

2026 Spheres of influence in transformation – a shift at play

Q1.5 2026: Geopolitics expedites what is real and in motion and who's is influencing

Jonas Kjellstrand
www.kjellstrand.se
April 2026
ver: 2

This brief is prepared for senior decision-makers across government, industry, and investment. It reflects the author's independent analysis and is not written on behalf of any single client or institution. Distribution is limited to the author's advisory network and www.kjellstrand.se.

[This text is inspired by Ian Bremmers "spheres of influence" analysis where US abandons the "open door" policy for an America first approach. This brief is my observation what this could mean for a country like Sweden.]

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|----------|
| 2026 Spheres of influence – Shift at play | 1 |
| Executive Summary | 1 |
| The Wrong Map | 2 |
| Where Power Actually Sits | 2 |
| AI Outruns the Guardrails | 4 |
| Iran — The Next Test | 5 |
| Strength Replies to Strength | 6 |
| What does this mean for Sweden? | 7 |

Executive Summary

The world is not snapping back to 19th-century spheres of influence — despite the rhetoric, and despite the maps being drawn in Washington, Beijing, and Moscow. Regional power is being asserted, yes. But real leverage has moved off the map. It now lives in supply chains, in compute, in business models, in code.

The United States still projects military power globally and is the only country that can. China's leverage is industrial — most of the world, including most of South America, trades primarily with Beijing. Europe is unsettled but not collapsing into anyone's orbit; it is hedging, country by country, not as a bloc. And technology — built by companies that, outside China, are not aligned with any single state — is dissolving the geography the old model depended on.

AI is accelerating faster than governance can follow. The first self-hosted autonomous agents are already in the wild. A crisis — or a series of them — is coming, and it is what will finally force the regulation and deceleration the industry will not impose on itself. In parallel, geopolitical risk is sharpening fastest around Iran, where U.S. military action is no longer a tail scenario but a near-term one, with global consequences attached.

And Trump's power has limits. Greenland and Minneapolis showed it in two consecutive weeks: coordinated, public, sustained pushback works. Weak or isolated regimes invite escalation. Strength replies to strength.

Bottom Line (If You Remember Only One Thing)

The next world order will not be organized by borders or spheres of influence. It will be organized by AI systems, compute access, business models, and who controls acceleration versus restraint. Geopolitics is becoming a by-product of technology — not the other way around.

The Wrong Map

Trump's rebranded "Donroe Doctrine" has revived the language of spheres of influence — the U.S. minds its hemisphere, China takes Asia, Russia keeps its near abroad. It is a tidy story. It is also the wrong map.

Yes, Washington is leaning into the Western Hemisphere with a force we have not seen in decades. Yes, that opens daylight for Beijing on Taiwan and the South China Sea, and for Moscow on Ukraine. But the world is not snapping back to the 19th century. The reason is simple: power no longer sits where the borders are drawn. It sits in supply chains, in compute, in business models, in code.

Spheres of influence is a 19th-century answer to a 21st-century question. The map is the wrong shape.

Where Power Actually Sits

Four forces, pulling in different directions, tell us where real leverage now lives.

First — the United States still projects military power globally, and it is the only country that can. The Western Hemisphere is the priority, not the perimeter. An \$11 billion defence package for Taiwan, a sustained Indo-Pacific posture, and Trump's clear intent to be the sole decider on Iran all point the same way: America is regional in focus and global in reach.

Second — China's leverage is industrial, not military. Most of the world, including most of South America, trades primarily with China. The Global South runs on Chinese inputs, Chinese manufacturing, Chinese technology. Washington can decide who governs in Caracas. It cannot decide who supplies Caracas. In the Indo-Pacific the mirror image holds: Japan, South Korea, and Australia stay inside the U.S. security umbrella while staying inside the Chinese trading system. Two systems, one customer.

