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# The Dominance Race: US–China Rivalry in Artificial Intelligence Investment and Policy (2020–2024)

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**Abstract**

This research examines the rivalry between the United States and China in the field of artificial intelligence (AI) through the theoretical lens of techno-nationalism, arguing that both nations treat AI not as a market commodity but as the defining strategic asset of the twenty-first century. Employing a qualitative research design with a descriptive-analytical approach, and drawing on primary sources including the CHIPS and Science Act (2022), the US Innovation and Competition Act (2021), and China's New Generation AI Development Plan, this study analyzed how techno-nationalist imperatives have shaped each nation's AI investment strategies during the period of 2020–2024. The findings revealed that the United States constructed a techno-nationalist policy architecture encompassing massive state intervention and aggressive semiconductor export controls designed to structurally prevent China from achieving technological parity, while China pursued its own distinct path through state-directed investment and the ambition of becoming the world's leading AI innovation center by 2030. The study concluded that the US–China AI competition constitutes a structural, zero-sum contest for global dominance one in which control over AI translates directly into control over the future architecture of the international economic and geopolitical order. These findings contribute to the literature on techno-nationalism by demonstrating its analytical power in the AI domain and highlight the need for new institutional frameworks capable of governing great power technological competition.

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## Introduction

The development of Artificial Intelligence (AI) over the past decade has transcended mere technological innovation. AI has now transformed into a strategic instrument that determines a nation's position within the global economic order (Schmalz, 2025; Starrs & Germann, 2021). No two countries feel this urgency more acutely than the United States and China the world's two largest economies, now engaged in an increasingly intense technological rivalry with systemic consequences for the architecture of the global economy. In 2022, just 100 companies the majority originating from the United States and China accounted for 40% of all global AI research and development (R&D). Combined, the two nations hold 60% of all AI patents worldwide and produce one-third of all scientific publications in the field of AI (UNCTAD, 2025). These figures reflect a new geopolitical reality in which control over AI technology is equivalent to control over strategic resources in previous eras.

This escalating rivalry intensified following the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. The pandemic exposed vulnerabilities in global supply chains and pushed both nations to pursue technological self-reliance ever more aggressively (Kenney & Lewin, 2022; Starrs & Germann, 2021). The United States responded with the US Innovation and Competition Act (2021) and the CHIPS and Science Act (2022), together allocating more than $300 billion for strategic technologies including AI and quantum computing (Schmalz, 2025). China deepened its commitment through its New Generation AI Development Plan first introduced in 2017 and progressively intensified through 2020–2024 alongside a $47.5 billion semiconductor fund (Stanford HAI, 2025). This phenomenon reflects what scholars have termed techno-nationalism a policy orientation in which technology is treated not as a freely tradable market commodity, but as a critical national asset that must be developed, controlled, and protected to advance a nation's economic competitiveness and national security (Starrs & Germann, 2021; Kenney & Lewin, 2022). Within this framework, long-term AI investment is not merely a business decision, but an expression of calculated national interest aimed at achieving and sustaining global technological dominance.

With the global AI market projected to grow from $189 billion in 2023 to $4.8 trillion by 2033 (UNCTAD, 2025), the question of which nation will ultimately dominate this landscape has become one of the most consequential questions in contemporary international relations. This research seeks to answer that question by analyzing the US–China AI rivalry through the lens of techno-nationalism, with a focused examination of how each nation's policies and investments reflect a deliberate pursuit of global AI dominance. The central research question guiding this study is: How does techno-nationalism shape the long-term AI investment strategies and policies of the United States and China in their competition for global AI dominance during the period of 2020–2024? This question is operationalized through three sub-questions: first, how techno-nationalism has manifested in US AI investment policies and what the United States ultimately seeks to achieve; second, how techno-nationalism has manifested in China's AI investment policies and what China ultimately seeks to achieve; and third, why the nature of US–China AI competition constitutes a structural rivalry for global dominance rather than conventional market competition.

