AI amid the US-China Rivalry: Scenarios and Policies for Small States

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Abstract

Emerging disruptive technologies such as artificial intelligence (AI) are fueling global rivalry by changing the power dynamics among countries. This article examines the implications of AI for the prospects of defense competition between major powers such as the United States and China. It presents possible scenarios of such competition through 2050 and their implications for smaller countries with limited geopolitical influence as they adapt to the increasingly complex context these processes create. The scenarios provide not only structured pictures of possible futures but also a strategic canvas for developing proactive national security policies in the changing international landscape. In the context of rapid technological advances and strategic competition, smaller countries face both challenges and opportunities as they navigate their own paths. The proposed recommendations aim to "level the playing field" and help such states not only address the challenges posed by AI in the military sphere but also seize the opportunities arising from technological shifts. The findings presented can serve as a basis for developing national security strategies even in the context of institutional and infrastructural limitations. Decision makers will be able to navigate and effectively act in a complex, changing arena, the dynamism of which is largely determined by AI technologies.

Keywords: US-China rivalry; innovation in the defense sector; artificial intelligence (AI); technological competition; national strategies; foresight; small states; global security; international cooperation

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Introduction

The dynamic development of new technologies is radically transforming a wide range of activities in both the civilian and military spheres. This is especially true for dual-use technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI). The increased integration of AI into military strategies is reformatting the sphere of global security, changing the nature of strategic planning, and data collection. (Johnson, 2019; Mori, 2018). Qualitatively different approaches to decision-making are emerging, it becomes possible to more accurately predict the tactics and strategies of opponents, and the arsenal of means for retaliatory steps is expanding. The dynamics of the balance of power in international relations are closely related to economic and technological development. According to some estimates, by 2030, thanks to the spread of AI technology, global GDP may increase by $15.7 trillion, with 70% of this increase coming from the two most influential powers, the United States and China (PWC, 2017). The rivalry between these countries, including in the creation of technologies for the military sector, is increasing global tensions. The Center for a New American Security (CNAS) compares this kind of technological competition to the space race of past decades (Horowitz et al., 2018). The critical role of this technology in shaping the future geopolitical landscape is emphasized not only for world-leading states but also for other players (Fernández-Montesinos, 2019). For smaller countries, this means a widening technological gap that will make them critically vulnerable to a wide range of complex challenges. Unlike major powers, such entities do not have sufficient technological and military resources to compete directly. As a result, the risks of destabilization for them increase. However, if they engage in multilateral international cooperation and form strategic alliances that promote the ethical governance of AI, they have greater opportunities to strengthen their security and sovereignty.

This study fills a critical gap in the existing literature: researchers have rarely considered the long-term impact of AI on global power dynamics and its implications for different states. We analyze the transformative effect of AI on future conflicts between the United States and China, focusing on the military and geopolitical domains. We develop a set of possible scenarios up to 2050. We offer practical recommendations to help small states navigate the rapidly changing international system based on flexibility, adaptability, and proactivity. The analysis of risks and opportunities presented in this paper can provide a solid foundation for future research and policy development in the era of AI-influenced geopolitics.

Literature Review

General Trends in the Development of AI in the Military Sphere[1]

As AI technologies advance, their potential to alter the global balance of power and strategic stability is increasingly being revealed (Boulanin et al., 2020). Most of these breakthroughs, which have resulted from the combined efforts of the commercial and academic spheres, have already led to significant changes in the dynamics of weapons.[2] The formation of a critical mass of publicly available basic research and tools has allowed for significantly reducing the cost of development and accelerating their adaptation to military applications (Morgan et al., 2020). States are beginning to recognize the potential of such innovations and are changing their defense strategies accordingly (Horowitz et al., 2020). Many researchers agree that AI is pushing the limits of technology per se, creating uncertainty in terms of strategic stability (Larson, 2021). There is growing concern about the ethical implications associated with this process (Johnson, 2020). The literature provides numerous assessments of the changing nature of warfare, with emerging political, social, and technological trends leading to conceptual shifts in approaches to resolving military conflicts.

