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Digital Imperialism and the Geopolitical Asymmetry of National Sovereignty

Abstract

This article examines the political and institutional mechanisms through which digital imperialism influences national sovereignty within the context of contemporary global geopolitical realities. Unlike classical forms of imperialism, it demonstrates that digital imperialism exerts indirect yet systematic pressure on the decision-making autonomy of states, not through physical occupation, but through information flows, global digital infrastructures, artificial intelligence systems, and algorithmic governance. For the first time, the article conceptually defines digital imperialism as a mechanism that directs national sovereignty, political decision-making capacity, and public consciousness through technological hegemony. Adopting a comparative political-theoretical approach, the study also analyzes the impact of the dominant Western technological model and alternative Asian digital surveillance strategies on state governance capacity. The findings reveal that digital imperialism represents a new geopolitical threat that undermines sovereignty not by open military force, but through silent, institutionalized mechanisms of technological dependency.

Keywords: digital imperialism; national sovereignty; artificial intelligence; digital hegemony; information flows; algorithmic control; global technology corporations

Dijital Emperyalizm ve Ulusal Egemenliğin Jeopolitik Asimetrisi

Öz

Bu makale, günümüz küresel jeopolitik gerçeklikleri bağlamında dijital emperyalizmin ulusal egemenlik üzerindeki siyasi ve kurumsal etki mekanizmalarını incelemektedir. Klasik emperyalizm biçimlerinin aksine, dijital emperyalizmin devletlerin karar alma özerkliği üzerinde doğrudan fiziksel işgal

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yoluyla değil; bilgi akışları, küresel dijital altyapılar, yapay zekâ sistemleri ve algoritmik yönetim üzerinden dolayı fakat sistematik baskı kurduğu ortaya konulmaktadır. Çalışmada ilk kez dijital emperyalizm, teknolojik hegemonya aracılığıyla ulusal egemenliği, siyasi karar alma kapasitesini ve kamu bilincini yönlendiren bir mekanizma olarak kavramsal düzeyde tanımlanmaktadır. Karşılaştırmalı siyasi-teorik bir yaklaşım benimsenerek modern Batı teknolojik modelinin ve Asya'daki alternatif dijital gözetim stratejilerinin ulus-devletlerin yönetim kapasitelerine etkileri analiz edilmektedir. Bulgular, dijital emperyalizmin egemenliği açık askeri güçle değil, sessiz ve kurumsallaşmış teknolojik bağımlılık mekanizmaları yoluyla zayıflatan yeni bir jeopolitik tehdit formu olduğunu göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: dijital emperyalizm; ulusal egemenlik; yapay zekâ; dijital hegemonya; bilgi akışları; algoritmik kontrol; küresel teknoloji şirketleri

Introduction

In the twenty-first century, the structure of global power has shifted from conventional military and economic dominance toward forms shaped by digital networks, artificial intelligence infrastructure, and data-driven governance mechanisms. In academic discussions, this transformation is increasingly framed through the concept of *digital imperialism*, highlighting an emerging model of power in the international system. Existing literature often addresses this issue in relation to information security, technological ethics, and media influence, yet its broader implications for national sovereignty remain conceptually underdeveloped. This study aims to contribute to this gap by defining digital imperialism as a political mechanism that influences state autonomy, decision-making processes, and public consciousness through control over artificial intelligence, digital infrastructure, and information flows.

The objective of this research is to examine, at a political-theoretical level, how digital imperialism reshapes the notion of sovereignty within contemporary geopolitical conditions. A conceptual-analytical method is employed, supported by comparative examination of modern digital power structures. Through this approach, the article seeks to explain the relationship between digitalization and political authority, and to clarify how sovereignty is reconfigured within digital environments.

The Problem of Sovereignty under Digital Imperialism

In the current global order, digital imperialism represents a form of hegemony exercised through technological, cultural, and economic means rather than territorial domination. This model relies on data flows, platform infrastructures, and algorithmic governance. Its core function is the standardization of knowledge systems, values, and social behavior through centrally operated technological frameworks, resulting in cultural and intellectual dependency.