Prior scholarship on this subject has approached the US–China AI rivalry from several productive but partially overlapping angles. Ding (2022) provides the most direct theoretical antecedent, situating the rivalry within the tension between techno-nationalism and technoglobalism and arguing that most contemporary AI policy discourse is dominated by nationalist framing that overestimates decoupling while underestimating deep technological interdependencies. Schmalz (2025) extends this analysis by examining how each nation has developed distinct models of digital capitalism market-supplemented

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in the US case, state-directed in the Chinese case shaped by their respective industrial policies and geopolitical ambitions. Rolf and Schindler (2023) shift the lens toward state platform capitalism, analyzing how both nations leverage digital platforms as instruments of geopolitical competition, including through China's Digital Silk Road initiative. Starrs and Germann (2021) revisit the techno-nationalism concept specifically in the AI context, examining the structural limits of technological decoupling and the paradoxes it generates. Collectively, these studies establish a strong foundation, yet a consistent gap remains: none conducts a dedicated, parallel analysis of each nation's AI investment strategy within an explicit techno-nationalist framework, nor do they systematically assess the ultimate dominance objectives that drive each country's policy choices. This research is positioned to fill that gap.

## Methods

This research employs a qualitative research design with a descriptive-analytical approach, which is the most appropriate method for studying complex international phenomena that cannot be reduced to quantifiable variables alone. Rather than measuring the frequency or magnitude of events statistically, this research seeks to understand the underlying logic, motivations, and competitive dynamics of the US–China AI rivalry as shaped by techno-nationalist imperatives a goal best achieved through in-depth interpretation of textual, policy, and documentary evidence. Data collection relied primarily on library research and documentation techniques, systematically gathering and critically evaluating existing written sources relevant to the research questions. No field interviews were conducted, as the nature of this research is macro-level and state-centric, focusing on the policy behavior and strategic calculations of two sovereign states. This research draws on two categories of source material. The primary analytical sources are academic journal articles, books, and scholarly research reports that interpret and theorize the US–China AI competition including works by Ding (2022), Schmalz (2025), Rolf & Schindler (2023), Starrs & Germann (2021), Kenney & Lewin (2022), and Doshi (2021).

The empirical foundation of the analysis rests on official and institutional documents consulted as documentary evidence: these include the text of the CHIPS and Science Act (2022) and the US Innovation and Competition Act (2021), China's New Generation AI Development Plan (State Council, 2017), and data reports from major international institutions including Stanford HAI (2025), UNCTAD (2025), and the World Bank (2025). While these institutional reports are treated in the analysis as secondary interpretive sources rather than raw primary legislative documents given that the analysis engages with their findings and data rather than conducting independent legislative reading they collectively provide the empirical grounding against which the theoretical arguments of this study are developed. Data analysis employed qualitative content analysis, involving systematically identifying, coding, and interpreting patterns, themes, and arguments within the collected data in relation to the theoretical framework. The analysis traces how techno-nationalist logic is embedded within each nation's policy documents and investment decisions, and how the bilateral competition reflects a structural contest for global dominance. The analysis was conducted iteratively moving between empirical data and theoretical concepts to ensure that interpretations remain grounded in evidence while being theoretically informed. This research operates at the state level of analysis, examining each nation separately and in dedicated analytical depth before assessing their competitive dynamics comparatively.

# Results and Discussions

## 1. The Global Rise of AI as a Strategic Phenomenon

The contemporary AI landscape is the product of converging forces that transformed AI from an academic research domain into a central arena of great power competition. The exponential growth of digital data, dramatic reductions in computing costs, and breakthroughs in deep learning algorithms collectively enabled AI systems to achieve and in many cases surpass human-level performance across complex tasks (Stanford HAI, 2025). The public breakthrough of AI into mainstream consciousness arrived in successive waves: IBM Watson's victory over human champions in Jeopardy in 2011, DeepMind's AlphaGo defeating the world's top Go player in 2016, and the explosive proliferation of large language models beginning in 2022. What distinguishes the current era of AI development from its predecessors is the recognition by states, corporations, and international institutions that AI is a general-purpose technology whose impact traverses virtually every sector of the economy and every domain of national power. Like electricity or the internet before it, AI does not merely create new industries; it fundamentally restructures existing ones, redefines competitive advantage, and reshapes the conditions of economic productivity and national security. This general-purpose character elevated AI from a technological phenomenon to a geopolitical one.

