ieee.es
Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos

Analysis
Paper

81/2026 18/11/2026



Visit the website Subscribe to the E-NEWSLETTER

Javier Fernández Aparicio *

The Chessboard of the Emerging Multipolar Order: India, China and Central Asia in the Geopolitics of Chess

The Chessboard of the Emerging Multipolar Order: India, China and Central Asia in the Geopolitics of Chess

Abstract:

This article examines the transformation of the global geopolitics of chess through the rise of India, China and Uzbekistan as major players in international competition. Building on the role played by chess during the Cold War, when it served as an instrument of rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union, the analysis explores its evolution into a platform for national assertion, public diplomacy and the projection of soft power.

The 2026 World Chess Championship between India's Dommaraju Gukesh and Uzbekistan's Javokhir Sindarov, preceded by the 2024 match between Gukesh and China's Ding Liren, illustrates the shift in chess's centre of gravity towards Asia, which is closely linked to the ongoing transformation of the international order. In this context, China's institutional policies, the development of India's chess ecosystem and Uzbekistan's emergence as a major chess power reflect distinct strategies that extend beyond sporting competition. Chess has thus become an instrument of national prestige, international influence and the projection of cultural power abroad, mirroring the emergence of a more multipolar international system.

.

Keywords:

Chess, India, China, Uzbekistan, Central Asia, Soft Power

How to quote:

FERNÁNDEZ APARICIO, Javier. *The Chessboard of the Emerging Multipolar Order: India, China and Central Asia in the Geopolitics of Chess*. IEEE Analysis Paper No. 2026.

Javier Fernández Aparicio *

Introduction

Chess has historically transcended its status as an intellectual discipline and sporting competition to become an instrument of soft *power*[1], national prestige and international influence. Its geopolitical dimension took on particular significance during the Cold War, when matches between Soviet and Western grandmasters symbolised the ideological rivalry between two political, economic and social models. The 1972 World Championship, held in Reykjavík between the American Bobby Fischer and the Soviet Boris Spassky, was one of the most representative examples of this political and diplomatic instrumentalisation of chess[2].

In the early decades of the 21st century, the geography of elite chess has undergone a significant transformation, parallel to—though not equivalent with—the changes seen in the global distribution of power. The traditional pre-eminence of Europe – and, in particular, Russia and the post-Soviet states – is being challenged by the rise of new Asian chess powers, whose consolidation stems both from the emergence of generations of grandmasters and from policies on training, institutional investment and international promotion. India, China and the Central Asian republics represent distinct manifestations of this process.

The 2026 World Chess Championship, scheduled to take place in Geneva from 22 November to 12 December, represents a significant event in this regard. The reigning world champion, Dommaraju Gukesh of India, will defend the title he won in 2024, aged just eighteen, against Javokhir Sindarov of Uzbekistan, winner of the 2026 Candidates Tournament. Both will be twenty years old at the start of the match, making it the youngest world title contest in history[3]. The presence of two Asian representatives highlights this

[1] NYE, Joseph S. (2009). *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. New York: PublicAffairs. ISBN 978-0786738960. See also SCOTT, Adelaide (2022). 'A Battle of Sixty-Four Squares: The Role of Chess in Cold War Foreign Policy'. *The Mirror*, 42(1), pp. 38–55. Available at: https://ojs.lib.uwo.ca/index.php/westernumirror/es/article/view/15128 (accessed 12 November 2026).
[2] MORENO, Eduardo and BRULL, Boris (2026). *Great Rivalries in the History of Chess*. Madrid: Editorial Base. ISBN 978-8410043954.
[3] FIDE (2026). 'Salesforce FIDE World Championship Match 2026: Schedule, Format, and Prize Fund Confirmed'. 14 September. Available at: https://www.fide.com/salesforce-fide-world-championship-match-2026-schedule-format-and-prize-fund-confirmed/ (accessed 12 November 2026).

generational and geographical transformation in world chess. China, for its part, despite not featuring in this edition, maintains a prominent position, consolidated through decades of institutional development and culminating in Ding Liren's world championship victory in 2023[4].

This scenario raises two questions: are we witnessing a new Cold War in chess, comparable to the Soviet–Western confrontation of the 20th century? Or does this competition represent a sporting manifestation of the gradual establishment of a multipolar international order? From this perspective, the rise of India, China and Central Asia allows us to analyse how a discipline such as chess, associated with intellectual prestige, is integrated into strategies for international projection.