From a political science perspective, this form of influence reflects a new configuration of cultural power, wherein digital corporations hold increasing authority over communication channels and technological systems. Big Tech structures promote a single operational model under claims of global modernization, presenting certain linguistic and cultural forms as universal. Consequently, technological rationality becomes a dominant reference for knowledge production and social organization.

The expansion of this system introduces new risks for state sovereignty. Governmental capacity to manage information flows weakens as artificial intelligence begins to influence decision-making mechanisms. Over time, data-driven systems generate asymmetric dependencies that challenge the ideological and institutional autonomy of nation-states. Corporations frequently frame digital expansion in rhetoric centered on progress and unity, yet such narratives may obscure profit-oriented structures and new forms of dependence. In practice, the concentration of digital control among a small circle of global actors allows these institutions to extract data, regulate digital labor, shape resource distribution, and reinforce cultural dominance.

Academic perspectives on this issue remain diverse. While some emphasize data localization and stronger state regulation, others focus on open-source technological development and digital sovereignty. Existing analyses indicate that certain scholars interpret digital imperialism as an extension of U.S.-based corporate power (Kwet, 2019; Arora, 2019), while alternative viewpoints highlight platform influence shaped by Asian contexts (Jin, 2025). Current discussions overall demonstrate that digital imperialism functions as a multidimensional geopolitical challenge rather than a purely technological issue.

Within the contemporary geopolitical reality shaped by digital imperialism, the classical meaning of national sovereignty is gradually eroding. Traditionally, national sovereignty has referred to the state's independent exercise of political authority, governance, and decision-making within clearly defined territorial borders. Under digital imperialism, however, this territorial conception is transformed, as sovereignty is no longer confined to physical space. As Jabrailov (2022) notes, traditional military and security structures that once focused on visible threats such as tanks or troops now confront forms of influence that operate through information, technology, algorithms, and digital platforms. For this reason, digital imperialism has become a geopolitical problem that undermines sovereignty not through open military intervention, but by means of subtle, silent, and deeply institutionalized mechanisms of influence (Jabrailov, 2022).

From this perspective, digital imperialism can be understood as a set of systematic mechanisms of indirect influence over the informational and political–social systems of states, achieved through control of artificial intelligence, global digital infrastructures, and information flows. In practice, this implies the subordination of national sovereignty, political decision-making autonomy, and the formation of public consciousness to global centers of power that exercise technological hegemony in the digital sphere. In such a context, artificial intelligence functions not only as a technical instrument, but also as a key pillar of political and ideological power.

Nothias (2025) argues that critical approaches to technological power increasingly conceptualize it as a form of digital colonialism. In these critiques, major technology companies—especially those based in the United States—are seen as occupying a position in contemporary societies analogous to former colonial powers. They design and disseminate digital infrastructures in line with their own economic interests and, by securing dominant positions in the market, generate strong dependencies on their platforms and services (Nothias, 2025). This line of argument offers an important theoretical foundation for understanding the problem of sovereignty in the era of artificial intelligence and digital imperialism. It also highlights the way in which global technology corporations act as both architects of the information space and shapers of social behavior, reviving a “colonial spirit” through the design of digital infrastructures, the management of data flows, and the normative influence of AI-driven systems.

In this context, the question of sovereignty acquires both technological and epistemological dimensions. Digital sovereignty depends on a state’s ability to make independent decisions about technological systems, data-processing regimes, and digital policies that align with national interests. Yet under conditions of digital imperialism, these capacities are progressively constrained, as core AI models, cloud infrastructures, and data-flow platforms are concentrated under the control of global corporations.

