 2026). The scope of that dialogue remains unclear, and it is too early to judge whether it will constrain military applications. Earlier experience, in which nuclear arms-control talks stalled shortly after a brief resumption, counsels caution ("Biden, Xi agree," 2024).

7.6 Assessment

The evidence on P3 is mixed. AI has not ended U.S. military superiority. The United States retains global power projection, a unique network of alliances, extensive operational experience, and deep integration between its armed forces and its technology sector. But AI has diluted that superiority in specific ways. It lowers the cost of capabilities that threaten U.S. networks, it enables more effective use of information, and it reduces the advantage that sheer platform quality once conferred, especially

in China's regional theater. The more accurate formulation is that military primacy persists globally while becoming more contestable regionally. P3 is therefore partially supported.

8. THIRD ACTORS AND THE LIMITS OF THE BIPOLAR FRAME

A purely bilateral account would risk treating the rest of the system as a passive backdrop. This section considers three sets of third actors whose behavior bears on the polarity question: the European Union, India, and the Gulf states. The cases are illustrative rather than exhaustive.

8.1 The European Union: regulatory power without a technological lead

The European Union has pursued influence through regulation rather than capability. The AI Act (Regulation (EU) 2024/1689) is the first comprehensive legal framework for AI, with obligations for general-purpose models applying from August 2025 (European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2024). The capacity of the Union to export rules through the size of its market is what Bradford (2020) calls the Brussels effect. The EU thus contributes to the diffusion of norms even as it trails the two leaders in capital and compute. Whether regulatory power can be sustained without a stronger technological base is a central question for European strategic autonomy.

8.2 India: convening power and the Global South

India hosted the AI Impact Summit in New Delhi in February 2026, which concluded with a non-binding declaration endorsed by nearly ninety countries and organizations, including both the United States and China (DGA Group, 2026). The summit was widely read as an attempt by India to present itself as a convener for the Global South and as a partner of the United States and like-minded states, and Chinese participation was reportedly limited (DGA Group, 2026). The episode shows that middle powers can build convening power around AI, and the declaration's thin operational content shows how hard it is to turn consensus into binding rules.

8.3 The Gulf states: conditional access and hedging

The Gulf states exemplify how middle powers use AI to hedge and diversify. In November 2025, the U.S. Department of Commerce authorized the export of advanced chips, equivalent to up to 35,000 Nvidia Blackwell (GB300) processors each, to G42 in the United Arab Emirates and Humain in Saudi Arabia, subject to security and reporting requirements (Reuters, 2025). These approvals followed G42's divestment of its Chinese holdings and a pledge by Humain's chief executive not to buy Huawei products in order to secure U.S. licenses (AGBI, 2025). The Gulf case thus shows both U.S. leverage, in that access to the most advanced compute is conditioned on distancing from China, and the agency of middle powers, which use that access to build domestic AI ecosystems as part of wider diversification strategies.

8.4 Implications for polarity

Taken together, the three cases support a more nuanced reading of the systemic effects. Third actors are neither passive recipients of bloc discipline nor autonomous poles. They hedge, bargain, and in some cases build regulatory or convening power of their own. For polarity, this means that the emerging structure is better characterized by two dominant AI powers surrounded by a growing set of middle powers whose alignment is issue-specific than by two rigid blocs. The finding supports P1, since the options of third states have widened, and it qualifies it, since the Gulf case shows that the leading power can still extract alignment where it controls scarce inputs.

9. DISCUSSION

9.1 Layered polarity

Taken together, the three dimensions do not point to a single polarity. They point instead to what this article terms *layered polarity*: the distribution of AI-related power differs from one layer of the system to another. The United States leads in capital, computing capacity, and global military reach. China leads in research and patent volume, industrial deployment, and, in its own region, military contestation. The two are at near-parity in frontier-model performance, and they compete to define standards and institutions. Table 4 summarizes this structure.

Table 4. Layered polarity in AI-related power (assessment as of mid-2026)

Layer	Position	Key evidence	Trend
Capital and computing capacity	U.S.-dominant	Private investment; data-center base; advanced chip design	Stable, but dependent on coherent export policy
Frontier-model capability	Near-parity	Performance gap effectively closed; leadership exchanged since early 2025	Converging
Research output and industrial deployment	China leads in volume	Publications, citations, patents, robot installations	Chinese volume lead; U.S. lead in impact
Supply-chain chokepoints	Contested	U.S. and allied control of design and equipment; Taiwan fabrication; Chinese self-reliance drive	Fluctuating
Global military projection and alliances	U.S.-dominant	Alliance network; global deployment; operational experience	Stable
Regional military contestation	China-competitive	Asymmetric, AI-enabled capabilities; Taiwan	Intensifying
Norm and institutional entrepreneurship	Contested	U.S. full-stack export strategy; China's Action Plan and proposed WAICO	Competing blueprints
Alignment of third actors	Hedging	EU regulatory power; India's convening role; Gulf states' conditional access to U.S. compute	Issue-specific