The recognition of AI's transformative potential has been accompanied by an unprecedented surge in global investment. The global AI market is projected by UNCTAD to grow from $189 billion in 2023 to $4.8 trillion by 2033, a figure that highlights not only the economic scale of the technology but the extraordinary magnitude of what is at stake in the competition (UNCTAD, 2025). A defining feature of the global AI investment landscape is its extreme concentration: in 2022, just 100 companies the majority from the United States and China accounted for 40% of all global AI R&D, and the two nations combined hold 60% of all AI patents and produce one-third of all AI publications worldwide (UNCTAD, 2025). By 2024, more than 60 countries had published national AI strategies, reflecting near-universal governmental recognition that AI preparedness is a prerequisite for economic competitiveness in the twenty-first century (TRENDS Research & Advisory, 2024). This proliferation of state-led AI strategies reflects a broader structural shift in how nations perceive the relationship between technology and national power the growing influence of what scholars call techno-nationalism, which treats frontier technologies as strategic national assets requiring active state management rather than market-determined distribution (Starrs & Germann, 2021).

## 2. The United States: Techno-nationalist Policy Architecture and AI Dominance

The period from 2020 to 2024 marked a decisive shift in the United States' approach to AI governance from the historically market-oriented model to an explicitly interventionist, state-directed framework rooted in the logic of techno-nationalism. This transformation was driven by a growing consensus within the executive and legislative branches that the United States could no longer rely solely on private market dynamics to maintain its AI leadership in the face of China's state-directed challenge. The most significant legislative expression of this shift was the CHIPS and Science Act of 2022, signed into law by President Biden in August of that year. The Act allocated $52.7 billion in direct subsidies for domestic semiconductor manufacturing and research, alongside $200 billion in funding for scientific research and development across strategic technology sectors including AI and quantum computing. The CHIPS Act was explicitly framed not as conventional industrial policy but as a national security imperative an acknowledgment that American dependence on foreign-manufactured semiconductors constituted a strategic vulnerability in an era of intensifying great power competition (Schmalz, 2025).

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The classification of the CHIPS and Science Act as a techno-nationalist policy instrument rests on three defining characteristics that distinguish it from conventional industrial policy. First, its primary rationale is not economic efficiency but national security and geopolitical competition: the Act was designed not to optimize semiconductor markets but to rebuild domestic production capacity that had been deliberately offshored over decades, precisely because policymakers concluded that dependence on foreign-manufactured chips constituted an unacceptable strategic vulnerability. Second, the Act explicitly targets a specific geopolitical rival by restricting recipients of federal subsidies from expanding semiconductor manufacturing in countries of concern, a provision directly aimed at preventing the leakage of American-funded technological capacity to China. Third, and most decisively, the CHIPS Act treats semiconductor technology not as a tradeable commodity subject to comparative advantage logic but as a sovereign capability that the United States must control domestically regardless of cost a position that is definitionally techno-nationalist in its subordination of market efficiency to national strategic imperatives (Starrs & Germann, 2021; Kenney & Lewin, 2022). In this sense, the CHIPS Act operationalizes the techno-nationalist conviction that advanced technology must remain within national boundaries and under state influence, not because markets fail, but because technological dependency is itself a form of strategic vulnerability incompatible with great power competition.

Complementing the CHIPS Act was the US Innovation and Competition Act (2021), which together with successor legislation allocated more than $300 billion for research and application of strategic technologies (Schmalz, 2025). These legislative measures collectively represented the largest peacetime investment in science and technology in American history a signal of the extent to which Washington has internalized the techno-nationalist logic that state investment in frontier technology is not merely economically rational but strategically essential. Simultaneously, the United States deployed an increasingly aggressive suite of export controls designed to restrict China's access to advanced technologies necessary for cutting-edge AI development. In October 2022, the Biden administration announced semiconductor export restrictions prohibiting the sale of advanced chips particularly those above certain performance thresholds used for AI training to Chinese entities without US government licenses. These restrictions were expanded in 2023 and 2024, closing loopholes and extending restrictions to additional countries that might serve as transit points for controlled technologies (Stanford HAI, 2025).

The ultimate objective driving this techno-nationalist policy architecture is not merely to maintain parity with China but to structurally prevent China from achieving AI supremacy that would enable it to set global technology standards, dominate AI-dependent industries, and leverage AI capabilities for geopolitical coercion. In 2024, US private AI investment reached $109.1 billion nearly twelve times China's $9.3 billion and American institutions produced 40 notable AI models compared to China's 15 (Stanford HAI, 2025). These figures reflect an American strategy of overwhelming investment scale designed to maintain a capability gap that export controls on hardware alone cannot guarantee.