Another view is that AI can improve the effectiveness of all types of military operations by working through established systems and interacting with other, more established forms of military power.[3] This technology is seen as an important complementary resource to traditional military operations. The introduction of an AI system can add some level of creativity to certain routine tasks. However, there are limits when it comes to adapting to new contexts and developing transformational strategies. Emerging unprecedented contexts require creating new rules and capabilities. Strategy remains an "essential human competence" (Payne, Warbot, 2021). Like any advanced technology, AI eliminates some existing problems, but at the same time new "black boxes" (Gardner, 2021) and issues of trust in information sources arise. One potential side effect of the introduction of more powerful

[1] The section is prepared on the basis of (Horowitz et al., 2020).

[2] https://www.chathamhouse.org/2017/01/artificial-intelligence-and-future-warfare, accessed 18.01.2025.

[3] https://samf.substack.com/p/does-artificial-intelligence-change?utm_source=+substack%26utm_medium=email, accessed 07.02.2025.

computing resources and data analytics is the increased risk of miscalculation by decision-makers when they rely on unreliable sources of information.[4] AI systems and their databases may contain vulnerabilities, with opportunities for adversaries to deliberately distort content, creating uncertainty. New challenges will arise from mechanical failures, algorithmic degradation, biased data, and adversarial or counter-technologies. In other words, the use of AI in military operations requires a fine-grained trade-off between opportunities and risks across a wide range of options.

The Potential of the USA and China

As the geopolitical landscape shifts toward a more multipolar world, the US and China are banking on the development of AI technologies to maintain their strategic advantages.

In **the United States,** research and development (R&D) into military AI has been underway since the 1950s. For example, Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) has been implementing projects related to natural language processing, facial recognition, and predictive analytics (Morgan et al., 2020). Since 2016, a special strategic R&D program in the field of AI has been implemented (the National Artificial Intelligence Research and Development Strategic Plan) aimed at strengthening national defense and security (Johnson, 2021). When introducing new technologies, a key focus is on cooperation between the state and technology companies. An example is the Maven project, carried out jointly by Google and the US Department of Defense. Within its framework, computer vision algorithms are being developed to recognize and identify classes of objects in video footage from reconnaissance drones. Based on this information, decisions are made on potential targets for destruction (Malmio, 2023). Another program, Sea Hunter, aims to create an autonomous vessel to counter submarines.[5] Despite significant investments in AI development by the government, technology companies, and universities in the United States, their volumes remain lower than expected. As a result, a number of experts question the ability of the United States to maintain its leadership position in the long term (Hunter et al., 2023), predicting that China will take over the lead in the next 10 years (NSCAI, 2023). However, other experts, while acknowledging certain challenges, still believe that the United States will retain its lead in military AI development, and do so by a large margin.

As in the US, **China** sees AI as a key competitive tool in its bilateral geopolitical rivalry. It is predicted that by 2030, the country's GDP could be increased by $600 billion annually as a result of AI technology implementation (for comparison: Shanghai's GDP in 2021 was $680 billion).[6] The growth will occur mainly due to such sectors as the automotive industry, transportation and logistics services, manufacturing, manufacturing software, healthcare, and life sciences.[7]

China's first-mover strategy in AI development involves a broad conceptualization that the defense sector synthesizes into a holistic framework for future "intelligent" military operations and strategic superiority (Johnson, 2019). A three-stage strategy has been developed to achieve global leadership in AI by 2030 (He, Ji, 2023). The creation of an AI system is considered key as a tool for military modernization. The R&D spectrum ranges from a drone program[8] to the widespread integration of advanced cloud computing, surveillance, and facial recognition technologies.[9] These initiatives are seen as an entry point into the AI race with other powers.

China has been actively responding to the US restrictions on access to chip manufacturing technology. Even before the deterioration of bilateral relations, China believed that rapid technological transformation would turn into a zero-sum race between major powers and recognized the need to reorganize the national innovation system (Cheung, 2022). China officially designated AI development as a national priority in 2017. Specific areas include algorithms, advanced semiconductors, high-performance computer chips, quantum computing, big data, brainmatics, brain-computer interfaces, computational neuroscience, brain-cognition, among other fields. A wide range of national players are involved in new AI developments. Military applications of AI are seen as a fast and effective way to modernize the defense sector. Key areas of AI application in military operations include: unmanned combat platforms for pinpoint destruction of enemy targets; operational collec-

[4] https://securityintelligence.com/articles/data-poisoning-big-threat/, accessed 19.01.2025.