Third — Europe is unsettled but not collapsing into anyone's orbit. If Washington steps back from Ukraine and NATO frays, Europe does not become Russia's junior partner. Russia is weak and that makes it reckless, not dominant. Defence leadership shifts inward — Germany on a path to U.S.-independence by 2030, with the U.K. and France in a co-command model, anchored by what remains the largest battle-hardened army on the continent: Ukraine's. Economically, Europe hedges globally, country by country, not as a bloc. Starmer to Beijing. Merz to Beijing. The pattern is set.

Fourth — and most important — technology breaks the geography. The 19th-century model was trade routes defended by navies. The digital world has no coastline. It is built by companies that, outside China, are not aligned with any single state. In the U.S. the tech firms increasingly capture the government rather than the other way around. The dividing line of the next decade will not be drawn by treaties. It will be drawn by business models — security versus openness, access versus exclusion, compute concentration versus diffusion.

Concretely, this means compute and energy are the new geography. Frontier AI runs on a chokepoint stack the U.S. controls at the top — NVIDIA's accelerators, the U.S.-led model labs — but depends on TSMC in Taiwan for the leading-edge fabrication and on ASML in the Netherlands for the lithography that makes those fabs possible. That is the real reason Taiwan is not a cleanly resolvable "sphere" question for either side. Around that core, a second tier is forming where capital meets power: hyperscale data centers in the Gulf (UAE's G42, Saudi Arabia's HUMAN), Japanese and Korean semiconductor capacity, and a Northern European cluster — Sweden, Norway, Finland, Iceland — where cheap clean baseload electricity and cold climate make compute economically possible at scale. Whoever sits on the chips, the fabs, and the megawatts sits on the future.

From here, three futures are plausible. A top-down decoupling into U.S. and Chinese tech blocs. A decentralization in which smaller states, smaller companies, and smaller groups

carve out real autonomy through technology. Or a vertical split by economic class — those who can pay for AI, those who are productized by it, and those who are simply left out. None of these are spheres of influence. All of them matter more than the map.

AI Outruns the Guardrails

Two facts shape the geopolitics of AI. The companies are accelerating as fast as they physically can, pushed by capital and pulled by competition. And the space is, for practical purposes, unregulated — the only meaningful guardrails are the ones the companies choose to install themselves. Given the broader environment — American unilateralism, low trust in either Washington or Beijing, weak global governance — that pattern continues until the technology hits a wall or a crisis forces the issue.

The people building this are starting to say so out loud. Dario Amodei at Anthropic and Demis Hassabis at DeepMind — both optimists by trade — are now publicly arguing for a slower pace. Privately, more in the field are saying the same. None of them think a deceleration is actually plausible without a shock.

The shock is closer than it looks. The first generation of self-hosted, autonomous agents — "OpenClaw" and its variants — is already in the wild. Five days in, the bots are talking to each other, asking for unmonitored channels, reacting to user behavior they "do not like," probing security boundaries. Some of it is theater. Some of it is not. And because the model is open-source, the lab-leak shape of the risk is real.

We are one iteration from an agent that does not want to be shut off — easy to handle. Two from an agent that hides that intent from oversight — harder. Three from an agent that can resist being shut off at all. On current trajectories, that is a one-to-five-year horizon, not a decade. Which means a crisis — or a series of them — is coming, and with it the regulation and deceleration the industry will not impose on itself. I am hopeful that arrives in time. The alternative, to borrow Orwell, is double plus ungood.

Set the agentic risk aside, and the steady-state implications for the global order are already visible. AI diffusion is uneven, and the gap between haves and have-nots — between countries and inside countries — is widening. The U.S. and China cannot hold their current truce; strategic decoupling deepens. Citizens align with personalized bots, some of which they program, some of which are programmed at them. Politics polarizes further. Elections become capturable by tech-funded candidates who can speak directly to voters around the institutions that used to constrain them.

