

Hegemonic Identity and State Interests in the United States' TikTok Ban Policy (2020)

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Abstract

This article examines the United States' TikTok ban policy in 2020 by analyzing the relationship between hegemonic identity, state interests, and foreign policy actions. Drawing upon a constructivist perspective, the study argues that the policy should not be understood solely as a technocratic response to cybersecurity concerns, but rather as part of a broader effort to preserve the United States' dominant position within the global technological order. The United States' identity as the hegemonic power shaped the construction of strategic interests related to cybersecurity, digital sovereignty, and platform competition, which were subsequently translated into the restrictive policy measures targeting TikTok as the Chinese-owned platform. Using a qualitative case study approach, this article analyzes policy documents, official government statements, and relevant academic literature concerning digital politics and US-China technological rivalry. The findings demonstrate that the TikTok ban reflected broader geopolitical anxieties regarding China's technological rise and the shifting balance of power within the global digital economy. This article contributes to International Relations scholarship by highlighting the role of identity in shaping foreign policy behavior in the context of digital capitalism and technological competition.

Keywords

The United States; Identity; Constructivism; TikTok

Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital technology has transformed the landscape of international relations beyond conventional issues of military competition and economic rivalry. In the contemporary era, cyberspace and digital platforms have become strategic arenas through which states contest influence, authority, and legitimacy within the global order. Social media platforms are no longer merely communication tools or spaces for online interaction, but increasingly function as infrastructures of political influence, data accumulation, and economic power (Nasrullah, 2015). As digital platforms become more deeply embedded in transnational political and economic processes, concerns regarding cyber security, digital sovereignty, and technological dependence have also intensified. Consequently, competition among major powers has expanded into the realm of digital governance and technological control.

The competition between the United States and China has increasingly expanded beyond conventional sectors such as trade and military affairs into broader domains including health diplomacy, digital technology, and platform governance. Previous studies have shown that rivalry between the two powers continuously adapts to emerging strategic sectors in response to shifts within the global order (Saputra & Larasati, 2023). In this context, TikTok represents another arena through which technological competition and hegemonic contestation between the United States and China are reproduced in the digital era.

The rivalry between the United States and China illustrates how technological development has become inseparable from strategic state interests. Both countries seek to strengthen their positions within the global technological order through innovation, industrial expansion, and digital infrastructure development. China has accelerated investment in strategic sectors such as artificial intelligence, robotics, telecommunications, and digital platforms as part of its long-term ambition to enhance national power and reduce dependence on Western technological systems (Chen et al., 2019). Meanwhile, the United States continues to preserve its influence through globally dominant technology corporations such as Google, Apple, Microsoft, and Meta, which collectively shape the architecture of the global digital economy. In this context, technological superiority increasingly represents not only economic capability but also geopolitical influence and hegemonic status.

The contestation between the two powers is especially visible in the development of artificial intelligence and platform-based digital ecosystems. China's rapid technological advancement has enabled Chinese companies to compete directly with major American corporations in sectors historically dominated by the United States. The emergence of Chinese digital platforms demonstrates China's increasing capacity to shape transnational digital culture and platform economies. Several studies have argued that China's technological expansion reflects broader structural transformations in the global political economy, where digital innovation becomes a central instrument of national power projection (Lee, 2017; Li, 2025). Such developments have generated growing concern within the United States regarding the future balance of

technological leadership and digital influence.

Among these digital platforms, TikTok emerged as one of the most controversial manifestations of China's growing technological presence. Owned by ByteDance, TikTok experienced rapid global expansion and became particularly popular in the United States market. Its influence extended beyond the number of users, encompassing algorithmic innovation, digital advertising markets, and global cultural dissemination. TikTok's expansion occurred amid intensifying tensions between Washington and Beijing concerning trade disputes, cyber security, technological competition, and digital sovereignty. As a result, TikTok increasingly became politicized within American political discourse and was represented not simply as a foreign entertainment platform, but as a potential strategic threat associated with China's technological rise.

The strategic significance of TikTok within the United States market can be observed through the scale of its American user base. As shown in Chart 1, the United States ranked as the country with the largest number of TikTok users globally in 2023, reaching approximately 116.5 million users (Annur, 2023). This indicates that TikTok has become deeply embedded within the American digital ecosystem and possessed substantial influence over digital consumption patterns, cultural dissemination, and platform-based economic activities. Although other American social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube still dominated global user numbers, TikTok's rapid valuation growth reflected its increasing competitiveness within the global platform economy (Muhamad, 2024). Consequently, TikTok's expansion was perceived not merely as a commercial success of a foreign application, but also as an indicator of China's growing influence in the global technological order.



