

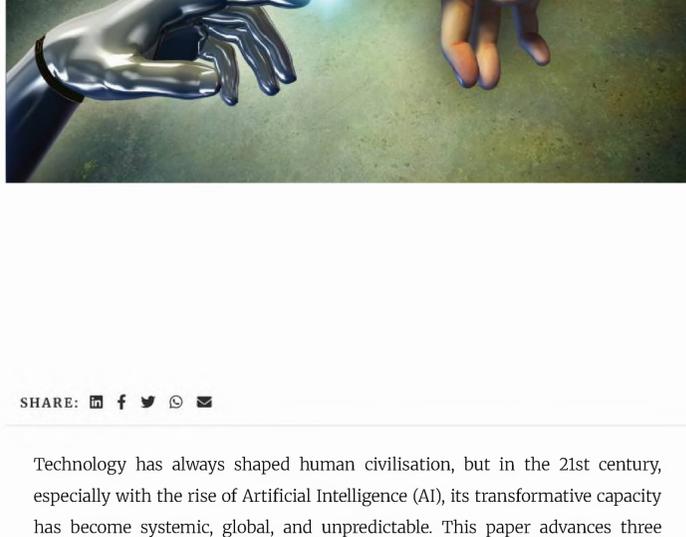
Technology: Causing Chaos Or Transforming The World Order?

AI is redefining power, war, and society. This essay argues for ethical, human-centred governance to harness technology's transformative potential

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Technology has always shaped human civilisation, but in the 21st century, especially with the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI), its transformative capacity has become systemic, global, and unpredictable. This paper advances three interlinked arguments.

First, technology, inclusive of AI, is transforming societies and reshaping the world order, particularly within the U.S.–China rivalry.

Second, the relationship between innovation, ideas, and war is complex; modern wars evolve through technological revolutions and, in turn, accelerate them.

Third, while technology has deepened global interdependence, it has also intensified exclusion, producing contradictory trends. Leaders like Elon Musk, Sam Altman, and Mark Zuckerberg are driving innovation that transcends borders, yet political figures such as Donald Trump have reframed AI and technology supremacy as existential issues of national survival, disrupting the logic of interdependence.

Let me state this up front: the contemporary world is dynamic, interconnected, and perpetually under turbulence. To navigate this transformation, we must understand both the forces of disruption and the opportunities for governance that accompany them.

The contest for technological dominance, especially AI, has become the defining feature of global politics. The U.S.–China rivalry today is not merely geopolitical; it is technopolitical. As Ian Bremmer (2021) describes, the world has entered a “technopolar moment” in which a few powerful technology corporations, such as Tesla, Starlink, Amazon, Alibaba, and Deep Seek, exercise geopolitical influence comparable to states. In the United States, private technology giants dominate AI research and innovation, while in China, state-supported firms drive a techno-state-centric model of development. Together, they are redrawing the frontiers of power and governance.

The challenge, therefore, is not to fear AI as an existential threat but to democratise its control and harness it to improve governance, service delivery, and citizen welfare

Karen Hao, in *AI Empire*, echoes Bremmer’s view that a handful of corporations now monopolise artificial intelligence, turning technology into both an instrument of profit and a pillar of geopolitical strategy. This fusion of *technopower* and the *state* is evident not only in the U.S. and China but also in Europe and South Asia. Countries like India and Pakistan are being drawn into this evolving architecture where energy, data, and security are increasingly intertwined.

Indeed, AI and energy are glued together. The race for technological superiority has generated an insatiable demand for energy, compelling nations to rethink their energy and national security policies in tandem. AI data centres, satellite networks, and electric mobility systems all demand unprecedented power consumption, making the geopolitics of energy inseparable from that of technology. Artificial Intelligence rests on three core attributes:

- **Intentionality**, meaning machines making decisions like humans.
- **Intelligence**, meaning learning and adapting from data.
- **Adaptability**, meaning responding autonomously to complex situations.

These features provoke both amazement and apprehension. Critics fear AI may erode values, privacy, and ethics, while others see it as a capacity-builder enhancing human and institutional performance. Alarmists such as Harari, Musk, and Altman warn that by 2045, AI could surpass human intelligence and threaten human existence. Yet cautious optimism is warranted. In my view, AI is a *human invention*, not a divine or extraterrestrial force. Humanity retains the ability to guide and regulate its development. The challenge, therefore, is not to fear AI as an existential threat but to *democratise its control* and harness it to improve governance, service delivery, and citizen welfare.

To achieve this, a globally agreed regulatory framework must emerge, one that balances innovation with ethical responsibility and ensures AI remains a tool for learning, not domination.

The feedback loop between conflict and innovation is an enduring feature of global transformation

Wars, ideas, and technological innovations have invariably been interconnected. Conflicts generate demand for innovation; innovations, in turn, reshape the nature of conflict. As the International Committee of the Red Cross reports, over 120 armed conflicts are currently active, yet only a few command global attention. Modern wars, from Ukraine to Gaza, demonstrate how drones, robotics, and precision weapons have revolutionised warfare. These technologies underscore the Hobbesian truth that humanity’s impulse towards rivalry often outpaces its commitment to peace.

Historically, wars have been *transformative forces*. They produce destruction but also innovation, adaptation, and social change. The two World Wars not only redrew borders but also triggered decolonisation, expanded women’s participation in the workforce, and ushered in American global leadership. Wars, paradoxically, are engines of modernisation.