Ugwudike (2020), analyzing the role of digital technologies in the justice system, stresses that differing interpretations of privacy rights and uncertainty over who bears responsibility for protecting them create significant risks, as digital surveillance tools increasingly produce various forms of social discrimination. Her research shows that the multidimensional nature of privacy rights and the ambiguity surrounding their protection have become central challenges to state sovereignty amid deepening digital imperialism. AI-governed surveillance systems affect individual freedoms on the one hand and the integrity of national decision-making processes on

the other. As sovereignty is drawn into the sphere of influence of technological power centers, the classical understanding of sovereignty—based on a state’s independent authority to decide within its own territory—gradually loses its functional capacity. Studies further indicate that, in the era of digital imperialism, artificial intelligence functions as a tool of geopolitical power that generates serious risks for national sovereignty. Accordingly, the protection of privacy can no longer be regarded solely as a human-rights issue; it has become a key indicator of states’ capacity to remain independent in the digital age.

Arora (2019), in his work on digital security and human rights, observes that contemporary debates increasingly focus on the defense of privacy in the context of data protection and surveillance. His analysis suggests that the rapid expansion of digital technologies—especially AI—places growing pressure on the sovereign decision-making capacity of states and transforms data governance into one of the most strategic challenges of the present era. The dependency mechanisms produced by digital imperialism weaken states’ ability to govern their data ecosystems autonomously, concentrating control over information flows in the hands of transnational technological actors. This dynamic leads both to the erosion of privacy at the individual level and to the weakening of strategic autonomy at the level of state decision-making. The risks associated with privacy highlighted by Arora (2019) represent only one aspect of the broader process through which digital sovereignty is undermined by mass data collection, predictive analytics, and behavioral manipulation enabled by AI systems.

In this regard, Kwet (2019) notes that many scholars have analyzed digitalization in Africa and other postcolonial contexts through the concept of digital colonialism. His interpretation shows that when technological infrastructures are transferred into the hands of global technology giants, new types of threats to sovereignty emerge. Dependency patterns observed in postcolonial settings are further intensified in the AI era, as algorithms, data-collection systems, and core cloud infrastructures become concentrated under the control of transnational actors. Within this framework, the digital colonialism approach clarifies the nature of the threats posed by digital imperialism to sovereignty under rapidly advancing AI conditions.

Singler and Babalola (2024) argue that digital colonialism is a useful framework for examining digitalization processes in the Global South. They demonstrate that in many such contexts digitalization is driven by the economic exploitation objectives of transnational corporations, the appropriation of resources, and post-imperial forms of control over technological infrastructure. Their work also reveals how, in North–South relations, state institutions and private

companies frequently operate through joint modes of influence and governance. From the perspective of digital imperialism, this suggests that digitalization in Global South countries often represents not neutral technological modernization, but a deepening of dependency relations structured by North-centered political and economic actors.

The transfer of technological infrastructures, algorithmic governance, and data flows into the control of foreign corporations severely restricts states' ability to protect their informational sovereignty. This becomes especially evident in the field of artificial intelligence, where both technical standards and large-scale data-processing capacities are largely concentrated in the hands of Northern countries and transnational platforms. As state–private sector syntheses expand within North–South relations, the sovereignty problem in the age of AI deepens: instead of building their own digital ecosystems, many states become increasingly dependent on externally imposed rules, standards, and infrastructures.

Sokhi-Bulley (2019) shows that digital border management often rests on arguments that large-scale data collection and information exchange between migration and law-enforcement authorities are inherently necessary. These justifications are frequently framed within a human-rights discourse, not to restrict surveillance, but to showcase “rights-based expertise” and legitimize external interventions, as in the case of the IOM’s role in Nigeria’s emerging digital border-control regime (Sokhi-Bulley, 2019). This perspective illustrates that the deployment of AI-enhanced biometric surveillance systems functions not only as a form of technological modernization, but also as a mechanism of influence over sovereignty. The fact that extensive data-collection practices in border control are legitimized by external actors through a human-rights vocabulary reveals some of the most subtle and institutionalized forms of digital imperialism.

The paradox here lies in the use of universal normative values, such as human rights, to legitimize measures—such as mass data collection and biometric monitoring—that may undermine sovereignty. In the age of artificial intelligence, this indicates that states' real capacity to control borders, data flows, and security policies is increasingly constrained by externally driven technological and institutional arrangements.