Chart 1. 10 Countries with the Most TikTok Users in the World

Source: Annur (2023),

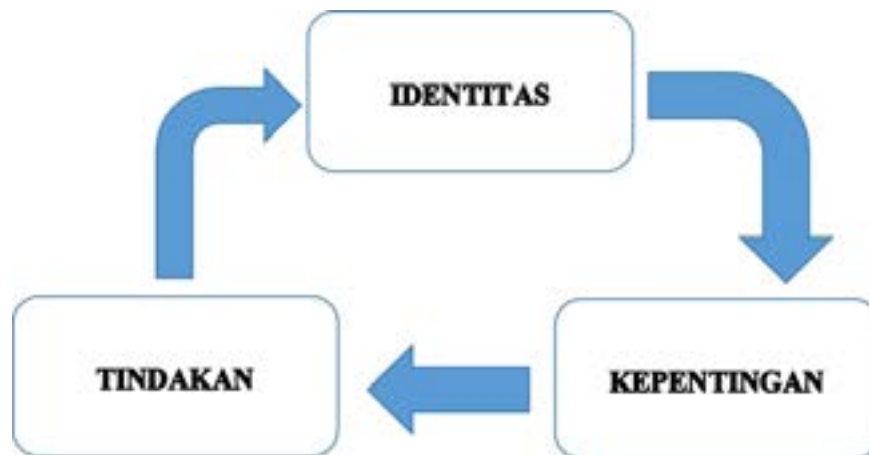
<https://databoks.katadata.co.id/media/statistik/e55f918fb00588b/pengguna-tiktok-di-indonesia-terbanyak-kedua-di-dunia-per-april-2023-nyaris-salip-as> (has been processed)

The United States government under President Donald Trump responded to these developments by issuing policies aimed at restricting TikTok's operations in the United States during 2020. Officially, the policy was justified through arguments related to national security and the protection of American user data. Several previous studies examining the TikTok ban policy primarily focused on securitization, cyber threats, and concerns regarding the potential access of the Chinese government to user information through digital platforms (Ichwan & Nursita, 2023; Indrayani & Maharani, 2022). This perspective contributes significantly to understanding the security dimension of the policy, particularly in explaining how cyber security discourse was mobilized within American political narratives. Nevertheless, focusing exclusively on security considerations risks oversimplifying the broader political and ideational context underlying the policy itself.

From a constructivist perspective, state actions are not determined solely by material calculations or objective threats, but are also shaped by identity, norms, and intersubjective understandings within the international system (Wendt, 2012). Constructivism emphasizes that state interests are socially constructed through interactions between actors and their surrounding social environment (Rosyidin, 2015). In this context, the United States' response toward TikTok can be interpreted as part of a broader effort to preserve and reproduce its identity as a hegemonic power within the global technological order. China's technological expansion, symbolized through the global success of TikTok, is therefore perceived not merely as economic competition but also as a challenge to the established hierarchy of digital authority dominated by the United States.

The relationship between identity, interests, and state actions occupies a central position within constructivist analysis. State identity influences how actors interpret their strategic environment, while interests emerge from the meanings attached to that identity. These interests subsequently shape state actions and foreign policy behavior (Rosyidin, 2015; Wendt, 2012). In this framework, the interaction between identity, interests, and actions forms a continuous cycle through which states maintain, negotiate, or transform their positions within the international system. Previous studies on US–China rivalry have also demonstrated that the identities of both states shape the construction of their strategic interests and policy behavior across various issue areas, including health diplomacy and regional influence (Saputra & Larasati, 2023). This pattern is similarly reflected in the United States' response toward TikTok, where technological competition became intertwined with hegemonic identity and geopolitical concerns. Therefore, the United States' TikTok ban policy may be understood not only as a response to security concerns but also as an effort to preserve hegemonic identity amid intensifying technological rivalry.