Chess as a geopolitical instrument: history and soft power

Chess constitutes a historical example of cultural exchange between civilisations. Although its exact origins remain the subject of historiographical debate, the most plausible interpretation traces its roots to the Indian subcontinent, where, around the 6th century, *chaturanga* was developed – a Sanskrit term referring to the four traditional components of the army: infantry, cavalry, elephants and war chariots. From India, the game spread to Persia, where it was known as *chatrang*, and subsequently to the Islamic world as *shatranj*. The trade and cultural networks of the Silk Road facilitated its spread through Central Asia to Europe[5].

The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 gradually transformed chess into a tool for popular education, sporting organisation and ideological propaganda. The Soviet authorities promoted its teaching in schools, youth organisations, workers' clubs and military structures, believing that it helped to develop discipline, logical reasoning and planning skills. At the same time, during the 1920s and 1930s, an institutional system of training and state support was established. The promotion of chess evolved from its educational

[4] MARTÍN, Antonio (2023). "Ding Liren takes the World Championship to the wire: he is crowned champion in the final game of the tie-break". *El Confidencial*, 30 April. Available at: https://www.elconfidencial.com/deportes/2023-04-30/ding-liren-mundial-ajedrez-campeon-desempate_3620771/ (accessed 12 November 2026).

[5] MURRAY, H. J. R. (2015). *A History of Chess*. London: Ishi Press. ISBN 978-4871877541. See also MARK, M. (2007). 'The Beginnings of Chess'. In FINKEL, I. L. (ed.), *Ancient Board Games in Perspective*. London: British Museum Press. Available at: http://history.chess.free.fr/papers/Mark%202007.pdf (accessed 12 November 2026).

value into an instrument designed to showcase the cultural achievements of the Soviet system[6].

Mikhail Botvinnik's victory in the 1948 World Championship marked the beginning of a long period of Soviet dominance, interrupted only during the reign of the American Bobby Fischer, between 1972 and 1975. Sporting success was presented as a manifestation of the superiority of socialist education and collective organisation over Western individualism. The 1972 Reykjavík match, mentioned earlier, took that rivalry beyond the sporting arena and turned it into a symbolic contest between the United States and the Soviet Union[7].

Anatoly Karpov's recapture of the world championship in 1975, following Fischer's refusal to defend his title, returned the title to the Soviet Union. His subsequent rivalry with the dissident Viktor Korchnoi intensified the political dimension of chess, and the subsequent matches between Karpov and Garry Kasparov also took on political significance, as both were part of the Soviet system but represented different political sensibilities and different generations[8].

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, chess lost much of its bipolar dimension, but retained its value as a means of national representation through the prestige that champions bring to their countries, the organisation of international competitions and the development of educational programmes. The case of Magnus Carlsen is a prime example. The Norwegian grandmaster, a five-time world champion between 2013 and 2023, became a symbol of Norway's prestige and, by extension, of the international image of the Nordic countries as societies associated with education, innovation and the development of human capital.

Paradoxically, Carlsen's career also illustrates the progressive individualisation and commercialisation of elite chess, in contrast to the state-led models that characterised the previous era. His decision, announced in 2022, not to defend his world title again

[6] HUDSON, Michael A. (2013). **Storming Fortresses: A Political History of Chess in the Soviet Union, 1917–1948**. PhD thesis. University of California, Santa Cruz. Available at: https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0s71f0cw (accessed 12 November 2026).
[7] EDMONDS, David and EIDINOW, John (2006). *Bobby Fischer Went to War: The Most Famous Chess Match in History*. Madrid: Debate. ISBN 978-8483066690.
[8] REMNICK, David (2007). 'The Tsar's Opponent'. *The New Yorker*, 1 October. Available at: https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/10/01/the-tsars-opponent (accessed 12 November 2026).

reflected the growing autonomy of top players vis-à-vis the traditional structures of the International Chess Federation (FIDE) and their involvement in commercial ventures and alternative competitions with substantial organisational, financial and media resources[9].

The distancing of a large proportion of Western elite chess players from official channels has allowed others to emerge who are linked to countries that do wish to use chess to project their geopolitical position. Thus, from Russia, the 2016 world championship between Carlsen and Sergey Karjakin reignited comparisons with the confrontations of the Cold War. In 2021, Carlsen faced another Russian, Ian Nepomniachtchi, who was unable to compete under his country's flag due to the sanctions imposed on Russia over institutional doping[10].

In this context, the current rise of India, China and the Central Asian republics should not be interpreted solely on the basis of their results on the chessboard; it also reflects their investment in human capital and new strategies for international visibility.

