

Geopolitics and Transnational Data Governance

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Submitted: 27 September 2025 **Published:** 23 October 2025

Issue: This editorial is part of the issue “The Geopolitics of Transnational Data Governance” edited by Xinchuchu Gao (University of Lincoln) and Xuechen Chen (Northeastern University London), fully open access at <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.i437>

Abstract

This editorial introduces a thematic issue that examines the geopolitics of transnational data governance through interdisciplinary perspectives. It explores how data governance—once a technocratic concern—has become a core domain of geopolitical rivalry and statecraft. Contributions in this issue highlight the tensions between data sovereignty and transnational flows, great power rivalry in transnational data governance, the growing importance of informal and plurilateral governance, and the strategic agency of Global South actors. The issue also foregrounds the critical but often overlooked roles of private sector actors and sector-specific governance in domains such as energy, semiconductors, and development aid. By analysing contested norms, competing governance models, and hybrid institutional arrangements, the articles collectively show how transnational data governance reflects and shapes broader geopolitical dynamics.

Keywords

data governance; geopolitics; normative contestation; power rivalry; technology

1. Introduction

In the contemporary digital era, data has emerged as one of the most valuable and contested resources in the global political economy. Its significance extends far beyond its economic role as a driver of innovation, commerce, and growth. Data also underpins national sovereignty and serves as a key determinant of security. The regulation and governance of data flows are therefore no longer peripheral concerns reserved for technocrats or niche regulators; they have become central issues of geopolitics and international power rivalry (O’Hara & Hall, 2021).

Recent global crises have reinforced this shift. The Covid-19 pandemic underscored the indispensability of data for crisis management, from health surveillance and vaccine distribution to the control of misinformation (Caceres et al., 2022; Li et al., 2022). At the same time, the war in Ukraine highlighted the strategic role of data and information warfare in contemporary conflict (Arner et al., 2022). These events collectively demonstrate the extent to which data infrastructures, standards, and governance frameworks are deeply intertwined with questions of politics, security, and global power dynamics. Crucially, the governance of cross-border data flows has evolved from a technical or regulatory concern into a core field of geopolitical contestation. Competing models—including liberal, market-driven approaches, rights-based frameworks, and sovereignty-centric paradigms—promoted by major international actors, such as the United States, the European Union, and China, are reshaping the global digital order (Arner et al., 2022; Bradford, 2023).

Against this backdrop, this thematic issue brings together 12 contributions from diverse disciplinary perspectives—including political science, communication studies, law, and development studies—to examine the geopolitics of transnational data governance.

The contributions in this issue interrogate how state actors, regional organisations, and private sector stakeholders frame and implement data governance amid intensifying great-power rivalry, technological interdependence, and normative contestation. Together, they illuminate three central dynamics. First, data governance has become a key instrument of geoeconomic and geopolitical statecraft, exercised through both formal and informal mechanisms. Second, the pursuit of digital sovereignty increasingly clashes with the inescapable interdependence of global infrastructures and supply chains. Third, agency in transnational data governance is highly distributed: not only great powers, but also middle powers, private corporations, and international organisations actively shape the emerging order. This editorial outlines the contours of these debates, synthesises the findings of the 12 articles, and proposes a future research agenda for the study of geopolitics and data governance.

2. Key Debates Featured in This Thematic Issue

This thematic issue explores key debates at the intersection of geopolitics and transnational data governance. First, it highlights the persistent tension between data as a sovereign resource and as a transnational flow. Sovereignty claims have proliferated—from China's cyber sovereignty and the EU's digital sovereignty to India's emphasis on developmental data and the US's restrictions on sensitive transfers. Yet, the global nature of data infrastructures renders full autonomy elusive. Contributions reveal how governance frameworks often oscillate between data localisation and conditional openness, seeking to balance security with economic integration.

Second, the issue examines formal versus informal governance mechanisms. While early digital trade efforts centred on formal WTO-led agreements, recent years have seen the rise of informal and plurilateral arrangements. These enable regulatory flexibility and coalition-building, yet raise concerns about accountability and inclusivity. The contributions show that informality is now central—not peripheral—to the practice of data geopolitics.

A third major theme is the evolving role of the Global South and cross-regional actors. While much attention has focused on the US–EU–China regulatory triangle and the EU’s “Brussels effect,” this issue foregrounds the agency of Global South actors such as India and ASEAN. These actors are not passive recipients of external norms; they strategically leverage data governance to attract investment, build capacity, and negotiate influence. Development data infrastructures like the OECD Creditor Reporting System (CRS) and International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) both reflect power asymmetries and offer opportunities for contestation.