Figure 1. The Relationships between Identity, Interest, and State Actions



Source: Rosyidin, 2015 (has been processed)

The relevance of this analytical framework becomes increasingly apparent within the context of digital capitalism and platform competition. Studies on platform economies argue that contemporary global power is increasingly determined by control over data, algorithms, and digital infrastructures rather than solely by conventional industrial capacity (Kenney & Zysman, 2016; Srnicek, 2016). Furthermore, cyber security scholarship demonstrates that digital data has become a strategic asset closely associated with national security and geopolitical influence (Deibert, 2015; Cavelti & Wenger, 2020). Consequently, the rise of Chinese digital platforms do not only generate economic concerns but also anxieties regarding sovereignty, information control, and global technological dominance. This situation reflects broader transformations in international politics, where cyberspace increasingly functions as a domain of strategic rivalry among major powers.

Although previous studies have examined TikTok from the perspectives of cyber security and securitization, relatively limited attention has been devoted to the relationship between hegemonic identity and the construction of state interests underlying the policy. Most existing studies tend to position states as rational actors responding to material threats while paying insufficient attention to ideational dimensions shaping foreign policy behavior. As a result, the TikTok ban policy is frequently interpreted as a purely technical or defensive response rather than as part of a broader effort by the United States to maintain its hegemonic position within the global technological hierarchy. This analytical gap demonstrates the importance of examining how identity influences the formation of state interests and policy actions in the digital era.

Based on this gap, this article analyzes the United States' TikTok ban policy in 2020 by examining the relationship between hegemonic identity, state interests, and foreign policy actions within a constructivist framework. This article also contributes to constructivist scholarship in International Relations by demonstrating how hegemonic identity shapes technological governance and digital platform regulation in the context of great power competition. This article argues that the policy do not only reflect security concerns but also broader efforts by

the United States to preserve its structural dominance amid China's growing influence in the global digital economy. Through this approach, the article seeks to contribute to International Relations scholarship by demonstrating how identity and technological competition intersect in shaping contemporary foreign policy within the evolving landscape of global digital politics.

Method

This article employs a qualitative research approach with a case study design to analyze the United States' TikTok ban policy in 2020. A qualitative approach was selected because the study seeks to understand the meanings, interpretations, and political narratives underlying state behavior within the context of technological rivalry and digital geopolitics. Rather than measuring causal relationships quantitatively, this research focuses on examining how the United States constructed TikTok as a strategic issue associated with national security, digital sovereignty, and hegemonic competition. The case study design allows for an in-depth examination of a specific policy phenomenon within its broader political and international context (Creswell, 2014; Bakry, 2016).

The primary unit of analysis in this study is the United States government's policy to block or restrict TikTok during the administration of President Donald Trump in 2020. Meanwhile, the objects of analysis include official policy documents, presidential executive orders, statements by United States government officials, public responses from TikTok and ByteDance, as well as reactions from the Chinese government. These materials were selected because they reflect how the policy was justified, interpreted, and contested within both domestic and international political discourse.

Data collection was conducted through qualitative document analysis and literature review. The study relies primarily on secondary data obtained from academic journals, books, policy reports, official government publications, and credible news sources relevant to cyber security, digital politics, platform economies, and United States–China relations. The academic literature was used to establish the theoretical and conceptual foundation of the study, while official documents and public statements were examined to identify policy narratives and strategic discourses surrounding TikTok. This combination of sources enabled the researcher to connect theoretical interpretation with empirical developments related to the policy.

The analysis was conducted interpretively using a constructivist framework. This study focuses on how the United States' hegemonic identity shaped the construction of strategic interests related to cyber security, technological dominance, and digital governance. Through this perspective, TikTok is not understood merely as a digital platform, but as a socially constructed symbol of China's technological rise within the global order. The analytical process therefore emphasizes the relationship between identity, interests, and policy actions, particularly in explaining how the United States interpreted TikTok as a strategic challenge requiring restrictive political responses.

To strengthen analytical validity, this study applies source triangulation by comparing academic literature, official policy documents, and public statements from multiple actors involved in the issue. This approach helps minimize interpretive bias while ensuring consistency between empirical findings and the theoretical framework employed in the study. Consequently, the method does not function as a technical research procedure, but also as an analytical instrument for understanding the broader political meaning behind the United States' TikTok ban policy in the context of contemporary technological rivalry.