India: from Anand's legacy to aspirations of hegemony

India's rise as a chess powerhouse is a manifestation of its growing global influence. Chess has become part of the narrative of an India that asserts its civilisational identity, its youth and its ability to compete in activities linked to knowledge and intellectual excellence. However, its successes stem not so much from a state strategy as from the interaction between sporting figures, private initiatives, educational institutions and families. Chess's historical connection with the Indian game *of chaturanga* weaves its triumphs into a narrative of civilisational continuity and cultural legitimacy, in which India presents itself as the heir to an intellectual tradition that has returned to one of its places of origin[11].

[9] 'Chess – Carlsen Rules Out World Championship Return, Still "Better Than the Kids"'. Reuters, 17 March 2025. Available at: https://www.reuters.com/sports/chess-carlsen-rules-out-world-championship-return-still-better-than-kids-2025-03-17/ (accessed 12 November 2026).
[10] BARDEN, Leonard (2021). "Ian Nepomniachtchi will not be able to play under the Russian flag against Carlsen". *The Guardian*, 30 April. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2021/apr/30/magnus-carlsen-responds-to-ian-nepomniachtchi-challenge-with-26-game-unbeaten-run-chess (accessed 12 November 2026).
[11] 'From Chaturanga to Grandmasters: A Historical Timeline of Indian Chess'. India On This Day, 26 June 2026. Available at: https://www.indiaonthisday.com/blog/from-chaturanga-to-grandmasters-a-historical-timeline-of-indian-chess/ (accessed 12 November 2026).

Viswanathan Anand represents the key turning point in modern chess in India. In 1988, he became the first Indian grandmaster and went on to win five world titles: in 2000, 2007, 2008, 2010 and 2012, breaking the traditional dominance of European and post-Soviet players in the world championship; but, beyond his results, Anand changed the social perception of chess in India by inspiring young people to take up the game and increasing media attention. Anand's success ceased to be an individual exception and gradually became a generational phenomenon[12]. Chess players such as Dommaraju Gukesh, Rameshbabu Praggnanandhaa and Arjun Erigaisi represent a new Indian elite characterised by both their precocious talent and their rigorous training.

This growth also features a significant female dimension. Koneru Humpy, Harika Dronavalli, Rameshbabu Vaishali and Divya Deshmukh illustrate the diversification of national talent. In July 2025, Deshmukh won the Women's World Cup against Humpy, whilst Vaishali won the 2026 Candidates Tournament[13]. This simultaneous emergence of numerous competitive chess players is a strong indicator of the structural development of the game in India.

Thus, on 12 December 2024, Gukesh defeated China's Ding Liren in Singapore, becoming, at the age of eighteen, the youngest ever absolute world champion. The match took on particular geopolitical significance as it brought together representatives of Asia's two leading demographic powers, whose undeniable historical and economic ties coexist with territorial and strategic rivalries. However, it would be incorrect to interpret this championship as akin to those of yesteryear during the Cold War or as a confrontation between New Delhi and Beijing, as its significance lay in the international visibility of both powers and in the opportunity to incorporate their sporting successes into their respective national narratives of prestige[14].

The 2022 Chess Olympiad in Chennai demonstrated India's ability to organise major events in the world of chess, but the subsequent 2024 Olympiad in Budapest confirmed

[12] 'Viswanathan Anand'. In *Open Chess Museum*. International Chess Federation, 2026. Available at: https://museum.fide.com/champions/viswanathan-anand (accessed 12 November 2026).
[13] "Divya Deshmukh Becomes Third Women's World Cup Champion, Defeats Humpy Koneru in Tiebreak". 28 July 2025. Available at: https://www.fide.com/divya-deshmukh-becomes-third-womens-world-cup-champion-defeats-humpy-koneru-in-tiebreak/ (accessed 12 November 2026).
[14] DATTA, Devangshu (2024). "Gukesh Dommaraju: How the Indian teenager became the youngest world chess champion". *BBC News*, 13 December. Available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c23vn7x4012o (accessed 12 November 2026).

the collective strength of Indian chess. For the first time, India won gold medals in both the open and women's competitions. Unlike the individual world championship, the Olympiads allow for an assessment of a federation's competitive depth and its ability to field balanced teams; this double triumph reinforced India's international image as a well-rounded chess powerhouse, capable of competing simultaneously across different categories and of translating individual talent into national results[15].