[5] https://www.nationaldefensemagazine.org/articles/2020/6/19/navy-industry-eager-to-develop-bigger-robo-ships, accessed 19.01.2025.

[6] https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/quantumblack/our-insights/the-next-frontier-for-ai-in-china-could-add-600-billion-to-its-economy, date 01/16/2025.

[7] Since the turn of the millennium, China has overtaken Germany and Japan to become the world's second-largest R&D funder after the United States. Notably, the gap in R&D funding between the United States and China is rapidly narrowing, as the United States, although increasing its own investments, has done so at a significantly slower pace since 2000 (https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-020-00084-7, accessed 15.02.2025) .

[8] https://www.businessinsider.com/chinas-underwater-drone-allies-in-pacific-2019-10, accessed 02.03.2025.

[9] https://www.wired.co.uk/article/china-social-credit-system-explained, accessed 02.03.2025.

tion, processing, and analysis of data; defensive and strike cyber systems.

China has been heavily investing in UAV development since the late 1990s, building the world's largest UAV manufacturing capacity to produce a full range of military drones (He, Ji, 2023). Next-generation technologies are being developed, including directed energy systems and human-machine systems (Hunter et al., 2023). Development has been accelerated significantly by the government's close cooperation with technology giants Huawei and Tencent (Johnson, 2021; Lu, 2021).

Conceptual Basis of the Study

Our analysis is based on two basic concepts that are critical to understanding the dynamics of the balance of power and constructing future scenarios: realism in international relations and strategic foresight. In the course of our research, based on expert opinions, four scenarios were developed that describe the impact of AI on military and geopolitical strategies. Specialized foresight tools were used, including expert surveys, PESTEL analysis, and the Régnier Abacus[10] and Schwartz Axes (Schwartz, 1997). The presented results can be useful for developing national strategies to prepare for global shifts caused by the introduction of AI.

Since the 1930s, the behavior of countries in the system of international relations has been viewed primarily through the prism of "political realism." According to this paradigm, states as rational actors prioritize maximizing their influence to ensure security and development (Velázquez, González, 2016). Historically, the dynamics of the balance of power have manifested themselves through conflicts, often driven by territorial and economic interests. In light of the geopolitical confrontations of recent decades, realism has evolved into a structural paradigm (or neorealism), acquiring a systemic perspective. Distinctions are made between the hierarchical nature of domestic politics and the unstructured framework of international relations, based on the assumption that the balance of power arises from the interaction of systemic processes, rather than the actions of individual states (Waltz, 1979). According to this approach, major powers play a central role, and global competition is determined by the distribution of power and systemic constraints.

The international system is currently largely determined by the geopolitical competition between the United States and China and their desire for dominance. The processes taking place within it inevitably have a large-scale impact on other states. Looking through the prism of the realist paradigm helps to better understand the broader implications of the influence of these processes (including the introduction of AI) on the prospects for global security and national strategies. Given that the countries in question seek to dominate in the field of AI, their actions are consistent with the principles of realist theory, since they are determined by the desire to maximize their strategic advantages in a competitive international system. In this scenario, technological innovation, military potential, and strategic alliances play a central role as key components of national security (Morgenthau, 2005; Mearsheimer, 2014).

Alfred Whitehead defines foresight as "the ability to see through apparent confusion to notice developments before they become trends, to see patterns before they are fully manifested, and to understand the particular social currents that will determine the direction of future events" (Whitehead, 1967; Tsoukas, Shepherd, 2004). In contrast to deterministic approaches, foresight starts from the multiplicity and uncertainty of potential scenarios for the development of events (futuribles) and emphasizes the role of man in their formation (de Jouvenel, 1964). This concept is based on the understanding that decisions made today significantly affect future developments (Godet, 1994; Godet, Durance, 2011; Mojica, 2005). In other words, Foresight complements political realism by offering the prospect of working with alternative futures to restructure actions in the present to ensure the implementation of the most preferred options.

