Algorithmic Influence and the Political Economy of AI Platforms: China's Digital Expansion in Southeast Asia

By

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Abstract

Artificial intelligence is reshaping global competition not only through productivity gains and technological innovation, but also through control over information ecosystems, recommendation algorithms, and digital infrastructures. As AI-powered platforms increasingly mediate communication, commerce, and political discourse, geopolitical influence is becoming embedded in the architecture of digital markets. Southeast Asia—one of the world's fastest-growing digital economies and a major arena of US–China technological competition—offers a critical setting for understanding these transformations.

This paper examines how Chinese AI-enabled digital platforms, including TikTok, WeChat, and e-commerce ecosystems linked to Chinese technology firms, shape information flows, consumer behaviour, and strategic narratives across Southeast Asia. The study conceptualises AI platforms not merely as communication technologies, but as economic and geopolitical infrastructures that generate influence through algorithmic curation, data extraction, platform dependency, and digital network effects.

The paper asks three central questions: (1) How do AI-driven recommendation systems influence political and economic perceptions of China within Southeast Asian digital markets? (2) To what extent do Chinese platform ecosystems create new forms of economic and informational dependency? (3) How are Southeast Asian governments responding to the growing concentration of algorithmic power within foreign-controlled digital infrastructures?

Methodologically, the study combines comparative political economy with computational and qualitative analysis across selected Southeast Asian countries, including Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines. The project draws on platform governance documents, digital policy frameworks, public discourse analysis, and comparative assessment of AI-enabled content amplification patterns across major social media ecosystems.

The paper contributes to the emerging literature on the economics of artificial intelligence in three ways. First, it extends debates on AI economics beyond productivity and labour-market outcomes by examining AI as an instrument of geopolitical and market power. Second, it introduces the concept of "algorithmic dependency" to explain how states and societies become structurally reliant on externally governed AI infrastructures. Third, it highlights how AI-driven digital platforms increasingly shape market behaviour, information asymmetries, and strategic influence in the Global South.

The study argues that the next phase of geopolitical competition will increasingly occur through control over AI-mediated digital ecosystems rather than through conventional trade or military dominance alone. In this emerging order, algorithms function not only as technological tools but also as instruments of economic coordination, political persuasion, and transnational power projection.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Algorithmic Governance, Digital Political Economy, China–Southeast Asia Relations, Platform Power and Geopolitics