The transformation of Indian chess cannot be understood without an understanding of its educational and business ecosystem. Chennai, in the state of Tamil Nadu, plays a significant role due to its competitive chess tradition, its clubs, academies and school programmes. The Tamil Nadu region is home to around a third of India's current grandmasters, whilst many others are trained within the educational environment of Velammal Vidyalaya, a private educational institution located in Chennai[16].

In November 2026, India reached the milestone of 100 grandmasters, thirty-eight years after Anand secured the country's first title. This milestone highlights the consolidation of a competitive ecosystem that has made India one of the world's leading chess powers[17]. The combination of family investment, corporate sponsorship, digital training and institutional support explains this growth in Indian chess and how, as a result, it has come to represent both a sporting success and an expression of human capital development and India's growing cultural influence on the international stage.

China: sports planning and international prestige

China's rise in world chess presents a different example to that of India, illustrating how sports planning, specialised training and institutional support contribute to a state's international profile in a clear expression of the soft power referred to by Nye. China's consolidation as a leading player in the chess world coincides with its growing geopolitical

[15] ANAND, Viswanathan (2024). "Gukesh, Pragg, Vidit — This Is the Golden Generation for Indian Chess". *The Indian Express*, May. Available at: https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/viswanathan-anand-writes-golden-generation-for-indian-chess-9311721/ (accessed 12 November 2026).
[16] KRISHNA, B. Venkata (2023). 'India's Chess Factory: The Chennai School That Is Home to Nearly 1 in 5 Grandmasters'. *The Indian Express*, 30 August. Available at: https://indianexpress.com/article/sports/chess/indias-chess-factory-the-chennai-school-that-is-home-to-nearly-1-in-5-of-grandmasters-8909501/ (accessed 12 November 2026).
[17] 'Anuj Shrivatri Becomes India's 100th Grandmaster'. Chess.com, 9 November 2026. Available at: https://www.chess.com/news/view/anuj-shrivatri-india-100th-grandmaster (accessed 12 November 2026).

importance and also with the competition for prestige amongst the Asian powers, although, unlike India, China developed its own tradition of strategic board games, particularly *xiangqi* or Chinese chess, which are distinct from modern chess; China adopted modern chess relatively late, in a process shaped by the political transformations of the 20th century[18].

Chess was subject to restrictions during the Cultural Revolution, and its full acceptance began in the 1970s, when China joined FIDE in 1975 and took part in a Chess Olympiad for the first time three years later. It should be noted that this accession coincided with China's opening up to the outside world and preceded its consolidation as a sporting power through integration into global institutions and competitions, with an organisational model characterised from the outset by state intervention aimed at identifying young talent and creating a specialised training structure, although private initiatives also contributed to this, particularly that of the Malaysian Dato' Tan Chin Nam, who played a significant role during this initial phase of Chinese chess's expansion[19].

Consequently, China won gold in the open competition at the Chess Olympiads in Tromsø in 2014 and Batumi in 2018, although it was Chinese women's chess in particular that came to play an almost dominant role. In 1991, Xie Jun defeated the Soviet player Maia Chiburdanidze and became the first female world champion of Asian origin, breaking decades of Soviet dominance. Subsequently, Zhu Chen, Xu Yuhua, Hou Yifan and Ju Wenjun – the latter becoming world champion for the fifth consecutive time in 2025 by defeating another Chinese grandmaster, Tan Zhongyi – would consolidate this trajectory, and women's chess became a prominent feature of China's sporting prestige[20].

The men's turn came on 30 April 2023, when Ding Liren became the first Chinese absolute world chess champion after defeating the Russian Nepomniachtchi. His victory represented a historic milestone for Chinese chess and, from a geopolitical perspective, this title bolstered China's international profile in a sport traditionally associated with

[18] 'Discovering Chinese Chess (Xiangqi): History, Evolution, and Cultural Significance'. HelloChinaTrip, 2026. Available at: https://hellochinatrip.com/discovering-chinese-chess-xiangqi-history-evolution-and-cultural-significance/ (accessed 12 November 2026).
[19] LONG, Peter (2018). "Obituary for Honorary Life President of the Malaysian Chess Federation Dato Tan Chin Nam". FIDE, 22 October. Available at: https://old.fide.com/component/content/article/1-fide-news/11212-obituary-for-honorary-life-president-of-the-malaysian-chess-federation-dato-tan-chin-nam.html (accessed 12 November 2026).
[20] DINIC, Milan (2023). 'The Rise of China as a Chess Power'. FIDE, Women's World Chess Championship. Available at: https://womenworldchampionship2023.fide.com/ (accessed 12 November 2026).