Methodology

From a methodological point of view, the study was carried out in several stages. First, an in-depth analysis of the military use of AI in the United States and China was conducted. In particular, a bibliometric review of scientific publications, reports from various organizations, and government documents was carried out to identify trends and drivers of change. An analysis of political, economic, social, technological, environmental, and legal aspects (Politics – Economy – Social – Technology – Environment – Legal, PESTEL) allowed us to comprehensively assess the factors determining the development of military AI for use in a potential conflict between the United States and China (Table 1). We also studied expert opinions on the development of AI and the geopolitical consequences of this process.[11] Then, the variables determining geopolitical competition in the field

[10] https://www.colorinsight.fr/?lang=2, accessed 03.03.2025.

[11] A non-probability sampling method was used to select experts in military AI, geopolitics, and international relations. Participants were selected based on their research experience, professional reputation, and contributions to debates on relevant topics. This provided qualified expert assessments of potential future scenarios.

Table 1. **Results of PESTEL Analysis**

Dimensions	Variables
Politics	• Geopolitical competition • Governmental policies • International alliances
Economy	• Investment in AI • Industrial competitiveness • Global economic power
Social Field	• Ethical challenges • Privacy • Human rights • Unequal access to technology
Technology	• Advancement in AI • Autonomous systems • Changes in war
Environment	Indirect environmental impact of military technology
Legal Issues	• Regulation of autonomous weapons • Ethical rules enforcement

Source: author.

of AI were identified and evaluated. The variables were ranked using the Rainier mosaic panel method, which consisted of marking expert assessments of the degree of significance of a particular factor using a color scale. Two key drivers acted as axes of the scenario matrix, namely: "Cybersecurity and Digital Manipulation" and "Militarization and Space Race." Based on the matrix, four internally consistent scenarios were constructed (Figure 1) with a horizon up to 2050. Let us consider them in more detail.

AI Use Scenarios to 2050

Scenario 1: Masters of Cyberspace, Peace in the Stars

This scenario depicts a future where the geopolitical competition between the United States and China moves forward to cyberspace, leaving the physical space virtually demilitarized. In this scenario, high-tech data manipulation and digital control become the central hub in the conflict, and the global powers use artificial intelligence to affect the public discourse and destabilize their opponents without the need for direct military confrontation. Advanced surveillance systems and cyber espionage will then lead all the national security strategies, while cyberwar will virtually replace traditional conflicts.

In the meantime, in outer space, a cooperative approach is applied, and both the United States and China have agreed to preserve this as a weapon-free environment. The aforementioned is expressed through their collaboration in scientific missions and the joint development of technologies for space exploration, instead of an armed race. This scenario reflects a delicate balance between the digital war on Earth and peace in space, with an emphasis on the growing relevance of cyberspace as the new geopolitical battlefield.

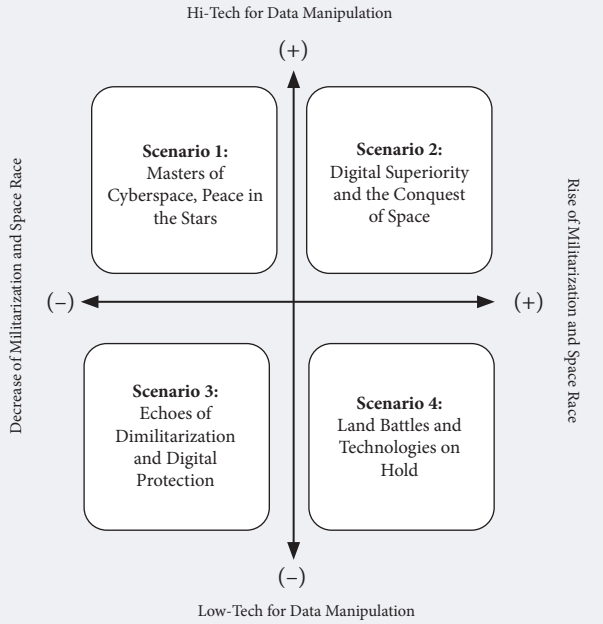
Implications: For small countries, this scenario highlights the need to strengthen their cybersecurity capacities and to develop policies to regulate the use of AI for data manipulation. Likewise, it implies active commitment in the field of international diplomacy to ensure that outer space continues to be a space for scientific cooperation and does not become a theater of operations.