Another underexplored yet critical dimension involves the entanglement of state and corporate actors. Private firms—especially big tech and infrastructure providers—act as both rule-takers and rule-makers, wielding infrastructural power comparable to that of states. Controversies around TikTok, Chinese cloud providers in ASEAN, and Starlink’s negotiations with European governments illustrate how corporate agency intersects with sovereign agendas in complex and unpredictable ways. Several contributions also stress the importance of sectoral and issue-specific governance. Data politics extend well beyond digital platforms, influencing energy transitions, semiconductor supply chains, and development aid. This sectoralisation underscores how data infrastructures shape a broadening array of geopolitical domains once considered technocratic. Finally, the issue engages with normative and cognitive contestations surrounding data governance. Competing views of data—as a commodity, strategic asset, or fundamental right—shape regulatory frameworks and reflect deeper ideological cleavages. Collectively, the contributions demonstrate that the geopolitics of data is as much about meanings and norms as it is about infrastructure and power.

3. Synthesis of Contributions

In this thematic issue, several articles explore how great powers and major players instrumentalise data governance as part of broader geoeconomic and geopolitical strategies. Specifically, Sukumar and Basu’s (2025) contribution traces the US turn towards informality in its withdrawal from WTO negotiations and reliance on plurilateral initiatives such as the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework and G7 statements. Su and Zhang (2025) examine the evolution of China’s legislative framework from the 2016 Cybersecurity Law to the Data Security Law and Personal Information Protection Law. They show how China balances sovereignty claims with selective openness, pursuing an “adaptive sovereignty” that seeks both security and global influence. Complementing this, He and Zeng (2025) analyse China and India comparatively, emphasising the role of state–capital relations. They argue that what appears as sovereignty discourse is often deeply rooted in domestic political economy and the interests of technology firms and capital. From a broader perspective, Liu (2025) adopts a constructivist lens, highlighting how data cognition—the cultural values attached to data—shapes governance. By comparing the US, EU, China, and Russia, the article identifies distinct “evaluative cognitions” that underpin policy shifts and international contests over cross-border flows. In addition, Cristiano and Monsees (2025) explore the framing of TikTok bans in Europe and the US—a telling example of geopolitical contestation over data governance. While both invoke security, the EU frames its actions through privacy and fundamental rights, whereas the US foregrounds national security and China-related risks. This illustrates divergent governance cultures within the West. A cluster of contributions investigates the EU’s unique position and evolving role in transnational data governance. Carrapico and Farrand (2025) analyse the governance gap between autonomy aspirations and interdependence realities in the EU’s data sovereignty agenda. Using semiconductors as a case study, they show how global supply chain dependencies undermine the EU’s ability to operationalise full sovereignty. Heidebrecht (2025) highlights

how digital policy has served as a driver of integration and Commission empowerment. In addition, Zhang (2025) examines the diffusion of EU data governance to Japan and Singapore, highlighting both the strength and the limits of the EU's normative power in Asia.

Further contributions show that data governance debates also play out in the context of domestic politics. For example, Griffini's (2025) study of Italy's populist radical right analyses parliamentary debates on digital sovereignty in the context of Giorgia Meloni's engagement with Elon Musk's Starlink project. It shows how party ideology shapes external digital policy, with sovereigntist parties prioritising control and security over openness. Yang and Li (2025) introduce the concept of offshore embeddedness to explain how Chinese cloud providers like Alibaba and Tencent secure legitimacy in ASEAN. By decoupling from home-state control and embedding themselves in host-country governance structures, these firms turn suspicion into acceptance, illustrating ASEAN states' agency as regulators, brokers, and orchestrators.

In addition, several contributors look beyond the traditional focus on major power rivalry and conventional regulatory issues in terms of data governance by paying specific attention to an increasing trend of sectoralisation and issue-specific governance of transnational data. Specifically, Yu et al. (2025) extend the debate into the energy sector, comparing EU and ASEAN data governance in the energy transition, showing how centralised EU governance enables cross-border power grids, raw material tracking, and carbon markets, whereas ASEAN's decentralised model offers flexibility but risks fragmentation. Similarly, Park's (2025) contribution examines development data infrastructures as an insightful case study. By analysing OECD's CRS and IATI, it shows how aid data governance reflects power hierarchies, donor priorities, and competing visions of transparency and accountability. Datafication of aid reshapes development practices, with geopolitical implications for how the Global South engages with international donors. Together, these studies highlight that data governance permeates diverse policy fields, each revealing tensions between sovereignty, interdependence, and normative contestation.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our deepest gratitude to all the contributors to this thematic issue for their insightful and thought-provoking articles. Their work reflects a remarkable breadth of disciplinary perspectives and empirical cases, and together they have significantly advanced scholarly understanding of the geopolitics of transnational data governance. We are also sincerely grateful to the anonymous peer reviewers whose constructive feedback and intellectual generosity greatly enriched the quality of the individual contributions and the coherence of the thematic issue as a whole. Their careful engagement and critical insights were invaluable throughout the editorial process. Finally, we extend our heartfelt thanks to the editorial team at *Politics and Governance* for their unwavering support and professionalism at every stage—from the initial proposal to final production. Their guidance, efficiency, and encouragement made the realisation of this thematic issue possible.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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