European and Russian intellectual heritage. However, the World Championship held in Singapore in 2024 pitted the Chinese champion against the Indian challenger Gukesh, and the latter's victory was perhaps even more significant than Ding's, as it made him the youngest absolute world champion in history, in a highly tense contest that brought together representatives of the two major Asian powers with a complex bilateral relationship[21].

China has developed a centralised chess system underpinned by institutional sporting structures, training programmes and talent selection mechanisms, whilst also relying on private initiatives, with the aim of using the chessboard to foster global recognition – a source of national prestige and cultural influence – thereby demonstrating, as in the case of India, the competitive shift from the West towards Asia[22].

Central Asia: Uzbekistan, the Soviet legacy

Uzbekistan's rise in international chess is a reflection of Central Asia's growing visibility on the world stage[23]. Traditionally linked to the Persian cultural heritage and the Soviet sports system, the Central Asian republics have found in chess a means of enhancing national prestige and projecting their influence abroad. In the case of Uzbekistan, these successes coincide with a foreign policy aimed at diversifying its relations and preserving its strategic autonomy, particularly vis-à-vis Russia and China. We are witnessing a state with limited material resources that wields cultural influence greater than its actual geopolitical weight.

[21] BHOOTHALINGAM, Ravi (2018). 'What Chess and "Go" Tell Us About India and China's Strategic Thinking'. The Wire, 19 December. Available at: https://thewire.in/world/india-china-strategy-chess-go (accessed 12 November 2026).
[22] 'The Chinese School of Chess: the model that revolutionised the game'. Peón Aislado magazine, 28 March. Available at: https://revista.peonaislado.com/escuela-china-de-ajedrez-el-modelo-que-revoluciono-el-juego/ (accessed 12 November 2026).
[23] 'Central Asia: from linchpin to crossroads'. Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies (CESEDEN), Cuadernos de Estrategia, no. 216, 2024. Madrid: Ministry of Defence. Available at: https://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/cuadernos/CE_216/CE_216.pdf (accessed 12 November 2026).

Central Asia played a fundamental role in the historical transmission of chess between India, Persia and the Islamic world. Cities such as Samarkand and Bukhara, major commercial and intellectual centres along the Silk Road, facilitated the circulation of knowledge, goods and cultural practices. Archaeological finds at Afrasiab, ancient Samarkand, include ivory chess pieces dating from the 7th and 8th centuries, considered to be among the oldest material evidence of the game[24]. This historical link now serves as a source of cultural identity, for, as in the case of India, Uzbekistan presents itself not only as an emerging chess power, but also as a country that has inherited an intellectual tradition shared by the ancient Eurasian civilisations.

The incorporation of Central Asia into the Soviet Union led to the development of chess through clubs, schools and federative structures integrated into the Soviet organisation. The emergence of players such as Georgy Agzamov, Uzbekistan's first grandmaster, in 1984, demonstrated the consolidation of what was then a regional school, whilst Uzbek chess players, like their Central Asian counterparts, became part of the Soviet Union's competitive structures, which provided them with international knowledge and experience that would facilitate the development of independent national schools. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 ushered in a process of building distinct sporting identities in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and their sporting achievements became a means of gaining international recognition[25].

In Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev's accession to the presidency in 2016 spurred a foreign policy based on the diversification of international partners, maintaining constructive relations with both Russia and China, whilst also engaging in some cooperation with the United States, the European Union, Turkey and other actors[26]. Chess soon emerged as a complementary dimension of this foreign policy, aimed at raising the country's profile amongst the major powers. Rustam Kasimdzhanov won the World Championship in 2004, a victory that proved to be a watershed moment and put

[24] FREEMAN FAHID, Deborah (2018). *Chess and Other Games Pieces from Islamic Lands*. London: Thames & Hudson. ISBN 978-0500970911.
[25] 'Soviet Team Chess Championship: Uzbekistan, Individual Record'. Historical database of chess competitions, 2026. Available at: https://www.olimpbase.org/teamsst/uzb_i01.html (accessed 12 November 2026).
[26] 'Biography of the Candidate for President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Shavkat Miromonovich Mirziyoyev'. United Nations, 2016. Available at: https://www.un.int/uzbekistan/news/biography-candidate-president-republic-uzbekistan-shavkat-miromonovich-mirziyoyev (accessed 12 November 2026).

Central Asian chess on the map. Subsequently, Nodirbek Abdusattorov was crowned World Rapid Chess Champion in 2021, aged seventeen, and Javokhir Sindarov has now become the first Uzbek to qualify for the World Chess Championship, marking another milestone for elite chess emerging from Asia[27].