Scenario 2: Digital Supremacy and the Conquest of Space

In this scenario, both cyberspace and physical space are the main battlefields in the competition between the United States and China. Artificial Intelligence, with the support of advancements in quantum computing, has boosted the development of surveillance, espionage, and social control technology, while the militarization of space has occurred due to the construction of armed satellites, combat stations, and military bases on the Moon and Mars. The conquest of space is assumed not only as a national prestige affair but also as a survival and geopolitical supremacy issue.

Artificial intelligence plays a key role in military logistics, as it optimizes the deployment of forces and allows rival powers to efficiently reply to threats, in real-time. This scenario depicts a future where the

Figure 1. **Scenario Matrix**



Source: author.

war in cyberspace and physical space are intrinsically intertwined and lead to an unprecedented military escalation.

Implications: For small states, this scenario highlights the need to participate in international fora on space governance and the regulation of artificial intelligence for military purposes. Additionally, it shows the relevance of developing a strategy for the protection of critical infrastructure facing potential cyberattacks, as well as the preparation for a potential environment where space becomes increasingly militarized.

Scenario 3: Echoes of Demilitarization and Digital Protection

In this scenario, the military tensions between the United States and China are reduced and open the gates for an era of progressive demilitarization and international cooperation. In this case, artificial intelligence, while still present, has not advanced as fast as projected, due to ethical concerns and the high costs linked to its development. Cybersecurity and data manipulation are ruled by international standards aimed at protecting digital rights and ensuring privacy.

In this scenario, outer space becomes a field for scientific collaboration. The space powers have dismantled their arsenals and shifted their efforts toward research and peaceful exploration. In this world, global stability is a priority over conflict and the nations choose diplomacy and cooperation instead of the arms race.

Implications: This scenario provides smaller nations with the chance to play a significant role in space diplomacy and the protection of digital privacy. Simultaneously, it underscores the importance of adapting technological innovation policies to ensure that emerging technologies evolve ethically, allowing less powerful states to thrive in a more cooperative and less militarized global landscape.

Scenario 4: Land Battles and Technology on Hold

In this last scenario, space militarization reaches an alarming level, while the development of digital technologies, particularly those linked to artificial intelligence, has stagnated. The United States and China are focused on competing for the control of strategic resources in outer space and set innovation in cybersecurity and data manipulation aside. Space, once perceived as the last border of pacific exploration, becomes a highly militarized battlefield, with bases and satellites orbiting around the Earth. Tensions intensify on Earth, and the capacities for digital surveillance and cybersecurity have not progressed at the required pace to face the new threats. This scenario depicts a future where the war is fought both on Earth and in space, and where the absence of technological progress in cybersecurity leaves most nations vulnerable to face attacks and destabilization.

Implications: In this scenario, small states must focus on strengthening their traditional and digital defenses, in preparation for a world where military tensions and space conflict have intensified. Additionally, countries will have to invest in improving the resilience of their technological and energy infrastructures aimed at mitigating the impact of potential destabilization caused by the competition between the superpowers.

General Comments and Policy Recommendations for Small States

An analysis of the prospects for the development of AI and geopolitics in the period up to 2050 has shown that AI is becoming a major factor in the dynamics of the balance of power in the world. The scenarios presented in this article illustrate the different paths that the United States and China could take: from cyberwarfare and the militarization of space to cooperation and active demilitarization. For smaller countries, all scenarios emphasize the need for active policies on cybersecurity, AI governance, and space diplomacy. Strategic foresight and flexibility will be key to countering new challenges and seizing emerging opportunities. Policy recommendations are summarized in Table 3.

Conclusions

This study analyzed the impact of AI on future conflicts between the United States and China, successfully addressing the research objectives. A prospective approach facilitated the exploration of various scenarios through 2050, highlighting how AI could reshape geopolitical dynamics and military strategies for both major powers. These insights are crucial for less powerful states, enabling them to begin formulating national security policies despite institutional and infrastructure constraints.

