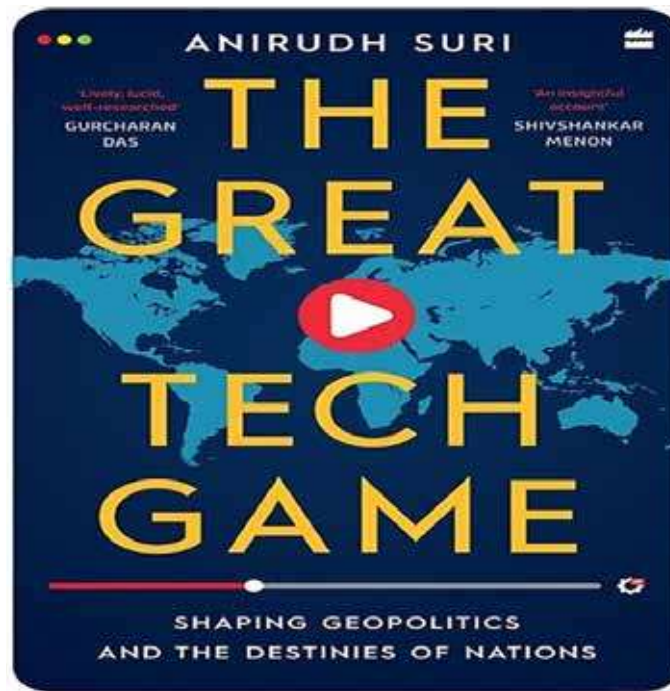


The Great Tech Game: Anirudh Suri

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Abstract

Technology as a maker and shaper of the history of our times is the organising principle of this book by Anirudh Suri, a redoubtable polymath, as attested by its blurb. He invests the mega theme with a historical narrative tracing the transformative role of human pursuits beginning with agriculture and gathering cumulative momentum through the interface since the fifteenth century of scientific advancement, industrialisation, colonisation and political and economic development of nations worldwide. Moreover, today and in the days to come, the motive force for the onward movement of humankind is technology, which has long since implacably girded itself in the global socioeconomic system as the fifth factor of production.

As postulated by Suri, the Great Tech Game is the global contest for technological, economic and geopolitical dominance. There have been previous games, beginning with the Agri and trade games over 10,000 years ago which set humanity on a new path of evolution in terms of life, cultures, civilisations, economies and political systems. These were followed by the colonisation and industrialisation games with similar transformative effects from 1500 to 1945. The period since then is where the games of capitalism and technology, with their consequences and ramifications, continue apace now and into the future. Technology is the prime mover of this era, as the Great Tech Game, with its transformative effects, spreads across nations' systems and even destinies.

Comparisons can be odious, but there is a touch of Arnold Toynbee in Suri's recounting of history. While a sceptical view can be taken of several generalisations in Suri's account of history, his chief argument that technology is the new wealth of nations and that there is any number of implications for the world arising from that hypothesis cannot be contested.

Suri argues that in the same way as trade, industrialisation, and capitalism (or capitalism's rival systems, Suri could well have posited) had done in the previous eras, it is now technology in an all-pervasive way that would decisively influence geo politics and the destiny of nations. A vast transition is now from an industrial to a digital economy consisting of tech manufacturing, digital services and digital trade and commerce.

Therefore, countries' conventional SWAT exercises would need to pivot severally to these sectors and address the requirements and tasks they call for. Suri deals at length with the global digital value chains (GDVCs) or ecosystem and aver that for countries to be relevant to the excellent tech game, they must consider what parts of that ecosystem they can play in. Despite evident inequalities in resource and capability endowments of countries, he believes that strategies are available for all for competition in the digital economy. The era of industrialisation led to the first "great divergence" between Asia and Europe / US in terms of GDP; intimations of a second "great divergence" in the digital era offer both a threat and an opportunity for countries, argues Suri.

In a detailed analysis of digital competitiveness at the global level, Suri considers different frameworks for its assessment and proceeds to an examination of seven strategies applicable to countries, from the US and China aiming for complete technological dominance to digital challengers like Europe and tentatively India, and then on to digital laggards comprising Latin America and Africa. It is instructive to note that in this conspectus, India figures in the categories of digital services with prominence and of the Government Tech with India stack, both crucial to her distinctive competitiveness. He reiterates that in the context of the Great Tech Game, countries must not only orient their industrial policies and strategies but also think about their technology and digital strategies. More importantly, he believes that the US-China battle for technological leadership does not exhaust the scope of the Great Tech Game; there are arguably niches in the digital economy accessible to the competitiveness of most countries.

However, predictably, US-China rivalry is a recurrent part of the book's narrative bringing within its purview global value chains, communications and digital infrastructure, the contestations for tech markets, emerging technologies and establishment of standards in the digital world, America's existing and developing alliances, China's BRI, the QUAD in Asia Pacific, India as a digital swing state in the global technology line-up as strands which stand out in the various chapters of the book. The author's appraisal of artificial intelligence, which is at the centre of the excellent tech game, is that as well in the internet economy as in artificial intelligence (AI), the US and China will continue their paths towards becoming

major AI superpowers. On the broad perspective of alliances as a critical determinant of who wins the Great Game for technological and geopolitical leadership, he expects that, like the alliances of all kinds forged by the US during the Cold War, the country is likely to attempt to win the war for technological leadership by beating China at the alliance game.

The book's analysis of the US-China geopolitical competition in the context of the Great Tech Game considers emerging frameworks for alignments and contests viz techno democracies and techno authoritarian states, digital sovereignty vs a global interoperable internet, prospects of techno nationalism and technology Cold War. This part and chapters deal with differing approaches to global technology governance and issues posed by the dominance of Big Tech companies and data governance at national and global levels. These are pretty engrossing in terms of content and insights. The troubling implications for the authority of the state in the Great Tech Game, such as threats in different realms posed by social media, cryptocurrency and blockchain, side by side with the dire perils from AI and cyber espionage and much else, are addressed by the author at the intersection of multiple pathways and trends of present and future technologies -in domains ranging from climate science to genetic engineering. Above all are the prospects of a world where algorithms could determine human choices, as prognosticated by a famous historian. The author rhetorically asks whether, in the future, it would make a difference that our decision makers would have access to loads of information on their mobile phones but not the ability to engage in-depth with an issue or intractable problem. He mentions as a prime example that technology will not be able to solve our climate problem "unless we make changes in behaviour, restructure our systems and institutions and rethink our priorities and recalibrate our values", which is far from the case at the moment.

This work packs a formidable lot of information into the treatment of its theme; at points, there is a surfeit of citations from other authors. Nevertheless, there is little doubt about the extent or quality of the research that has gone into its authorship. There are some perceptive analyses on India's positioning in the Great Tech Game, notably of India forming part of the alliance of T-12 techno democracies but, like

China, asserting its unwillingness to compromise its digital sovereignty. There is, however. One factual error in the author's view is that in IT infrastructure, India had utterly missed out on the business of laying, operating and repairing undersea cables; long before the appearance of the book, Tata Communications had become a key player in the subsea cables bearing internet traffic; for another, since November 2021 Reliance has been building the most major international submarine cable system centred on India IAX.