However, the 2022 Chennai Chess Olympiad can be regarded as the turning point for Uzbekistan, when it won the gold medal in the open competition for the first time, remaining unbeaten throughout the eleven rounds. As in the case of India, this success demonstrated that the country's competitiveness did not depend on individual figures, but on a collective structure, and cemented its position as an emerging force in the world of chess.

Uzbekistan's rise introduces a third significant player to the Asian chess scene. Whilst India stands out for its vast pool of young talent and China for its institutional structures, Uzbekistan combines the Soviet tradition with public policies on training and promotion. A 2021 presidential decree promoted the compulsory teaching of chess in schools, the creation of clubs and programmes to identify early talent[28]. The subsequent hosting of the 2026 Samarkand Chess Olympiad, together with the successes of Uzbek chess players, has reinforced the global dimension of this strategy, as it demonstrates that chess offers middle powers and smaller states opportunities to increase their recognition and project their own identity in an increasingly multipolar landscape[29].

Conclusions: rivalry, multipolarity and sports diplomacy

The contemporary evolution of international chess reveals a transformation in its competitive landscape and geopolitical dimension. The traditional European and Soviet hegemony has definitively given way to a scenario characterised by the rise of new Asian

[27] HANK, H. (2026). "Uzbek Javokhir Sindarov conquers the world of chess". Deutsche Welle (DW), 17 April. Available at: https://www.dw.com/es/el-uzbeko-javokhir-sindarov-conquista-el-mundo-del-ajedrez/a-76816102 (accessed 12 November 2026).
[28] 'President of Uzbekistan issues chess decree'. FIDE, 15 January 2021. Available at: https://www.fide.com/president-of-uzbekistan-issues-chess-decree/ (accessed 12 November 2026).
[29] KAZANTSEV-VAISMAN, A. (2025). 'Diplomacy of Central Asian and South Caucasus States in Summer–Autumn 2025: Multivector Foreign Policy in Action'. BESA Centre Perspectives, PSCRP-BESA Reports, No. 156, 30 September. Begin-Sadat Centre for Strategic Studies. Available at: https://besacenter.org/diplomacy-of-central-asian-and-south-caucasus-states-in-summer-autumn-2025-multivector-foreign-policy-in-action/ (accessed 12 November 2026).

powers, particularly India, China and Uzbekistan. This shift in the centre of gravity of the chess world constitutes a cultural manifestation of the transformations in the international system – a literal chessboard favouring Asia, upon which global hegemony is played out – although there is no equivalence between sporting or chess results and the distribution of economic, political or military power.

Unlike during the Cold War of the 20th century, when the confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union turned chess into a high-profile ideological contest, the West now seems to attach less importance to its results on the board, even if this means a decline in its prominence. For example, the United States remains a major centre for chess, thanks to its ability to attract talent from around the world, professional competitions, private sponsorship and technological development. Players such as Fabiano Caruana, Hikaru Nakamura, Wesley So and Levon Aronian exemplify the strength of this competitive model, which is characterised by private initiatives. Meanwhile, Norway's Magnus Carlsen continues to top the world rankings. Geopolitics also partly explains Russia's relative decline as a chess powerhouse, as the war in Ukraine has imposed new restrictions on its international representation and accelerated the institutional politicisation of chess.

In this context, it is also worth mentioning a significant transformation driven by technology. Analysis engines, digital platforms and artificial intelligence have partially democratised access to chess knowledge, reducing the historical advantages of national training systems and increasing the pool of potential talent – which also partly explains the rise of India and China, demographic powerhouses where the young population accounts for more than a third of the total population.

Ultimately, the rise of Asia as a new centre of chess and its use as a tool of soft power by many of its countries lends credence to the hypothesis of a new Cold War as a historical metaphor, whether between India and China or between the West and Asia. However, this hypothesis does not account for contemporary reality: the chessboard no longer represents, as it did then, a confrontation between two closed ideological blocs, but rather an open competition between emerging and middle powers, in which chess, as a tool for national prestige and internal cohesion, coexists with sports diplomacy, the development of human capital and technological advances.

The ultimate paradox is that a game which, during the 20th century, became the symbol of bipolarity – with the West and Russia having monopolised it as a genuine instrument of soft power – has now been transformed into one of the most revealing cultural expressions of contemporary multipolarity, with Asia as the new beacon of leadership.

Javier Fernández Aparicio
Senior Analyst and Editor at the IEEE
@jafeap