The first stage of this work included a detailed analysis of the development and implementation of AI for military purposes in both countries through a methodology encompassing bibliometric review and Delphi surveys, aimed at identifying key variables and strategic axes that may influence the geopolitical competition. This approach facilitated the understanding of the current capacities in terms of AI while anticipating their evolution and impact regarding deterrence and conflict escalation.

Table 2. **Policy Recommendations for Small Countries**

Key Message	Measures to be Undertaken
	Strengthening National Cybersecurity
Cybersecurity is a priority for facing the increased use of AI in conflicts	• Develop a National Cybersecurity Strategy to protect critical infrastructure. • Collaborate with regional and international scoped cybersecurity initiatives. • Train staff in the fields of cybersecurity and advanced technologies, aimed at mitigating potential attacks.
	Regulation and Governance of AI
AI implies risks for the sovereignty of small states	• Create regulatory frameworks that promote transparency and responsibility regarding the use of AI. • Participate in the preparation of international standards on AI. • Promote research in AI at the local level and through international partnerships aimed at reducing technology dependence.
	Preparation for the Scenarios of Space Militarization
Outer space is a new field for geopolitical competition	• Develop special policies to protect their interests, particularly in the fields of communications and satellite security. • Strengthen international cooperation in space issues to fully take advantage of advanced technology. • Train experts in space rights for participation in international negotiation.
	Promotion of Strategic Partnership in the Security and Defense Areas
Strategic partnerships may improve the defensive capacities of small states.	• Participate in regional military exercises to reinforce their capacities to respond to threats. • Develop an adaptive defense strategy that encompasses new technologies such as drones and AI. • Strengthen relations with key global actors to balance their relations with world powers like the United States and China.
	Development of a Multidimensional Approach to National Defense
Defense should integrate traditional capacities and cybersecurity, together with AI.	• Include cybersecurity in their national defense strategy, through specialized units. • Coordinate the efforts of the governments, private sector, and academic institutions to develop a comprehensive defenses. • Monitor global trends in the fields of technology and security to adapt their defense strategies.

Source: author.

Subsequently, four prospective scenarios were constructed, outlining potential trajectories in the geopolitics of AI, ranging from digital supremacy to demilitarization and enhanced digital protection. These scenarios not only offer a structured vision of possible futures but also provide a strategic framework through which smaller nations can craft proactive national security policies while adapting to an ever-evolving international landscape.

Given the findings of this study, it is evident that AI will play a pivotal role in shaping future conflicts between the United States and China, as well as in influencing global power dynamics up to 2050. This research contributes to bridging the gap in the existing literature on AI's impact on future conflicts while laying a foundation for further studies in this critical field. By deepening the understanding of how technology might redefine international relations, this work serves as a reference for scholars and policymakers alike.

This context presents significant challenges, particularly for nations with limited geopolitical influence, as they must navigate an increasingly complex environment shaped by technological competition. AI presents not only opportunities but also risks that could threaten national security and stability, making it imperative to adopt forward-looking policy strategies. The recommendations below aim to assist smaller states in strengthening their position within this evolving landscape by fostering resilience and international collaboration in AI governance. The ultimate goal of these proposals is to mitigate the risks associated with AI while maximizing its potential benefits in the realms of security and strategic development.

Within the geopolitical rivalry between the United States and China, smaller nations will encounter both obstacles and opportunities as they navigate the landscape of emerging technologies and strategic competition. By implementing the proposed recommendations, these states can develop a long-term vision that strengthens their position in an evolving global order.

Thus, their approach to AI, particularly in the context of military and geopolitical challenges, must be characterized by resilience, adaptability, and strategic foresight. By proactively anticipating change and preparing accordingly, less powerful states can safeguard their national interests while contributing to global stability in the AI era.

The recommendations outlined in this study seek to level the playing field, enabling smaller nations not only to address the challenges posed by AI and military advancements, but also to seize the opportunities arising from technological shifts. By incorporating these strategies, they can help shape a global landscape that is secure, competitive, and strategically balanced. Furthermore, by navigating the complexities of AI-driven geopolitics with foresight and collaboration, these nations can enhance their influence and ensure their long-term stability in an increasingly technology-driven world.

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