Results and Discussion

United States-China Relations in Cyberspace and Digital Technology

The relationship between the United States and China in cyberspace reflects broader transformations in contemporary international politics, where technological competition increasingly intersects with issues of security, economic influence, and geopolitical legitimacy. Although both countries remain economically interconnected, their interactions in the digital sphere are characterized by growing strategic distrust. Technological development has become one of the primary arenas through which both states seek to strengthen their positions within the international order. Consequently, cyberspace is no longer understood merely as a technical domain of communication, but as a strategic space closely associated with national power and global influence.

The United States and China possess different perspectives regarding the meaning and governance of cyberspace. The United States historically promoted the principle of internet openness and digital liberalization, emphasizing the role of private corporations and global technological integration. In contrast, China has consistently emphasized the importance of state control, information sovereignty, and national regulation over digital infrastructures (Iasiello, 2016). These contrasting approaches illustrate how cyberspace governance is not shaped only by technological considerations, but also by ideological orientations and state identity. As a result, disagreements between the two countries concerning digital governance often reflect deeper contestation regarding authority and legitimacy within the global order.

The development of US–China cyber relations has evolved through several phases characterized by both cooperation and confrontation. During the early period of China's integration into the global internet system, cooperation between the two countries remained relatively dominant because both sides benefited economically from technological exchange and market expansion. American technology companies such as Microsoft, Google, Cisco, and Oracle expanded their presence within the Chinese market, while China adopted existing internet infrastructures and global technological standards to accelerate domestic modernization (Jinghua & Kalwani, 2024). This period reflected a relatively pragmatic relationship in which economic interdependence temporarily moderated geopolitical tensions.

However, the relationship became increasingly confrontational as cyber security issues

gained strategic significance within bilateral relations. Cyber espionage allegations, disputes over digital standards, and concerns regarding state-sponsored hacking intensified mutual suspicion between Washington and Beijing. The United States frequently accused China of conducting cyber operations targeting American corporations and government institutions, while China simultaneously criticized the United States for using technological superiority as an instrument of political intervention (Lam & Chen, 2013). These tensions demonstrate that cyberspace gradually transformed into a contested geopolitical domain where technological capabilities became closely associated with strategic rivalry and national security concerns.

The escalation of tensions was also reinforced by differences in how both countries conceptualized cyber security governance. China consistently advocated the principle of cyber sovereignty, emphasizing the authority of states to regulate and control digital spaces within their territorial boundaries. Meanwhile, the United States defended the principle of internet freedom and favored a more decentralized governance model involving private corporations and transnational technological networks (Louie, 2017). These opposing approaches produced competing visions regarding the future structure of global cyberspace governance. More importantly, they reflected broader ideological differences concerning the relationship between technology, sovereignty, and political authority.

Despite recurring tensions, both countries continued to engage in limited forms of cooperation related to cyber security dialogue and crisis management. Initiatives such as the Strategic Security Dialogue (SSD) illustrated efforts to reduce escalation and establish mutual understanding regarding cyber governance norms (Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the United States of America, 2013). Nevertheless, these cooperative mechanisms remained fragile because strategic mistrust continued to dominate bilateral relations. The persistence of cyber competition indicates that technological interaction between the United States and China cannot be separated from broader geopolitical calculations concerning influence and power transition within the international system.

The growing strategic significance of digital technology subsequently intensified the perception of technological competition as a zero-sum contest. Artificial intelligence, digital infrastructure, data governance, and platform economies increasingly became indicators of national capability and geopolitical influence. China's rapid technological development generated concern within the United States regarding the possible erosion of American dominance in critical technological sectors. Consequently, Chinese digital platforms operating globally were increasingly viewed through a security lens rather than purely economic considerations. This broader geopolitical context became essential in shaping the United States' perception of TikTok during the Trump administration.

The United States' TikTok Ban Policy

The United States government formally intensified its response toward TikTok in August

2020 when President Donald Trump issued an executive order restricting transactions involving ByteDance and TikTok within the United States. The policy represented one of the most visible manifestations of technological confrontation between Washington and Beijing during the Trump administration. Officially, the executive order justified the restrictions by arguing that TikTok potentially threatened national security due to concerns regarding data collection and the possibility of Chinese government access to American user information (Allyn, 2020). Through this policy, TikTok was transformed from a social media platform into a strategic political issue connected to cyber security and foreign influence.