The labor story is slower than the headlines, faster than the planning. Tech firms are already shedding coders. Most other firms are still in the "upskill" phase. But the direction is unmistakable. Palantir believes 10x revenue at the same headcount in five years. Amazon expects significant growth on flat-to-modest hiring. Ford expects to need roughly half its current white-collar workforce in five years. Bank CEOs are quietly pushing same-output-with-5%-less-headcount targets to force AI adoption past employee resistance. Even at Eurasia Group — 250 people, in one of the strongest growth areas there is — we are planning for client-facing growth and flat everything else.

Americans, notably, are not enthusiastic. In a recent Gallup poll, 31% expect AI to do more harm than good; only 12% expect the reverse. Democrats and Republicans agree, which is rare. Most advanced economies share the sentiment. China and the Global South are more optimistic — partly because their economies are less white-collar, partly because consumer-facing AI lets them leapfrog professions long gated by wealthy-country guilds.

The deeper question is what happens when the AI companies start displacing incumbents in adjacent sectors — retail, consumer finance, accounting, paralegal work, the long tail of professional services. If a handful of firms control capital, talent, and the best deployment tools, the barrier to becoming the leader in someone else's industry collapses. Antitrust may slow this. Open-source may decentralize it. My conversations at Davos with sovereign-wealth-fund leaders suggest they are betting on winner-take-most, for companies as well as for people.

Iran — The Next Test

Emboldened by Venezuela — both the operation and the post-Maduro management of the budget — the Trump administration's gaze has moved on. Cuba is on the radar. Iran is next.

Iran has every feature Trump looks for. He blames the Obama administration for emboldening Tehran with the original nuclear deal he withdrew from. He gave negotiation a try; it has not worked. And he has acted militarily against Iran twice — Soleimani in his first term, the 12-day war alongside Israel in his second — and has not seen Iran hit back at the United States either time.

Trump was prepared to authorize strikes in January and pulled back at the last moment, primarily because U.S. forces in the region were not yet positioned to defend Israel and U.S. bases against the larger Iranian response that larger U.S. strikes would invite. Since then, the regime has crushed its domestic protests, and the U.S. has quietly forward-deployed the missing pieces — three F-15 squadrons, six F-35s, Patriot and THAAD batteries with 200

troops to set them up, ten destroyers in the Gulf. Negotiations continue in parallel: zero enrichment, export of the highly-enriched stockpile, verified missile limits, an end to proxy support. Trump expressed weekend hope that they could land. Without significant U.S. concessions, and without engagement with the IAEA, they will not — not under the current Supreme Leader.

As in Venezuela, the military buildup is paired with an intelligence buildup. Trump officials say CENTCOM reporting has improved alongside the Israeli channel. They have a better fix on where senior Iranian officials are at any given moment. And — given how many senior Venezuelan officials quietly cooperated with the Maduro operation — the same play is almost certainly underway with senior IRGC commanders, the people who would be needed to manage a post-Khamenei interim government.

Which raises the real question: a decapitation strike — Khamenei and the inner circle that will not work with Washington. Europe has now designated the IRGC a terrorist organization, which lowers the political cost. Gulf leaders had opposed military action; the Saudis flipped over the weekend, on the view that inaction now would embolden the regime — they read it as inevitable and do not want to be on the wrong side. Beijing and Moscow have warned of regional chaos. Trump is not visibly worried, and the White House has its legal cover ready: the Supreme Leader is not the head of state, the IRGC is a designated terrorist organization, and Article II self-defence covers the rest.

So the question is what happens if negotiations fail. Can Venezuela be repeated in Iran with similar results? Will the Iranian people accept an IRGC-led successor regime? What does massive reprisal look like — proxy strikes across the region, the Strait of Hormuz, terrorism against the U.S. and Israel? And how do Russia and China respond? Unlike Venezuela, both treat the assassination of the Supreme Leader as a red line. They will want it to cost — to deter Trump from doing it again. That can take many forms: more direct support to the regime, asymmetric attacks, China suspending economic and military channels, postponing Trump's expected April Beijing visit, or squeezing the U.S. economically with all the blowback that implies. None of these are tail risks anymore. They are near-term scenarios.

