

# Exporting Autonomy, Importing Dependency: The Geopolitical Work of “Sovereign AI”

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## Abstract

This study critically examines how AI sovereignty is strategically sold and mobilized in global discourse, tracing the term’s diffusion through news media and analyzing how state and corporate actors invoke the language of autonomy while remaining embedded in U.S.-dominated infrastructural hierarchies.

## Background

“Sovereign AI” has emerged as a prominent geopolitical catchphrase, invoked by governments as a marker of national autonomy in the artificial intelligence era. While the term suggests control over AI infrastructure, data, and innovation, these initiatives often rely on U.S.-based firms—most notably NVIDIA—for compute capacity, orchestration systems, and compliance with export regulations.

## Theoretical Framework

Three bodies of scholarship inform this analysis.

**Technonationalism & Infrastructural Power:** States increasingly link technological capacity to sovereignty, yet infrastructures are rarely truly domestic, being shaped by global supply chains and foreign IP regimes (Hu 2015; Hummel et al. 2021).

**Infrastructure Studies:** Infrastructures are political and aesthetic formations that structure mobility, value, and legitimacy (Larkin 2013; Parks and Starosielski 2015). Claims to sovereignty often obscure persistent dependencies.

**Sociotechnical Imaginaries:** Sovereign AI operates as a collectively held vision of the future (Jasanoff and Kim 2015), functioning as a floating signifier that is adaptable

to divergent agendas yet potent in shaping policy and public discourse.

## Method

Drawing on critical discourse analysis and infrastructure studies, the analysis is based on a comprehensive dataset of all 485 news articles containing the phrase “sovereign AI” in the Nexis Uni database as of April 19, 2025, providing a robust foundation for analyzing the discourse’s global diffusion and strategic use. Media texts were treated as sites where state and corporate imaginaries intersect.

## Results

The discourse debuted in UK media (WalesOnline, Feb. 22, 2023) and diffused hierarchically to India, South Korea, Germany, Australia, France, and beyond. NVIDIA played a central role in shaping and amplifying the term, pivoting to a business-to-government strategy that positioned it as an enabler of cultural and economic autonomy. Governments framed sovereign AI as critical to national competitiveness, but the material stack—chips, orchestration software, and licensing—remained U.S.-controlled. Across contexts, nationalist rhetoric celebrated sovereignty, while infrastructural dependencies and licensing constraints were largely absent from public discourse.

## Conclusion

While governments promote it as a path to autonomy, Sovereign AI initiatives remain tethered to proprietary systems and export controls. Addressing this gap requires governance approaches that confront the material and regulatory dependencies shaping AI futures.

## References

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