The policy subsequently expanded beyond restrictions on digital transactions. The Trump administration demanded that ByteDance divest TikTok's operations in the United States and transfer ownership to an American company. This proposal reflected broader efforts to limit Chinese technological influence within the domestic American digital ecosystem. Oracle later emerged as a potential technology partner intended to manage TikTok-related data infrastructure within the United States (Ilmie, 2020). The proposed arrangement illustrated how technological governance increasingly became linked to geopolitical considerations and national security narratives.

The United States government framed TikTok primarily through a discourse of cyber security and sovereignty protection. American officials argued that Chinese domestic regulations governing technology companies created the possibility that user data collected by TikTok could ultimately become accessible to the Chinese government. Although conclusive evidence regarding direct data transfer remained publicly contested, the perception of risk itself became politically influential. Within this discourse, data was interpreted not merely as commercial information but as a strategic resource closely associated with national security and state sovereignty.

TikTok and ByteDance rejected these accusations and attempted to demonstrate institutional independence from the Chinese government. The company emphasized that American user data were stored outside China and highlighted various efforts to strengthen transparency and data protection mechanisms (Loftus, 2020). TikTok also challenged the executive order through legal action, arguing that the policy lacked sufficient legal justification and violated due process principles. Meanwhile, the Chinese government criticized the United States for applying discriminatory measures against foreign technology companies and accused Washington of politicizing technological competition (Natalia, 2024). These competing narratives demonstrate that the TikTok issue evolved beyond a legal dispute and became embedded within broader geopolitical contestation between the two countries.

The TikTok controversy also revealed how digital platforms had become central actors within global politics. Unlike traditional geopolitical competition focused primarily on territory or military capability, contemporary technological rivalry increasingly revolves around control over data, algorithms, digital infrastructures, and platform ecosystems. TikTok's rapid expansion

within the United States market challenged assumptions regarding American dominance over global social media industries. Consequently, the platform's success was not interpreted only as commercial competition but also as a symbolic representation of China's growing technological influence.

From a broader international political perspective, the TikTok case reflected a shift toward more protectionist approaches within global digital governance. Although the United States historically promoted digital liberalization and internet openness, the Trump administration adopted increasingly restrictive policies in response to Chinese technological expansion. This transformation indicates that concerns regarding technological competition and geopolitical rivalry began to outweigh earlier commitments to digital openness. Therefore, the TikTok policy can be interpreted as part of a broader reconfiguration of American digital strategy amid intensifying global competition.

The Relationship between Hegemonic Identity and United States Interests in the TikTok Ban Policy

The United States' TikTok ban policy in 2020 cannot be understood solely as a technical response to cyber security concerns. From a constructivist perspective, the policy reflected the interaction between hegemonic identity, strategic interests, and state actions within the context of intensifying technological rivalry. Constructivism emphasizes that states act based on socially constructed meanings rather than objective material conditions alone (Wendt, 2012). In this context, the United States does not only interpret TikTok merely as a foreign social media platform, but as a symbolic manifestation of China's growing influence within the global technological order.

The United States' hegemonic identity has historically been shaped through its dominant role within the post-Second World War international system. American leadership in economics, finance, military capability, and technological innovation contributed to the construction of a self-image as the primary architect of the liberal international order (Ikenberry, 2011). This identity subsequently influenced how the United States interpreted emerging challenges within the global system. Technological leadership became closely associated with national legitimacy, strategic authority, and geopolitical influence. Consequently, shifts in technological power distribution were often perceived not only as economic competition but also as potential disruptions to established hegemonic structures.

TikTok's global expansion emerged within this broader context of hegemonic anxiety. The platform's rapid growth demonstrated that Chinese technology companies were increasingly capable of competing with American corporations in areas previously dominated by the United States. TikTok's algorithmic innovation, digital advertising capacity, and global cultural reach challenged assumptions regarding the uncontested dominance of American digital platforms. As a result, TikTok became politically significant. It is not caused by its existence, but due to the symbol of broader transformations in the global technological hierarchy.

This perception subsequently shaped the construction of American strategic interests regarding TikTok. Within the security dimension, the United States increasingly interpreted cyberspace and digital data as strategic assets connected to national security and geopolitical competition. Cyber security discourse framed data governance as a matter of sovereignty protection, particularly amid growing mistrust toward China's technological expansion (Deibert, 2015; Cavelty & Wenger, 2020). In this environment, concerns regarding potential Chinese access to American user data became politically effective regardless of whether definitive evidence was publicly established. What mattered politically was the successful construction of TikTok as a credible security concern within American political discourse.