Phase I: Ideological Wars (1945–1975)

In the Cold War’s early decades, wars became ideological instruments. The Vietnam War, the Arab–Israeli conflicts (1956, 1967, 1973), and the global struggle between communism and democracy transformed warfare into a battle of ideas. Media technologies amplified ideological narratives, while propaganda became a weapon as potent as arms. George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* remains a metaphorical reminder of how ideas can shape, sustain, and distort perceptions about power, both democratic and authoritarian.

Phase II: Civilisational and Proxy Wars (1978–2001)

The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Iran–Iraq War introduced a new phase, that of civilisational conflict. Samuel Huntington’s *Clash of Civilisations* (1993) posited that future wars would revolve around culture and religion rather than ideology. Meanwhile, Chinese scholar Wang Huning, in *America Against America* (1991), observed America’s deepening social and moral contradictions, anticipating today’s polarisation and populism. Together, these analyses foreshadowed a shift from ideological rivalry to identity-driven politics.

Phase III: Non-State Actors and Populist Conflicts (2001–2025)

The 9/11 attacks and subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq ushered in an era of asymmetric warfare. The “war on terror” blurred the lines between state and non-state actors, accelerating the weaponisation of technology, from surveillance and cyberwarfare to drones. Ironically, while Western democracies advocated peace and liberal values, they also engaged in frequent interventions. Since 1945, Britain has intervened over 80 times in 47 countries, and the U.S. at least 21 times since 1991. The global consequence has been rising conservatism, nationalism, and populism, driven by grievance politics and anti-immigration.

This leads me to conclude that *wars reshape technologies, and technologies reshape societies*. The feedback loop between conflict and innovation is an enduring feature of global transformation.

Wars, pandemics, and revolutions have repeatedly tested societies, but they have also inspired creativity, resilience, and reform

Technology-driven globalisation has created a web of complex interdependence, as described by Nye and Keohane, linking economies, societies, and individuals in unprecedented ways. Yet this same interdependence has intensified inequalities and exclusion.

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated how technological gaps translate into survival wars. Nations competed for vaccines, ventilators, and digital infrastructure. Similarly, the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, and the larger Muslim world, including Syria, Qatar, and Iran, have shown how drones, cyberattacks, and surveillance tools redefine power. The technological revolution, spanning satellites, smartphones, and AI has made borders porous but societies more fragmented.

Historically, technological revolutions have always been double-edged. The Industrial Revolution advanced prosperity but also caused ecological disasters and inequality. The Digital Revolution connected humanity yet deepened divides between innovators and users. Alvin Toffler’s *Future Shock* (1972) predicted remote work and digital convergence long before Zoom or ChatGPT became everyday realities. Today, his prediction has matured into a lived experience. Work from home, telemedicine, online education, and algorithmic governance are transforming lifestyles and state–citizen relations.

The Social Media Revolution, from Facebook in 2004 to ChatGPT in 2022, has further accelerated the speed of change. Information now spreads instantly, collapsing the distance between event and awareness. The perception of chaos often stems from this immediacy, for what once took months to document is now broadcast live to millions, amplifying both empathy and anxiety.

The post-9/11 period institutionalised surveillance technology, redefining privacy and security. As globalisation expanded, instantaneous financial transfers and digital communication eroded traditional hierarchies of control. States now struggle to regulate these borderless domains. The convergence of finance, technology, and data has created a fragile, hyper-connected world, one where local disturbances trigger global consequences.

Modern economies and political systems have evolved into organised complex systems, intricate networks of finance, technology, and law. Their strength lies in connectivity; their weakness lies in interdependence. As the world becomes more technologically sophisticated, fragility increases. Cyberattacks, AI bias, misinformation, and digital monopolies can all destabilise institutions.

Leadership matters profoundly in managing this complexity. Nations that produce visionary leaders, those who embrace innovation with ethical foresight, thrive; others descend into reactive chaos. In today’s world, leadership styles, from Xi Jinping’s state-led techno-nationalism to Trump’s mercurial technopopulism, illustrate how politics and technology intertwine. The 2025 U.S. administration, invoking tariffs, sanctions, and digital controls, symbolises this fusion of economic nationalism and technological competition.

To move beyond the impasse, *AI governance must shift from automation-centred to human-centred innovation*. Nobel laureate Daron Acemoglu argues that without cultural change in AI development, focusing on human welfare and skill enhancement rather than efficiency alone, regulation will fail. A small elite of “tech feudalists” actors currently shape technological trajectories that affect six billion users who have little say. As Acemoglu notes, “*The world does not face a predetermined technological inevitability; conscious collective choices can prioritise human-centred AI development. The future, whether owned by a privileged few or humanity at large, remains up to us.*”

In conclusion, let me reiterate that technology is not destiny; it is a direction. The challenge is to guide it ethically and inclusively. The current U.S.–China technological rivalry, the monopolisation of AI, and the weaponisation of innovation all point towards a world both interconnected and fractured. Yet history reminds us that humanity’s adaptive capacity remains extraordinary.

Wars, pandemics, and revolutions have repeatedly tested societies, but they have also inspired creativity, resilience, and reform. **The task ahead is to govern transformation without stifling innovation, to democratise technology without diluting excellence, and to reaffirm human agency in an age of algorithms.** Technology may appear chaotic, but beneath the turbulence lies transformation. Whether this transformation yields domination or empowerment will depend on how wisely societies, states, and citizens choose to navigate their technopolar moment.

Author’s Note: This article, by Saeed Shafqat, Professor & Director, SHAFQAT INSTITUTE for Pakistan and Emerging Geopolitics (SIPEG), is based on remarks made at the Bandung Conference organised by the Pakistan Institute of International Affairs (PIIA), Karachi, at Beaconhouse National University (BNU) and the National School of Public Policy.

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