## 3. China: A Distinct Path Toward AI Dominance

China's techno-nationalist approach to AI is anchored in the New Generation Artificial Intelligence Development Plan (新一代人工智能发展规划), first announced by the State Council in July 2017. The Plan established a three-stage roadmap: to match global AI leaders by 2020, to achieve major breakthroughs at the world frontier in certain AI domains by 2025, and to become the world's leading AI innovation center by 2030 with the AI industry generating more than one trillion yuan in direct economic output. Crucially, the Plan framed AI leadership not as a technological aspiration but

as a prerequisite for national security, economic sovereignty, and China's capacity to compete as a great power in the twenty-first century (Stanford HAI, 2025).

As the US–China technology rivalry intensified throughout 2020–2024 accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the imposition of American export controls China progressively deepened and broadened its commitment to AI. The 14th Five-Year Plan (2021–2025) elevated AI to the highest strategic priority among seven frontier technology fields designated for national prioritization. In response to American semiconductor restrictions, Beijing established a $47.5 billion national semiconductor investment fund the third phase of China's National Integrated Circuit Industry Investment Fund, known as the "Big Fund" specifically designed to finance the development of domestic advanced chip manufacturing capabilities that China currently lacks (Stanford HAI, 2025). A defining feature of China's techno-nationalist AI strategy is the seamless integration of state direction and private sector execution a model fundamentally different from the pre-CHIPS Act American approach of market-led development. Under the New Generation AI Development Plan, the Chinese government designated leading technology companies including Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent, and Huawei as national AI champions, assigning them to develop open AI innovation platforms in their respective domains while providing privileged access to data, capital, and government procurement contracts (Rolf & Schindler, 2023).

China's ultimate strategic objectives in AI are twofold and deeply intertwined: to achieve genuine technological sovereignty independence from foreign-controlled technology supply chains that could be weaponized against Chinese interests and to fulfill its 2030 ambition of becoming the world's leading AI power, capable of setting global AI standards, leading AI-based industries, and leveraging AI capabilities to support China's broader geopolitical ambitions. The imposition of American semiconductor export controls has, paradoxically, accelerated China's pursuit of both objectives by demonstrating in stark terms the strategic costs of technological dependency. China's response massive state investment in domestic chip manufacturing, accelerated talent development programs, and the prioritization of domestic alternatives for American AI hardware and software reflects a techno-nationalist logic that mirrors, structurally, America's own (Starrs & Germann, 2021).

The classification of China's AI policy framework as techno-nationalist rests on characteristics that are analytically symmetrical to those identified in the American case, yet institutionally distinct in form. First, China's AI policies are driven by a logic of strategic sovereignty rather than market efficiency: the New Generation AI Development Plan explicitly frames AI leadership as a prerequisite for national security and great power status, not as an outcome of competitive markets. Second, China's industrial AI policy is explicitly oriented against a specific rival — the United States — as evidenced by the 14th Five-Year Plan's framing of technological self-reliance (自立自强, zili ziqiang) as a direct response to American technological containment. Third, and most distinctively, China's techno-nationalist model achieves what Rolf and Schindler (2023) call 'state platform capitalism': the fusion of state authority and private corporate capacity into a unified techno-nationalist project, where companies like Baidu, Alibaba, and Huawei are simultaneously commercial actors and instruments of national AI strategy. This model differs from the American approach not in its nationalist orientation but in its organizational form — replacing the US pattern of market-first development supplemented by state subsidy with a state-directed ecosystem in which private actors operate within national strategic parameters set by the Party-state (Schmalz, 2025).

Evaluating China's techno-nationalist AI strategy against its stated objectives reveals both significant achievements and persistent vulnerabilities that are central to understanding the rivalry's dynamics. On the achievement side, China has narrowed the AI capability gap with the United States

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in several domains: it produced 15 notable AI models in 2024 (compared to 40 for the US), leads globally in AI patent filings, and has deployed AI at scale in public administration, surveillance, and financial services in ways that constitute genuine technological capability (Stanford HAI, 2025). The Huawei Kirin chip and domestic large language models such as Ernie Bot represent concrete evidence of China's capacity to develop alternatives to American AI hardware and software. On the vulnerability side, however, China's techno-nationalist strategy faces a fundamental structural constraint: despite massive state investment, China remains dependent on lithography equipment from ASML and advanced chip design tools from American companies — dependencies that American export controls have begun to exploit. This vulnerability reveals the paradox at the heart of China's techno-nationalist ambition: the very depth of technological interdependence that its policies seek to overcome cannot be dissolved in the short term, regardless of investment scale, because frontier semiconductor manufacturing requires decades of accumulated industrial knowledge that state funding alone cannot replicate (Ding, 2022; Doshi, 2021). It is precisely this gap between techno-nationalist aspiration and current technological reality that makes China's 2030 target simultaneously credible as a long-term direction and uncertain as a near-term outcome.