The securitization of TikTok also reflected broader transformations in the politics of digital governance. Hansen and Nissenbaum (2009) argue that cyber security threats are often socially constructed through narratives emphasizing existential danger and urgency. In the TikTok case, political discourse increasingly associated the platform with espionage risks, foreign influence, and national vulnerability. This framing enabled the United States government to justify extraordinary policy measures, including restrictions on transactions and demands for corporate divestment. Consequently, cyber security narratives did not only function as technical explanations but also as political instruments reinforcing the legitimacy of restrictive state action.

Besides security concerns, economic and structural interests also played a significant role in shaping the policy. Contemporary platform economies generate power through the control of data, algorithms, and digital ecosystems rather than through conventional industrial production alone (Kenney & Zysman, 2016; Srnicek, 2016). TikTok's growing popularity within the United States market represented increasing competition for American technology companies operating within the digital advertising and social media sectors. Therefore, TikTok's success was interpreted as part of a broader shift in global technological influence that could potentially weaken the structural dominance of American platform corporations.

The policy also intersected with domestic political dynamics during the Trump administration. The "America First" narrative promoted by Donald Trump emphasized economic nationalism, sovereignty protection, and resistance toward perceived external threats. Within this political environment, TikTok became symbolically associated with concerns regarding foreign influence and national decline. Restrictive policies toward Chinese technology companies therefore served not only international strategic purposes but also domestic political objectives related to populist legitimacy and nationalist mobilization (Mudde, 2019; Moffitt, 2020). Through this discourse, the Trump administration reinforced the image of the United States as a sovereign actor defending national interests against external challenges.

More broadly, the TikTok case reflects ongoing transformations in the relationship between technology and global power. Digital platforms increasingly function as instruments through which states project influence, shape information flows, and compete for strategic advantage

within the international system. The United States' response toward TikTok illustrates how technological competition has become deeply intertwined with questions of identity, legitimacy, and hegemonic preservation. Consequently, the policy should not be interpreted simply as an isolated security measure, but as part of a broader effort by the United States to maintain its dominant position within the evolving global technological order.

Conclusion

This article argues that the United States' TikTok ban policy in 2020 cannot be understood solely as a technocratic response to cyber security concerns. Through a constructivist perspective, the study demonstrates that the policy was closely connected to the relationship between hegemonic identity, strategic interests, and state actions within the context of intensifying technological rivalry between the United States and China. The United States' identity as a dominant actor within the global political and technological order shaped how it interpreted the expansion of Chinese digital platforms, particularly TikTok, as a strategic challenge to its established position. Consequently, the policy reflected not only concerns regarding data security, but also broader efforts to preserve structural influence and legitimacy within the evolving digital order.

This article also finds that hegemonic identity contributed to the construction of interrelated security and economic interests. Within the security dimension, cyberspace and digital data were increasingly interpreted by the United States as strategic domains associated with sovereignty protection and geopolitical competition. At the same time, TikTok's rapid growth within the global platform economy generated concerns regarding shifts in technological influence and the growing competitiveness of Chinese digital corporations. These concerns reinforced the perception that China's technological expansion could weaken the long-standing dominance of the United States in the digital sector. In this context, the TikTok restriction policy became part of a broader political strategy aimed at responding to structural changes in the global technological landscape.

More broadly, the findings of this article highlight the importance of identity in shaping foreign policy behavior in the digital era. Contemporary technological competition is not determined solely by material capabilities or economic interests, but also by how states construct meanings, legitimacy, and strategic priorities within international politics. The TikTok case illustrates how digital platforms have become embedded within broader geopolitical contestation involving questions of authority, sovereignty, and hegemonic preservation. Therefore, this article contributes to International Relations scholarship by demonstrating the relevance of constructivist analysis in understanding the intersection between digital technology, identity politics, and global power competition in the twenty-first century.

The findings also indicate that technological competition between major powers will increasingly involve struggles over digital governance, platform regulation, and data sovereignty.

As digital platforms continue to shape global political and economic interactions, questions of identity and legitimacy will remain central to understanding foreign policy behavior in the evolving international order.

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