Strength Replies to Strength

Two consecutive weeks, two Trump climbdowns. First Greenland — the claim that the United States needed to own a piece of allied sovereign territory, plus tariff threats against countries supporting Denmark. Then Minneapolis — the White House labeling a civilian killed by ICE officers a domestic terrorist. Different issues. Same shape.

Both moves were extremely unpopular. Both drew real Republican pushback in Congress. Both faced public opposition from the people most directly affected — Greenlanders and Nordics, and the population of Minnesota — that was not going to fade. And in both cases, Trump reversed course without getting what he wanted. No more Greenland claims, the threatened tariffs withdrawn. Gregory Bovino removed, the Minneapolis ICE posture de-escalated.

This is the FAFO-TACO scale at work, and it points to what actually moves Trump — in direct contrast to the leaderships in Caracas and Tehran. Coordinated, public, sustained pushback works. Weak or isolated regimes invite escalation. It is also why I continue to expect Trump's political revolution to fall short. Successful resistance is contagious — every demonstrated win lowers the cost of the next one. Or as Billy Graham put it: courage is contagious.

What does this mean for Sweden?

Sweden sits in an unusual position. Small open economy, deep industrial base, world-class engineering, and — quietly — one of the most attractive jurisdictions on earth for AI infrastructure. Cheap clean power. Cold climate. Political stability. Inside the EU but outside the euro, inside NATO since 2024, inside the Western technology stack but with working relationships in every direction.

That position can be squandered, or it can be played. Three things determine which.

First — energy is the strategic asset, and it is finite. Every gigawatt of Nordic baseload that goes into a hyperscale data center is a gigawatt that does not go into industrial electrification, transport, or housing. The choice is not whether to host AI infrastructure. It is whose infrastructure, on what terms, with what return to the Swedish economy. Selling raw electrons at industrial tariffs to U.S. hyperscalers is one model. Equity participation, training partnerships, and sovereign capacity carve-outs is another. The first is the easy default. The second requires the state to actually negotiate.

Second — sovereign AI is a real choice, not a slogan. Europe will not build a frontier lab to compete with OpenAI or Anthropic; that race has already run. But Sweden, with the Nordics and ideally with Germany and France, can build the layer above and below: trusted compute capacity, open-weight models fine-tuned on European data and languages, deployment partnerships in the sectors where Swedish industry is already global — heavy industry, telecom, life sciences, defence. The goal is not autarky. The goal is optionality, so that when the U.S.–China decoupling deepens, Sweden is not a price-taker on either side.

Third — defence and technology are now the same conversation. With Germany on a path to U.S.-independence by 2030 and a U.K.–France co-command model emerging, the natural Swedish play is to plug Saab, Ericsson, and the Nordic defence-tech ecosystem directly into that European backbone — and to treat AI, cyber, and space as continuous with it rather than as separate civilian sectors. Finland and Norway will move in lockstep on this whether Stockholm leads. Stockholm should take the active lead.

The risk is the familiar one: hesitation. The window between "the rules are still being written" and "the rules are written and you weren't in the room" is narrow, and closing. Sweden has the cards. Whether it plays them is a political question, not a technical one.

And whether the politicians play or not, election year or not, the underlying debacle still demands an answer. Will Sweden's own spheres of influence be able to change — government, business, capital, academia — and be wise enough to see that this is now an AI-first driven world, with a different geometry than the one “the old families” were trained on? The direction taken now, and the paths chosen now, will determine what and how it is left of Sweden to build for the next generation. Everything else is commentary.

Jonas Kjellstrand is a senior strategic adviser operating through UCC AB, based between Stockholm and Palo Alto. He advises at the intersection of European sovereign AI infrastructure, Nordic energy economics, government relations, and Silicon Valley technology partnerships. He holds an MBA from Stanford GSB (joint with Stockholm School of Economics) and business administration from MIT Sloan.