## 4. The Structural Nature of the Rivalry: A Zero-Sum Contest for Global Dominance

The analysis of both nations' AI policy frameworks reveals that the US–China AI competition cannot be accurately characterized as conventional market competition between two large economies competing for commercial advantage in a growing industry. Such a characterization would fundamentally misread both the nature of the stakes and the logic driving the behavior of both parties. Conventional market competition operates through price mechanisms, efficiency incentives, and voluntary exchange its outcomes, while sometimes creating winners and losers, do not determine which nation controls the foundational infrastructure of the global economy or commands the next-generation military and surveillance capabilities. The US–China AI competition operates according to an entirely different logic. The application of digital geopolitics as an analytical concept explains why this is so. As Rolf and Schindler (2023) have shown, competition for dominance in the digital platform economy and more broadly in AI is fundamentally a contest over standard-setting power: the capacity to define the technical architecture, regulatory frameworks, and governance norms that will shape how AI systems are built, deployed, and governed globally. The nation that establishes dominance in AI will be positioned to set standards adopted by others, to define the terms of granting or denying access to AI capabilities, and to leverage AI-dependent supply chains as instruments of geopolitical influence.

A critical feature of the US–China AI rivalry that underscores its structural and zero-sum character is the techno-nationalist feedback loop that has developed between both nations' policies. Every American defensive action whether export controls, investment screening regulations, or domestic subsidies is perceived in Beijing not as a proportionate security measure but as confirmation of American intent to permanently suppress China's technological development. This perception drives China's increased domestic AI investment and its pursuit of technological independence, which in turn is perceived in Washington as evidence of China's ambition to achieve global AI dominance, justifying further American restrictions and investments. The result is a mutually reinforcing escalation spiral that deepens the rivalry and accelerates the decoupling of technological ecosystems that were, until recently, deeply interdependent (Ding, 2022).

At its deepest level, the US–China AI competition is a contest about the shape of the twenty-first century international order about whose values, institutions, and strategic vision will shape the global system enabled by AI. Strategic asset theory helps explain why this contest is so consequential: because

AI's spillover effects traverse national security, economic productivity, information dominance, and the governance of critical infrastructure, the nation that achieves sustained AI supremacy will possess structural advantages across virtually every dimension of national power qualitatively different from those generated by conventional economic or military superiority (Schmalz, 2025).

## Conclusion

This study concludes that techno-nationalism has fundamentally shaped the long-term AI investment strategies and policies of the United States and China, transforming their technological competition into a structural rivalry for global dominance rather than conventional market competition. The findings demonstrate that the United States has adopted an extensive techno-nationalist strategy through state-directed investment, semiconductor subsidies, and export controls to maintain its technological supremacy. Meanwhile, China has pursued a parallel strategy through state-backed investment, domestic semiconductor development, and efforts to achieve technological sovereignty. Although their policy approaches differ, both countries share the strategic objective of securing control over critical AI technologies and reducing dependence on foreign-controlled supply chains. Their reciprocal policy responses have created an escalating cycle of competition in which national security and technological sovereignty increasingly take precedence over market efficiency. The findings confirm that techno-nationalism, supported by strategic asset theory and digital geopolitics, provides a relevant framework for understanding the structural dynamics of US–China AI competition and its implications for the global economic and geopolitical order.

Based on these findings, policymakers should develop governance frameworks that address the security implications of AI competition while maintaining opportunities for international cooperation, particularly in AI safety, technological standards, and critical infrastructure protection. Technology companies should strengthen supply chain resilience, assess geopolitical risks in long-term investment decisions, and incorporate regulatory developments into their strategic planning. International institutions should facilitate dialogue and establish mechanisms for cooperation to reduce escalation risks and promote responsible AI development. Future research should extend the temporal scope beyond 2024 to examine changes in techno-nationalist policies in response to technological developments and diplomatic initiatives. Comparative studies involving other major powers are also recommended to determine whether the dynamics identified in the US–China relationship reflect broader patterns of great-power competition. Furthermore, research should investigate international AI safety cooperation, standard-setting coordination, and the potential development of AI arms control frameworks to strengthen the theoretical and practical understanding of global AI governance.

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