This finding refines the debate between Waltz and Wohlforth. If preponderance were as great as Wohlforth's account requires, the United States would lead across all layers. The evidence shows that it does not. Yet the United States remains far ahead in some layers, so a Waltzian expectation of rapid, general balancing is also not borne out. What the evidence supports is that balancing against the leading power has taken technological and institutional forms, namely indigenous capability building, alternative infrastructure, and norm competition, as the adapted framework in Section 3.2 anticipated.

9.2 Assessment of the propositions

Table 5. Assessment of the propositions

Proposition	Summary of evidence	Assessment
P1 (political)	Third states have credible alternatives and bargaining room; Chinese norm initiatives expand; U.S. alliances and institutional position remain strong; no stable counter-bloc	Partially supported
P2 (economic–technological)	U.S. monopoly over the frontier ended; two ecosystems emerging; U.S. retains capital and compute advantages; export-control policy volatile	Supported, with qualifications

Proposition	Summary of evidence	Assessment
P3 (military)	U.S. superiority persists globally but is more contestable regionally; new risk-management channels are tentative	Partially supported
Overarching	AI is a structural catalyst of change, with uneven effects across layers	Transition incomplete: contested primacy (layered polarity)

9.3 Alternative explanations and counterarguments

Several alternative readings deserve attention. First, a liberal-institutionalist perspective would stress the resilience of the U.S.-led order, whose institutions and alliances give the United States advantages that technology alone cannot erode (Ikenberry, 2011). The evidence that most states hedge rather than align with China is consistent with this view. Second, the assumption that technological convergence implies a change in polarity may be overstated. Polarity depends on aggregate capabilities, and in aggregate the United States retains considerable advantages. Third, although Section 8 considers selected third actors, the analysis cannot cover all of them. The European Union has pursued regulatory influence through its rules (Bradford, 2020), and middle powers in Asia, the Gulf, and elsewhere are actively shaping their own AI strategies, so that alignment is often issue-specific. Fourth, AI is only one of several factors that affect the distribution of power, and the analysis can show correlation and plausible mechanisms but cannot isolate the independent effect of AI. These caveats argue for the cautious formulation adopted here, that AI is a structural catalyst of change, not a sufficient cause of transition.

9.4 Implications

For middle powers and developing countries, the findings imply that diversification is both feasible and valuable. The existence of two competing ecosystems enlarges bargaining room, but dependence on either carries risks, which makes investment in sovereign capabilities and in interoperable, standards-based infrastructure prudent. The Stanford AI Index itself notes the growing emphasis on AI sovereignty in national policy (Stanford HAI, 2026). For the two great powers, the findings underline the importance of crisis-communication and risk-reduction mechanisms in the military use of AI, and the 2026 decision to open an intergovernmental dialogue offers a channel that should be used. For the governance of AI more broadly, the competition between U.S. and Chinese blueprints raises the risk of fragmented norms, which increases the value of inclusive multilateral forums.

10. CONCLUSION

This article asked whether U.S.–China competition in AI has contributed to a transformation in the structure of the international system. Its answer is that AI has become a structural variable in great-power competition and has eroded the uncontested character of U.S. primacy, but that the transition is incomplete and uneven. Politically, China's state-led technology diplomacy and norm initiatives have widened the options of third states without producing a stable counter-bloc. Economically and technologically, China has closed the gap in model performance and offers an alternative ecosystem, while the United States retains decisive advantages in capital and compute. Militarily, AI has made U.S. superiority more contestable, especially regionally, without ending it. The system is thus moving from uncontested unipolarity toward contested primacy, which is more accurately described as layered polarity than as unipolarity, bipolarity, or multipolarity in any simple sense.

The study contributes to International Relations theory by showing how structural realism can be adapted to a technological domain, by specifying observable indicators for the assessment of polarity change, and by introducing the concept of layered polarity. Its limitations are those of its design: a judgment-based assessment of qualitative evidence, limited access to classified military information and to Chinese-language primary sources, difficulty in measuring Chinese state-directed investment, and a primary focus on the two principal powers, with only selective treatment of third actors. Future research could construct composite quantitative indices of AI power across the layers identified here, extend the analysis of third actors such as the European Union, India, and the Gulf states beyond the cases sketched here, examine Chinese-language primary sources more systematically, and track the effects of the 2026 intergovernmental AI dialogue on strategic stability. Given the pace of change in the field, the conclusions here describe the situation as of mid-2026 and will need continual updating.

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