Jin (2025), examining digital imperialism in Asian countries, notes that although some observers claim Asia has gained sufficient power to compete with the United States in the fields of digital platforms and popular culture, the reality is more complex. Global platforms such as Netflix, YouTube, and Disney+ continue to expand their presence in many Asian markets, and local

platforms often fail to secure even a dominant share in their domestic environments. Jin (2025) points out that, due to the specific characteristics of Asian media systems, China represents an exception: platforms such as Baidu, QQ, and Tencent have developed under strong state protection, enabled by restrictive policies that shield domestic infrastructure from foreign competition. By contrast, other Asian countries remain under the strong dominance of American digital platforms, which limits their ability to exercise full sovereign control over their media and information ecosystems.

This situation demonstrates how sovereignty is asymmetrically configured on a global scale in the context of AI and digital imperialism. While Asia's rising technological and cultural power is sometimes portrayed as an alternative to Western digital hegemony, the balance of power in the platform economy still largely favors transnational American corporations. With the exception of China, the inability of most regional states to develop sufficiently robust institutional power and political will to protect their own digital platforms makes them more vulnerable to external influence in strategic fields such as artificial intelligence and algorithmic governance. China's strict regulatory and technological protection policies create a distinct environment for state-supported domestic platforms and, in a certain sense, offer a regional alternative model of digital sovereignty.

From this perspective, the findings of studies on Asian countries suggest that, in the age of artificial intelligence, digital imperialism is shaped both by who controls technological infrastructures and by how global platforms transform local informational environments. The continued dependence of most Asian countries on Western technological hegemony in digital media and platform economies indicates that the classical roots of imperialism are reappearing under new conditions.

Within this broader context, Morgenthau's classical realist reflections on imperialism retain their relevance. He describes imperialism as a political aspiration that grows out of certain structural conditions and moves toward objectives of domination that can extend to the entire politically organized world or be confined to large regions, limited only by the resistance of those subjected to it (Morgenthau, 2017). While Morgenthau wrote primarily about territorial and military power, his emphasis on imperialism's expansive logic acquires new meaning in the digital era. Today, the objective of imperial ambition concerns less the control of physical territory than the governance of informational space. In earlier periods, imperial strength was measured by control over land and material resources; now, hegemony is constructed through databases, algorithmic systems, and technological infrastructures.

In this environment, protecting national data repositories, developing domestic algorithms, and fostering local innovation ecosystems have become central indicators of resistance to digital imperialism. When a state entrusts its AI infrastructures to foreign technological centers, it risks reducing its sovereignty to a largely formal status, as critical aspects of national decision-making become structurally dependent on external information flows. A striking empirical example of this vulnerability can be seen in the debates that arose during the Russia–Ukraine war, when discussions about the possible suspension of Starlink services in Ukraine sparked serious geopolitical concern regarding communication security and military coordination (Reuters, 2025). This case illustrates how reliance on privately controlled digital infrastructures can transform seemingly technical decisions into issues that directly affect national sovereignty and strategic autonomy.

Conclusion

The analyses conducted indicate that, in the contemporary era, digital imperialism no longer operates through direct military intervention. Instead, it manifests via systematic control over information flows, artificial intelligence systems, and global digital infrastructures as a new form of geopolitical power. This dynamic considerably reduces states' strategic decision-making autonomy and undermines their sovereign ability to manage information and protect privacy. Moreover, asymmetric dependencies created by transnational technology corporations—especially within North–South relations—further intensify the crisis of digital sovereignty. Consequently, in a period shaped by the rapid expansion of artificial intelligence, safeguarding national sovereignty emerges not only as a technological matter but as a core political and strategic priority. Therefore, the development of independent digital policies, domestic technological infrastructures, and effective legal-regulatory frameworks becomes a necessary condition for states seeking to preserve autonomy in the digital age.

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