Intelligence, Technology, and Ethics

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An important and illustrative lesson from the current COVID-19 pandemic is that technology is wonderful: it gives us new materials, communication, medicines, and vaccines. It improves the quality of life and increases productivity. At the same time, most of successful and popular technological innovations are largely motivated by economic factors rather than political ones. This applies even to social innovations: technologies exploiting greed have proven to be much more compelling than love for one's neighbors. People in post-Soviet countries began to put children in car seats precisely to avoid fines. Thus technology has saved a lot of lives.

However, competition between companies, megacorporations, and states in the field of intelligence and technology has different dimensions. At the national level, the club of the smartest is still very small but more democratic than the club of military technology. If a nation seeks to enter a group of majors, it has no alternative but develop technologies, either focusing on a certain specialization, or—if it claims to be a superpower—pushing in all areas at once.

The simplest and, in some ways, superficial criterion is patents. Almost two-thirds of the applications go to Asian patent offices. Two out of the world's 3.2 million applications for patents come from China and the United States, 85% are concentrated in five largest patent offices. The top ten countries account for more than 90% of all patents. Regional leaders, such as Iran, Brazil, Turkey, and Thailand are also active, and much more effective than their regional neighbors. This is a fairly logical process. Germany leads in transport patents, and Asia, in electronics. And of course, South Korea is absolutely brilliant, leading by the number of patent applications per unit of GDP.

But if you look at this through the lens of world politics and international relations, the conclusions are completely non-linear. The French company L'Oreal is the first in the world in terms of the number of trademark applications. However, this does not mean at all that the great powers should now take up the development and marketing of "sovereign" mascara.

What is interesting is that not a single new natural science technology as such has fundamentally changed the balance of power between countries over the past half century; nor has it radically changed any country's influence in the international arena directly.

IT companies entered the markets around the world and began to sell their goods and services. The Internet did not create a "wow" effect for world politics as such (for political technologies, yes), although it did for the world of advertising, leisure, and education, and certainly for convenience of life. It has even increased vanity. But it has not done as much for world politics.

However, technology really can do it: it has fundamentally changed and is changing nuclear weapons—a political technology of immediate effect. Are there other deadly technologies? There are entirely comparable ones. But it was nuclear weapons that became the basis of the new ethical coordinate system of power. This was, naturally, convenient, especially for the strong. Maybe cyber weapons will provide such a new framework. But for now, its ethical boundaries are vague.

Of course, there is a connection between technology and politics, between technology and the state. However, technology that does not alter ethical standards does not really present a problem, challenge or opportunity for the state as an institution or, accordingly, for world politics.

Ethically neutral technologies can be an object of competition and colossal income, but the state as an institution is activated precisely at the stage of mobile ethics. The most obvious advance is weapons of mass destruction.

How can this neutrality be defined? Many technologies evoke vivid emotions, but in order to assess their influence, it is important for states to separate the unethical from the unusual. One is not at all equal to the other.

Today these are combat robots and drones. Because their use raises questions about the response: Is it ethical to kill enemy soldiers for destroying an arsenal of drones? Ethicists argue over the genetic alteration of future children—tailor-made kids. But what is bad about it if children will definitely not get sick with some kind of terrible disease? There are many fears associated with anthropomorphic machines. But a smooth-voiced home assistant—Alexa in the U.S. or Alisa in Russia—does not trigger panic attacks. It is just a new item. Will the machine be able to joke or lie? Maybe it is scary, or maybe it is okay. Advertising invented by people constantly lies to us; if machines do the same, should it provoke fear and horror?

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In conclusion, let us dwell on the technology of digital platforms, where purely ethical issues of free will and algorithmic predetermination converge. We see a pure battle or symbiosis of three intelligences: the natural intelligence of the user, the trained intelligence of the developer, and artificial intelligence.

Algorithms that guide choice and behavior are not an innovation. In addition to states, religion did an excellent job with this at a certain stage. Monasteries provided free will and supported information bubbles stronger than Google. There are far fewer design differences between the willingness to share information about oneself today and practicing confession five hundred years ago than you might think. Digital confession simply has a different objective: convenience, not eternal salvation.

Megacorporations are not concerned with ethical issues as much as they are with earnings and share prices. Ethics are a concern only insofar as it is necessary for the preservation and increase of profits and the growth of stock value. In terms of the logic of power, political relations between states and within states have changed much less than the instruments of power.

Therefore, intelligence, not artificial, but quite natural and trained, will be in maximum demand by states in matters of balancing technology and ethics, and in rule-making.

Whoever is the first to push ethical boundaries with the help of intellect and technology, and then fence them, as was the case with nuclear weapons, has a chance to succeed in fundamentally new technologies that change our way of life and political alignments. In other words, the question is not even who will create technologies—be it states, corporations, or networks of scientists and enthusiasts. What is important is who will be the monastery defining technological heresy and dogma. This is the most important strategic point of applying intelligence in the foreseeable future, in my opinion.